Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 2001 at approximately a quarter to 11. I am joined by Ron Frankum in talking with Dr. John Buessler about his slide collection. We are in the interview room in the Special Collections Library and Dr. Buessler is going to be giving descriptions of his slides from Vietnam. So why don’t we go ahead and begin. Do you want use the remote?

Dr. John Buessler: Oh yeah. This is a view of the South China Sea from off the shore of Vietnam. As you see there are multiple islands out in the sea, beautiful country. During the Vietnam conflict the Daily Press, in order to give a negative view of our experience in Vietnam, spoke how terrible it was and with the humidity, the mosquitoes the monsoons and all. And actually it’s very much like Florida, so if you are not afflicted with having to make a political point, one was to admit that Vietnam was a beautiful country.

SM: That was slide number 80 that you started with.

JB: Oh there we go.

SM: Yes, sir. Just a quick question, when did you first arrive in Vietnam?

JB: June of 1970. And I left two days before the end of August. We got the impression that the United States is the only country with combat troops in Vietnam from what the Daily Press would stress at that time. But actually there were nine countries that actually contributed troops and this is a list of the nine flags in front of the 5<sup>th</sup> Special
Forces group headquarters. Now all nine of the countries had combat personnel of one sort or another. This is not counting those that had, those countries such as West Germany, that participated in the humanitarian way, but without contact.

SM: So you were assigned to the 5th Special Forces?

JB: I was a Special Forces, I was a senior ranking Green Beret in country at that time. We had about 3,500 SF people. Most of them, a majority of them were gone in the south of the country involved in the Phoenix program. This must be on a timer.

SM: Now it’s off.

JB: Here’s another view of the South China Sea.

SM: This is slide number 2.

JB: Quite beautiful. This is a street scene of a medium sized village (slide number 3). This is a picture of a group of South Vietnamese ARVN soldiers and I put them in there just to demonstrate their size and weight and height. They were comparable to an American high school girl. Anywhere from 98 to 110 pounds. 5’4”, yet we expected and we got very good soldiering from them.

SM: This was slide number 4. Now this was near your hospital where you worked or..?

JB: No, this was just… I moved a lot around the country. I covered all the way from down through Saigon and back and forth. My orders allowed me to be attached to any unit that I stopped at. In my travels, this was good for me. This is slide number 5.

SM: 5, yes sir.

JB: It shows the firebase of one of the companies of the 101st airborne division. I think this is firebase Tomahawk. As you see the bunkers along the side is where the American soldiers lived. (Very difficult to hear next few sentences.) There were complications. These firebases were generally supplied by air, unless they were close to the home base of the unit. These were all some distance apart because the Viet Cong would get after them and ambush.

SM: Did you travel to bases like this frequently?

JB: Yes.

SM: Slide 6.
JB: And this is the first unit I was attached to. I think this was my third day in country. 498th Medical company helicopter ambulance was at Lane, L-A-N-E, heliport near An San in South Vietnam. The man at the right is a major who is in command of the company. He had 25 helicopters. I arrived at night and in the morning came down for breakfast right in the mess hall and noticed a table or two filled with exceedingly young looking fellows and when he came down he introduced himself and I commented that when I came in I thought I was coming into a high school cafeteria, they looked so young. He had 52 pilots. He said, “The average age is 19.” Now when you consider that he is a major, he had a couple of captains and four or five lieutenants and the rest were warrant officers, you can imagine what the average age among the warrant officers must have been to get an overall average of age 19. This gentleman was on his second tour and mentioned to me that he had become interested in medicine as a result of this. He was a MSC officer, Medical Service Corps, and asked me if it was a reasonable goal because of his age and the fact that he hadn't majored in pre-med in college. I told him how to make it up and apply. When he was rotated back to the States he did just that and is now a retired colonel orthopedic surgeon.

SM: Slide number 7.

JB: This is an example of what area coverage by the helicopters constituted. There were three systems of aero Medevac in Vietnam. The Army had two and the Marine Corps had one system. The Army invariably used dedicated aircraft. In other words, if there were air ambulances today, they were air ambulances throughout the tour. The crews were dedicated. They flew air ambulance period. One system was to cover the whole area by quadrants. Anybody in that area whether they were Americans, Australians, ARVN, or civilians, or enemy personnel who called for air ambulance got the service. This little fellow in front under the blue sheet was gored by a buffalo. As you probably know, little children generally herd the buffalo. They ride on it. Well, somehow the buffalo got angry and gored him and his companion little fellow ran off to a militia station, ARVN militia post that were scattered like police sentinel boxes all around, and told them what had happened. They telephoned the radio telephone operator for Dustoff. Dustoff gave the word to this Dustoff unit that went zooming out there and picked up the kid. Well, it was a Vietnamese person so they were to take him to a South
Vietnamese Provincial Hospital and in the provincial hospitals, the system in Vietnam was that members of the family took care of the patient, providing most of the nursing and like services, so you, if you didn’t have members of the family taking care of you, you were in a tough situation because they prepared meals for you, bathed you, took care of you. So there’s his mother, his brother, and his grandmother. All four were taken to the province hospital. At that time it was popular to think of Americans in Vietnam as ugly Americans and its interesting in this regard that these Vietnam civilians were getting better Air Ambulance service in 1970 at this time than we get in the United States in the year 2001.

SM: Did they show gratitude towards you and…

JB: Oh yes, they were, yes. They were in a tough situation because in their hamlets they were very much subject to Viet Cong intimidation, coercion because at night the Viet Cong would sweep into areas that had been cleaned out during the day. When some of the Viet Cong soldiers lost interest in fighting for the Viet Cong, or either captured or gave up. Many of them had been involuntarily drafted into the Viet Cong Army from the little hamlet and would defect to surrender to ARVN forces. Those who were willing to join the ARVN forces were put into units called Kit Carson scouts and they were like Indian scouts in American history. And we’d train them and to familiarize themselves with the way the ARVN did it and one of the ways was to show them that if they were wounded, they would be evacuated, most likely by air and one of the ways we did that was to use a hoist with a jungle penetrator. Well, there were about 25, 30 of them in this group and this is my 3rd day in country and I didn’t know any better and none of them wanted to ride the hoist and it looked like there wasn’t going to be a demonstration and I foolishly said “Well, maybe if one of us rode the hoist, show them it’s alright.” So a couple of American soldiers were pleased that I made the suggestion and voted me as the guy to ride the hoist. So there they are putting me on the penetrator.

SM: That was slide 8 this is slide 9.

JB: And there I am going up. Now I discovered that the hoist could carry one American or two Vietnamese or two Koreans or three Vietnamese. It has three little seats on it. 

SM: Slide 10.
JB: And there I am being swung in the door. After this was done we were back at base. Major Mayor said, “That was pretty gutsy of you,” and I said, “Well I thought it was pretty safe,” and he said, “Well, it is really.” The cables are rated for forty hoist. That’s on average or 20 hoist. Some will last as long as 40 hoist and some break on the first hoist. So they were smart not to have told me. But as you notice the door on the helicopter’s back, slid back, it hardly ever closed. We simply fool around like open convertibles.

SM: Now while you were there were there ever any incidences where the hoist did break

JB: No.

SM: This is slide 11.

JB: This is we’re sitting on the ground at a Korean regimental headquarters. The 1st Korean, called the Capital Division and the 2nd Korean Division called the White Horse Division were in Vietnam as part of our allies. We provided the air ambulance service for not only the Americans, but the Vietnamese as I mentioned as well as the Korean, Australians, and whoever else. When they went on a combat assault, we would then not only operate from our own base, but send a helicopter over and park it at their headquarters which would save considerable time in responding to calls that they got from the field to their radio telephone operator system. And we would go out and pick up their people. That fellow in the white T-shirt is a young Korean soldier, little teenager, who somehow was enamored with American Soldiers and as long as we were there several days he just followed around like a puppy. He wouldn’t get any closer than this and wouldn’t say anything but would just kind of follow around and watch and I suppose he was kind of impressed, because in that group we had one black, one Korean, and the rest Anglos and he may never had seen a black and was surprised to see that a fellow Korean was in the American Army, but anyway that was kind of interesting.

SM: Of course the Koreans had a reputation of being very harsh disciplinarians of their soldiers. Did you ever witness anything regarding that?

JB: On one occasion we picked up, we went in to pick up a North Korean, an NVA soldier who had been captured alive during the Korean assault. What the NVA would do when they were attacked, they would fall back and leave a rear guard and
generally the rear guard was made up of sick or wounded NVA soldiers and left in place to fight to the bitter end. Well this poor fellow had malaria and was in an acute phase and was so shaken with fever that he couldn’t even operate the machine gun he was assigned to so they managed to capture him. Well, when the main body or the other members of the NVA force realized one of theirs had been captured, they really concentrated their firing counter attack on the Koreans in order to get him back or kill him so that he couldn’t be interrogated. We flew in to pick him up because he was sick with malaria and that’s the way they called him in and as we settled down on top of the jungle canopy, we took a lot of enemy fire, so we had to get up about 10-12,000 feet and hover around there until dusk when they couldn’t see us well enough to hit us and then we went back down and settled as low as we could into the canopy and hoist him up. And he just was a pathetic little figure, raggedy trousers and raggedy shirt and that’s all. He was shaking like a leaf in the aircraft, high fever. Mayor, Henry Mayor, said, “Well, we have to take him to the Korean headquarters because they captured him and he’s their prisoner, but I sure hate to do that.” I was participant observer so I was learning as much as I could by asking questions and I said, “Why, why would you be reluctant to do that?” and he said, “Oh, because he’ll be dead by morning,” and he finished the sentence by saying, “The Koreans have a habit of interrogating prisoners, interrogating them to death.” They push the interrogation stimulus, torture to the point where the prisoner dies. Then they figure, “Well, we really extracted everything we could from him because if he had anything that he didn’t tell us, he was willing to die for it.” They were a tough bunch. Our kill ratio at that time was four to 1. four of the enemy to one of our Americans. The Koreans used to have a kill ratio of about the same. The Americans viewed their position in Vietnam as guests of the host country of the Republic of Vietnam and as guests they fulfill the requirement that they notify the Republic of Vietnam government that they wanted to go on a combat assault. Notify them in advance and the government would approve or disapprove, even though we were using American troops and not using any of their troops. It was one of those things. “Look it’s our country. If you're going to go attacking in that hamlet in that direction, tell us about it before hand.” Well, the problem was they figured there was about one out of every ten members of the ARVN military and government were actually Viet Cong people in deep cover so as soon as you notified
the South Vietnamese government that you wanted to go on a combat assault, it was only
a matter of hours before the enemy knew you were going to do that. Well, the Koreans
quickly learned that that’s what was happening to them so they figured, “Well, the
Americans can be nice guests, we’re not going to be. We won’t tell them.” So they
wouldn’t tell them and they would go on a combat assault without notifying the South
Vietnamese government with the result that their kill ratio jumped to 14 to 1 because the
enemy hadn't been alerted to withdraw. The enemy was still in place and quit flat footed.
This is a group, I was at 5th Special Forces group and was going out to one of their
firebases to actually Ban Me Thout, one of their posts at Ban Me Thout a B troop
detachment.

SM: Slide number 12.
JB: And the guy in front, the big guy was a thoracic surgeon who is surgeon to
the 5th Special Forces group. The guy behind him is a sergeant major to the 5th Special
Forces group. The guy on the right is a medical service corps officer with that group and
the kid over here on the left is new in country, just finished his internship and Special
Forces training and was being taken to Ban Me Thout to be assigned to their B
Detachment there as the medical officer because even though the Special Forces fighters
were mostly Montagnards, the Vietnamese government and the Montagnards were
somewhat alienated and even though the Montagnards were fighting the NVA and the
Viet Cong under U.S. leadership, the ARVN government would not provide them with
any health care or any support. As you’d know better than I, the Montagnards is
something like in a position of the Native Americans and the Vietnamese as the people
were Johnny come-latelys many centuries ago, but this place, the natives of the Vietnam
area, Indo China area pushed them up into the mountains. They were rather primitive
people so that there was that schism between the natives and the present Vietnamese. As
a result, the Montagnards, when they would join our Special Forces detachments and do
the fighting, were really fighting for the United States. They did not consider themselves
as fighting for Vietnam.

SM: Was it standard for all medical service personnel attached or assigned to the
Special Forces to go throughout the Special Forces qualification course?
JB: yes, the SF is entirely volunteer and you have to go through the program. You have to volunteer to be a paratrooper and successfully complete that and volunteer to go on thorough the Special Forces training and successfully complete that and even if you successfully completed it, not every one is assigned to a Special Forces unit. Those who are judged as not quit of the highest caliber of training, kind of like the D student, they were not assigned. They had Special Forces training, but then were assigned to an infantry division or an Airborne Division but no longer were part of Special Forces. The difference in size of the people there and Americans is shown here(next slide). This is the little Special Forces dispensary at Ban Me Thout. These are Montagnard soldiers and their families and the Montagnards went into battle with their families so wherever you moved a Montagnard soldier, along came his family. Wife, kids, sometimes his mother, mother-in-law, and so on. But there is our sergeant major who admittedly is kind of a big guy 6’2”, about talking to one of the SF medics in the dispensary, and that’s an average size Montagnard woman, two women next to him about 2/3 as tall. And really small fine-boned people.

SM: That was slide 13. Sir, the picture that was up on the wall, would you go back there for a second? Do you know who that is up there in the right hand corner, in the beret?

JB: No, I don’t. Don’t know.

SM: I was also curious if you recall, one of the controversial things about the Special Forces qualification course for medics is of course one of the final exams is basically saving the life of and animal that’s been wounded? When you went through, do you recall what they used at that time; was it dogs or had they switched to goats?

JB: Well, this was at Bragg where they had the school and this was, by the way, the most highly… well a Special Forces medic was ranked as the most highly trained enlisted person in the entire military. They had 52 weeks of training in their school and to my knowledge, they were using dogs, but I did hear that they were using other animals including pigs, but they would anesthetize them and then shoot them in the leg and the medic would have to then repair the leg and put on the splint. These medics were sufficiently well trained and I knew the medical officer who was head of that school and tried to recruit him to our medical school as head of preventative medicine and
community health. I have [?], so I’ll stand. He ran the school and they were trained so
that with the Special Forces A Detachment, sometimes called the A-team, if it were put
out in enemy territory, it could be out there for a year or 18 months without any resupply
or help so the medic would have to be in a position to take care of most of the illnesses
and injuries. In fact, one of the controversial things they taught them was acute
appendicitis. They could not plan on having a person Medivaced out and these enlisted
medics were not trained well enough to do abdominal or thoracic surgery. So, for
example, on acute appendicitis, their treatment was medical, heavy antibiotics for long
periods of time so that the appendix, even if it ruptured would be walled off and the
soldier could continue without being evacuated.

SM: slide 14.

JB: This is the operating room at Ban Me Thout. Now the Montagnards were not
authorized, we were not authorized any of this equipment, (table of organization
equipment). This was not part of the anticipated need. But if you look here, this is pretty
fancy stuff. Special Forces gathered this stuff together, to staff, to equip this little
hospital in Ban Me Thout and they did it by begging and borrowing and trading. You
know if you take an AK-47 and go to a supply sergeant back in the rear and was not
going to ever have a chance to go capture an AK-47 because he won't get that close to a
living enemy and you ask him if he would like to have an AK-47 to take back home as a
souvenir. “You bet!” “Well, let’s trade.” So this is what they would trade for. He’d see
that they got a load of stuff out of the back door at night. So all of this is begged and
borrowed and traded for. Its called field expediency. You read the field manuals and
well, this is the way it’s going to work. Not necessarily. It’s a guide but you have to
adapt it to reality when you get out there.

SM: Slide 15.

JB: And this is the little ward. All of these beds were acquired the same way and
those are patients, Montagnard patients.

SM: 17, or 16.

JB: This is the Special Forces camp, one of the more newer ones, more elaborate.
You notice all of the foliage is not just defoliated, but actually chopped down; right
down to the level of the dirt so that they can’t be blind sided by a sneak attack. So the
attacks would generally be at night under cover of darkness. As you notice, it’s on flat land. It’s not up on the hill. Rather, it’s a fortified camp out deep in enemy territory.

SM: On the left hand side, is that, over on the side, a short airstrip? To the very far left is the clearing with all the buildings and then over there farther out there seems to be some kind of a …

JB: I’m not sure.

SM: It’s connected by roads to the camp.

JB: They all had airstrips or helipads. But frequently a short airstrips in the Cobra, or the Caribou twin engine Dehaviland Canadian aircraft that was a dandy for short landing and takeoff was used to resupply.

SM: Slide 17.

JB: You notice the layout of this camp. These long buildings along the periphery looked like rectangular loafs of bread, they are partly underground so if there is small arms fire coming zinging along just a foot or so off the ground if you’re prone inside those little buildings, it’s going over your head. And their made of heavy logs. Then you notice the center with that high embankment with the little jeep road around it. Well, the first line of defense is out here by those rectangular buildings. Those rectangular buildings are where the Montagnard soldiers and their families lived. They lived on the firing line. Now it wasn’t necessarily planned that way, I’m not sure. But if you really want to motivate a soldier to defend a camp, you put his home with his family on the firing line and it’s a real motivator. They are less likely to drop their gun and run away. Well, if theory pushed back from that, and of course around it all is barbed wire, [concertino wire], if they’re pushed back then they can go up onto that center island and the enemy following them has to come up that high embankment which makes the enemy very vulnerable. In the inside you see those pits, those are mortar pits and in the center there is an artillery piece. The Americans lived in the center. Special Forces team consisted as I recall of ten individuals, captain, lieutenant, and 12 sergeants. In Special Forces, all the enlisted personnel are sergeants because of their technical training, they’re cross-trained. For example, they cross-trained as a COMMO communications sergeant and a medic. The same person can do both jobs. Or a demolition expert and a machine gunner, heavy weapons, do both jobs, so that you can divide and A-team, an A
Detachment in half and send four of them with the lieutenant to one camp and four with
the captain to another. The mission of SF is to train indigenous personnel to fight for
their own freedom, not to do the fighting for them. In other words, if they want to live in
a free country, they have to free the county themselves rather than us do it and hand it to
them on a platter. And that was the system.

SM: How many American personnel were stationed at that particular camp?
JB: ten.
SM: Slide 18.
JB: The guy on the left is the captain. He was about 25 years old. And the old
fart on the right is 50 years old.
SM: And that’s you.
JB: That young fellow is the captain. He had all of these troops under him and he
had about 5-600 Montagnard soldiers so it was quit a command.
SM: And you are carrying an AR-15 carbine, is that right?
JB: 16, M-16.
SM: 16, I’m sorry, M-16 carbine.
JB: And I also carried a .32 caliber revolver and I’ll tell you about that. When I
arrived there the first day I was there I was told, our surgeon, our MACV surgeon to all
of military forces in Vietnam Army General with jump wings with two jump stars on it.
The one World War II and one in Vietnam. He too was a thoracic surgeon. His name
was Thomas, last name and he called me in and said, “I’ll tell you right away, the last
thing we need over here is another colonel. I realize you are here to do a research project
and I’ve been briefed of what the project is and since it will mean you will be going into
places and situations where you can be killed or captured, do you have any objection to
carrying a weapon,” and I said, “No,” and he said, “Well, some doctors do,” and I said, “I
don’t.” He said, “Well, I want you to at least carry a pistol.” He said, “Oh, I don’t expect
you to win the war with a pistol, but I don’t want to here you on radio in Hanoi. I don’t
want you captured alive. That’s why you're carrying a pistol.” So, his whole message
was, if you are in a tight spot be prepared to commit suicide. And I was in such a tight
spot and thought it through and fortunately in the nick of time I was rescued so that I
didn’t have to pass the test, but I realized I was facing a moment of truth.
SM: What were the circumstances surrounding that?

JB: I'll tell you. It’s not on the slides, so over lunch I’ll tell you.

SM: Okay. Out of curiosity, you mentioned you were working on a special project, research project. Could you just briefly describe that?

JB: I went to Vietnam to do an operational analysis of aero Medevac. As a basis for translating lessons learned in Vietnam to civilian application. And that’s why, again, I’ll tell you at lunch how that sequence begun.

SM: Slide 19.

JB: Here are four young Montagnard soldiers that were sitting around fooling around the jeep acting like high-schoolers until they saw me bring up the camera then they sobered up and stood their ready to take their picture. Their wives and children on the other hand were very camera shy and I was told the reason for that is they felt that if you take a picture of them you take a bit of them away. The only way you get a picture is by having taken some of their body so I didn’t get pictures of them even though I was around those long houses. They were called long houses. As soon as I’d raise the camera, as soon as they'd see the camera, they'd scurry in the house.

SM: Slide 20.

JB: This is Pleiku, the major city in the highland that was in the path of most of the…in the path of the invasion route of Cambodia and Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Even though this is a major city, you see the streets are still quit primitive dirt streets. It has to be remembered that the Vietnamese were at war from the beginning of World War II, when the Japanese invaded Southeast Asia until we left in 1975. So they were at war some 35, 40 years and it had a negative impact on their infrastructure

SM: Slide 21.

JB: This is a firebase, again 101st Airborne, and that’s the South China Sea out beyond it. This was reasonably close in, so that, close to the 101st Airborne base at Phu Bi so that they used the road for resupply and did not depend on air resupply. But as you see the soldiers, the American soldiers, were like the Montagnard soldiers right on the front line. Our little hooches are also the same as bunkers and that’s where they fought from when attacked. And you can see an artillery, a couple of artillery pieces back there on the right. Can you see them?
SM: Yes sir.

JB: The interesting thing about the arrangement in Vietnam was that it struck me as a throw back to the Middle Ages where the good guys would live in the castles and the knights would live in the castles on top of a mountain or a high hill and wander out in the daytime and chase the bandits around the castle during the day and at night go back in the shelter and protection of the castle and the bandits took over the countryside, harassing and robbing and pillaging. The same thing went on in Vietnam. We’d send out patrols during the day and if they'd look for the enemy and contacting them, fight them and call in artillery fire or mortar fire in support. But at night most of the patrols would come back into this little fortified area to spend the night. Now, the long range patrols were something else. They would go out and enter the jungle area and stay for ten days, a ten day patrol. I’ll show you. The ten day patrollers and the long range patrol people, I was told their longevity on patrol was 20 days. So, ten days gave them a chance for survival and they'd come back and get rested and refitted and go out again. But, it was a very dangerous operation because they would be out without resupply support wandering in a small group of anywhere from five to eight people generally looking for the enemy and when they would identify where they were they could then radio back and the long range artillery in the firebase could then zero in and hit the enemy concentration. Let’s say a Viet Cong supply down or a Viet Cong training camp. When a long range patrol would find that, they wouldn’t necessarily take them on, but rather they would fall back a bit so that they weren't subject to precipitating hand to hand and then call in air and artillery.

SM: Now the long range patrollers staying out that long, it would seem that at that time, they would need the assistance of certain pharmaceuticals, amphetamines. Was that a policy?

JB: The Medic carried them with him whenever they needed it. If they had wounded, they could call in and a Dustoff would go zooming off there and try to scoop them up. I'll show worked.

JB: This is the same firebase.

SM: Slide 22.

JB: You see the little bunker and that highway down below. That’s highway number 1 ran from Saigon to Hanoi and Robert Falls, whom you are perhaps familiar
with, is a French historian. As a teenager, he was with the French Underground in World War II. After the war he came to the United States and majored in History at Howard University and got a Ph.D. in current history at Howard and his dissertation research was in Vietnam. He went to Vietnam, he was a Frenchman, and was with the French forces when they were fighting the Viet Minh and because the French didn’t have the air capabilities that we have, they moved largely on the ground, so they were very subject to the Viet Minh ambushing them on their roadways and shooting them up in their convoys. And that’s why he called the only north and south highway, he called it the “street without joy” because of the large number of casualties incurred by the French on that road. He went back to Vietnam after he got his Ph.D. and was back there with the Marines in the, oh, sometime in the late ‘60’s and while he was with them he happened to step on a land mine and was killed. His name is Robert Falls. His book, Street Without Joy, is worth reading.

SM: Slide 23.

JB: This is a patrol from the 101st Airborne taking a break at the height of the heat of the day. They’ll patrol for the day and then get back in to the fortress firebase at night. But you notice here, they have tarpaulin up there for shade and they’re standing around and one would think, “Gee, isn’t this a neat set up for the Viet Cong, NVA to hit them,” and it is. But the secret of being able to do this was in the children. If little children, 10, 12, 13 years old were out with their trinkets to sell and their Styrofoam carrying case full of ice and Coca-Cola were out to sell Coca-Cola to the soldiers for 50 cents per can. If the kids were there, the odds were very good that they would not be assaulted. If the kids didn’t show up, then you didn’t set up this kind of an arrangement. You settled into the tree line and made yourself as invisible as possible as you took your rest break because when the little children weren't around, then it was a signal that the enemy might hit you and the reason for that is, the children knew the enemy and the children knew what the enemy was going to do, whether they were going to attack you or not that day. If the children knew you were going to be attacked, they didn’t go out there with you. This is why the war was very strange to the Americans. The children lived in the little hamlets and the Viet Cong would circulate through the hamlets collecting supplies and war taxes and had their adherence in the community so that the little hamlets
and the people, most of the people in the hamlets, including the children, knew what the Viet Cong and NVA were going to do. The parents would say, “Now, don’t you go out selling your Coca-Cola to the soldiers tomorrow because it won’t be safe.” So, the children were a good barometer and the children were out here selling Coke. Now, the purple smoke, I had been asked to be pulled back because I had accomplished what I had wanted to with interviewing these soldiers. I had come out with them and they came to get me with the helicopter and to let them know where we were I had them pop smoke and they knew well that’s where we were and they came and picked me up.

SM: What kinds of questions would you ask them when you went to interview them?

JB: Oh, what their attitude was toward air ambulances. They were the user group, the client group, they were the population. So you would ask them, “How good is your health care, your medical coverage? Specifically how good is your air ambulance coverage?” And most of them thought pretty highly of the medical care they were getting from their enlisted medics and all the way. Some of them who had been sick or wounded and had been lifted out by air ambulance could speak personally of that experience and it was almost invariably positive. We’d pick them up so fast that they didn’t even have dressings on their wounds.

SM: Slide 24.

JB: By the time they were hit until they were being off loaded at Osco would run an average of 20 minutes. I shouldn’t say and average, but in as little as 20 minutes, the guy would be helped. The Medic would have their COMMO person call the radio telephone operators, RTO, “Dustoff, we got wounded, come and get them.” By the time we got there and got them to the hospital would be as little as 20 minutes. More often, longer than that to go out and back. Dustoff worked quit full. Now, this is a firebase, and a firebase is different than a Special Forces A Detachment camp. The A Detachment camp you saw is right out on a flat plain, deep in enemy territory. The firebases were up on the top of Hills. This is firebase Gaston, 101st Airborne. That black pad over there on the left is a helipad. You see the little round pits? Those are mortar pits. It’s a little hard to see everything else, but this is an old firebase that has been used for several years. Do you see how it has been defoliated all around? That was with Agent Orange; generally,
Agent Orange. Special Forces camps denude the vegetation right down to the ground. They would chop it down, bulldoze it down. Firebases were up high on a knoll, and they would simply get rid of the leaves so that they could see enough among the tree stumps and tree trunks if they were being attacked to defend themselves. Then they had horrendous firepower compared to a Special Forces detachment. These bases would have eight inch howitzers, 175 millimeter long range cannon, 105 millimeter howitzers, 150 millimeter howitzers, 80 millimeter mortar, the big mortar I think is a 80 millimeter mortar. They would throw shells out 20, 25 miles. So when they were told there was a Vietnam camp at such-and-such a quadrant, like from here to Hale Center, they could shout. They wouldn’t even need to call in air.

SM: Slide 25.

JB: This is from firebase Ogle, one of the newer firebases that was just operating a year or two when I was there. They took the top of the mountain and flattened it off and really [?] firebase. They could have stayed there for years. They figured they might have to. That’s Agent Orange, the work of Agent Orange out there. All the trees have been defoliated.

SM: Would they do this themselves or would they have aircraft come in and fly defoliation missions?

JB: Aircraft. The C-23. The slopes were chopped down.


JB: Here are the howitzers on top of firebase Ogle. Because the enemy did not have much in the way of aviation and air interdiction capability, we could set them up like this. If they had any kind of an airforce that came down to give us a bad time, this is very dangerous because all they would have to do is put a few rounds or bomb or two on that firebase and all these shells would go off. It would be a holocaust. I caught that one back there in recoil. Those are 150 mm guns. Since we had complete control of the air, it was an entirely different war than we would expect to fight against China, or Russia, or any other country with an air force. Now, the North Vietnamese had an Air Force. They used it north of the DMZ in order to interdict our bombers that were bombing North Vietnam.

SM: Slide 27.
JB: Now here’s a young fellow; a long range patrol guy. This is dusk. Behind
him on the left is an eight inch, self-propelled howitzer. It was very accurate. It could
throw a shell a heck of a distance. Over on the right is a 175 mm cannon, self-propelled.
That could throw a shell way out 25 miles. The problem was, toward the end of that long
range, it got a bit inaccurate. So, if you really want to lay it on them accurately and it
was within the range of the eight-inch howitzer, that was the one, or the 150 or the 105.
The 175 would get it way out there, but you weren't always sure how close to target it
was going to hit. Well, this kid was getting ready to go, as soon as it was dark, on a ten
day patrol; a LRP, long range patrol. He acted like he was maybe 19, 18 or 19.

SM: Slide 28.

JB: This is again on firebase Ogle, on the top. That medical officer-this is 101st
Airborne base- he’s now practicing obstetrics and gynecology in Houston. At that time,
he was just out of internship. He was a general medical officer. This was his dispensary,
first aid station and the walls are made of the wooden cases in which artillery rounds are
shipped. They used them as one would use -What do they call these new toys, they lock
together, like tinker toys or - Lego’s. He wasn’t all that busy because he took care of
mostly sick and non-serious wounds, because if one of their patrols was out in they got
injured, like a shot in the abdomen, or chest, or leg where they were not ambulatory, they
would not haul them back to this guy. They’d call air ambulance. Air ambulance would
go out there, pick them up, over fly, not stop here, just over fly right on to the hospital
that had the definitive capabilities to take care of the person.

SM: Slide 29.

JB: Here is a pick up on a Korean assault. You notice, this is not a place to land.
It’s a 45-degree slope practically. What the pilot does is fix on one of those tall reeds out
there and the crew chief tells the pilot where the rotor is and where the skid is on the near
side of the aircraft. The skid on the right side is about some six-eight feet off the ground
and the skid on the left side is just about touching the ground and the rotor is missing the
ground by about ten inches up at the top of its slope. This is a little rice paddy. The Viet
Cong would have rice that would grow on dry land. Well, you really couldn’t grow rice
on dry land. You know you have to have it in a pond. I was hoping to get the rotor as it
went by, but obviously I didn’t. But it was about ten inches off the ground. Now, the
problem with this is when you load a patient on to it, it changes the weight of the aircraft. The aircraft, by the way, belongs to the crew chief, not the pilot. The pilots and the medics don’t know which aircraft they are going to be flying in one day to the next. The crew chief stays with the aircraft all the time and is responsible for its first and second echelon maintenance. So, he tells the pilot what the situation is.

SM: 30.

JB: Here comes the Korean being carried fireman fashion. By the way, we hardly ever use litters, because in the jungle, the litter is kind of a clumsy thing. So, they brought him up and eased him onto the aircraft and the crew chief would say, “Okay, we’re going to take him aboard, get ready to add power. Okay, he’s on board.” As the aircraft pilot would be aware that he was sinking a little bit, he would juice up the (trails off). They were remarkable. Talk about fine tuning, my gosh!

SM: 32

JB: This is what the jungle looked like from up above. It was not unusual for an enemy up on the ridge, to literally shoot down on an air ambulance helicopter or a slick or whatever. The helicopters would go this way.

SM: 33

JB: We got a call out and the Koreans were fighting the enemy and the fire fight was hot enough so that they couldn’t move the person to a clearing. They were essentially pinned down, virtually pinned down. So, we went out and got over the area and asked them to pop smoke and we’d tell them the color and they would say, “Yes.” Then we knew it, because we learned early on, if they’d say, Okay here we are.” [And we’d say], “Pop yellow smoke so we know where you are,” and two or three pops of yellow smoke would appear, because the enemy was monitoring the radio frequency. He says, “Pop yellow smoke,” and (makes pop noise) then you had a choice. So, if you picked the wrong choice you were dead meat. This worked a little better. They'd pop the smoke and we’d tell them. I’ll finish up here.

SM: Slide 34.

JB: You see how dusty it is up there? That’s the rotor cutting the trees. We’d settled down into the canopy like a quail into weeds and we had a relatively new crew chief on this one, and he said to the pilot, “You're in the trees! Your rotors are hitting the
tree!” And the pilot very non-chalantly said, “I know that! Just tell me how big around
they are.” And the reason is that if they’re and inch or less, the rotor can cut them off. If
they’re more than and inch, they’ll break the rotor. If they break they rotor, you go down;
you’re all through for the day. So, you literally settle right down and you see the little
twigs flying around and settling.

SM: Slide 35

JB: Here we are hovering over, this is the same group with the purple smoke.
There they are. See them down there those little figures? We’re throwing up some dust.
This is fairly good because there are trees that are down and if you're going to put in
troops, you could get close enough with a small helicopter, like a Huey, to within ten feet
of the ground and the soldiers could jump off the skids. Most of the time, you couldn’t
see the people on the ground. But this was a good one even though we had to use the
jungle penetrator.

SM: Slide 36.

JB: Here they are again. See, we settle down as close as we can into the jungle
itself, so we’re below the treetops. The treetops are all around us so that even though
there’s a firefight going on right down there in the jungle, for the enemy to hit us is quite
difficult. They can hear the rotor, “Whump, whump, whump,” but they can’t really see
us or get a good shot at us.

SM: Slide 37.

JB: I’ll stop at this point. The black fellow is a medic and this is one of his early
flights with us. He was newly assigned with this group. This is with the 498th, not the
101st. This guy here, the name on his helmet is Fagan. He’s Korean. He was a Korean
orphan and an American Air Force sergeant stationed in Korea adopted him at age nine,
because he and his wife wanted children. Apparently, they could handle another child if
they didn’t have any. I don’t know how many they had. They decided they could take
care of a Korean orphan. So they adopted him, brought him back to the States at age
nine. He went through all of his education through high school in U.S. schools and had
their name, Fagan and spoke excellent English. Well, he wasn’t part of flight crew. He
was a corporal who was a supply soldier in our supply. Whenever the unit would go out
to cover the Korean combat assault, he would volunteer to go along. He wasn’t getting
any extra flight pay, or combat pay, but he would fly all day, every flight and cover the Koreans. The colonel of the regiment who was apparently new, was talking to Mayer, Henry Mayer and me. And he said, “It’s really great that you have a soldier that can speak Korean.” He said, “But you know, he only has the vocabulary of a nine year-old.” When we told him why, he was quite impressed. Holken had three or four decorations from the Koreans for what he had done. To my knowledge, he did not have a single decoration from the Americans for what he had done. That’s the way life is sometimes. It ain’t necessarily fair.

SM: We’re back from our break for lunch and continuing with Dr. Buessler.

JB: Okay, we talked about this one.

SM: Slide 38.

JB: Here’s a Korean coming in on the hoist.

SM: 39.

JB: Here is Fagan taking the [?] pulse of a wounded Korean. You notice no litters on the floor. We would have as many as six-eight on the floor at a time. In order to take the pulse of one you’d have to travel down the arm of the shirt attached to the patient you were interested in because it was like a can of worms. There was no way to utilize litters effectively. They take up too much room. Here we could move all around among these, but if you had the litters running crossways, it was like a room divider. Well, this fellow was shot in the left eye with an AK-47. That kid is a medic that we saw before. There is Fagan with no medical training, just what he had learned by frequent excursions of days and weeks at a time that he was a very good self-taught medic; very conscientious. This medic, the African American back here, was actually learning from him because the African American had no medical training.

SM: The man that was wounded you say was shot in the eye by an AK-47?

JB: Yes. He was also shot in the groin.

SM: Slide 40.

JB: That little dot, about the size of an eraser head, see it down in the groin?

SM: Did it go all the way through?
JB: All the way through and out the back. It’s not all that easy when you evaluate a person in a hurry under a stress situation. In all the confusion, you can overlook, where in the hell the entry wound is, because that’s all it is. It looks like a little black mole.

SM: This is slide 40. Now, there doesn’t seem to be a whole lot of blood loss at the entry wound.

JB: No, it bleeds on the way out.

SM: Slide 41.

JB: On that case Fagan did, the guy that got shot in the eye with the head wound. He kept periodically dying. Fagan in the helicopter, did CPR. When they off-loaded him, he ran along side the gurney using CPR as they wheeled him into the Korean division hospital, right into the operating room. They got him on the table, but he didn’t make it. But, that will kind of give you an idea of the behavior of Fagan. Ancestrally, these are his people. This is an area we’d offload, where we’re standing, the helipad.

This is where the wounded were first moved in. Generally, with an assault going on, you’d have anywhere from 1 to four or five helicopter trips or loads anywhere from three or four, two or three, up to 20, 25 wounded all at one time. So it’s a big cleared room except with places to put the litter. I’ll show you right here. (Changes slide).

SM: Slide 42.

JB: Here’s the example. This is 27 surgical hospital. You see the homemade wooden horses and the litter on one of them and the bar across the ceiling with stethoscopes and bottles of [?]. Well, we’d bring them in here and they’d just put up the litters and the whole side there would be wounded, one after another, like eight or ten. The triage people would be in there evaluating the nature of the wounds and had all their supplies there on the side. Right down the hall where the figure is in the door way, would be x-ray and surgery where they’d zip, zip, zip.

SM: This is slide 42. Sir, the triage process as you witnessed it, could you describe it in terms of how they prioritized the most severely wounded that looked like they wouldn’t make it? In the civilian world, the priority is always the most severely wounded person. Was that the case there?

JB: The principle of triage in mass casualties is you treat those that can be saved and need immediate attention. You set those aside, who in all likely hood aren’t going to
make it anyway and you set those aside that can wait. Here the mass casualty situation is
never that gross. In other words, you weren’t dealing with half a community that had
been nuked. They could handle 20-25 people in here pretty easily. If there were
minimally wounded, like walking wounded, depending on how busy their personnel were
in specialty areas, they would either get delayed treatment or get treatment immediately
depending on the ability of the personnel. There’s a lot of that stuff could be take care of
by general medical. But say it’s a head injury. You have three head injuries here. You
have one neurosurgeon. Then, he had to decide which one he would take first that he had
a reasonable chance to save, that if delayed, he would die. Then if another one, like that
man shot in the left eye and the bullet went through his head and came out here, and he
was going in and out of respiratory arrest, you would make him comfortable, period. You
[had lost him anyway]. But, where you had several physicians who could do the job,
then you had a greater opportunity to take care of it. For example, in minor injuries,
minor wounds, pediatricians could be brought in to take care of that, and the interns also.

SM: Slide 43.

JB: This is firebase Ripcord. You perhaps have read and heard about it. The
101st Airborne had a couple of platoons. They may have had a full company at one time,
but generally, it was less than the company strength of the firebase. This was out quit far.
It was resupplied by air. The only little trickling road there is almost a walking path. This
one was resupplied by air helicopter. They were attacked by a reinforced North
Vietnamese regular Army regiment consisting of probably at least 5 to 6,000 first line
soldiers and they attacked that group of 100 to 150 guys for six weeks continuous day
and night. These guys held out. Well, it was a stalemate and neither side was getting
anywhere. Discretion being the better part of valor, do we sit here and show the NVA we
can take it, or do we say, enough of this attrition and let’s get the hell out of here, so
besides that? I arrived at the time that that evacuation was taking place. I arrived with the
101st, so I rotated all over. They were evacuating and it took them about a week. They
destroyed the artillery pieces in place, got the heavy weapons and machine guns and the
personnel off, and anything else was destroyed in place. It took them a week to get them
out because fighting was going on all the time. In that week 101st lost 17 helicopters in
the evacuation process. How many were empty and how many had troops that they were
in the process of evacuating, I don’t know. Six out of the 17 were air ambulances of
those shot down. How many air crews do you think they rescued? This is in South
Vietnam. One, one out of the 17. One air crew was rescued. 16 air crews never heard
from again. Now, you know the probability is reasonably high that there must have been
1 or 2 people alive out of these 16 helicopters, because they didn’t all go down in flames.
Some of them were just disabled and crashed by auto rotation. That was one of the
interesting battles

SM: Slide 44.

JB: This is about a month after that. It was decided that the North Vietnamese
regiment was in such a position either for retraining and reorganizing, but they were in a
situation where it’s inappropriate to hit them. This was a counterattack about a month
after the Ripcord was evacuated. I was in the line of helicopters that haul these people in.
The first aeroplane that came in was a C-130. It had a thousand pound bomb with a long
probe in the middle and they rolled it off the ramp. It went down and the probe hit the
ground and the bomb exploded about to the height of the ceiling. The whole purpose was
for it to be a lawn mower, and it blew the trees up. So, the stumps were anywhere from a
couple of feet to three or four or five feet high. The helicopters that followed the C-130
could then come in and go down and hover above the ground five to ten feet and the
Vietnamese ARVN soldiers would jump off. The advantage of air assault is that you
don’t put them on the ground ten miles from the enemy; you put them on the ground as
close to the enemy as you can get them with the distance being just sufficient for them to
off load and get organized and they didn’t have to march half the day to get to the enemy,
rather just 200 meters. Well, the last of the long string of Hueys full of these guys, at the
very tail end was air ambulance. I happened to be riding in it. We were at the end of this
string. The helicopters didn’t coincide, but it was a string. One would go in afloat and the
other one would be approaching off…very well organized. By the time the last
helicopter had unloaded and flown out, we flew in to pick up the first of the wounded.
The soldiers who had gotten off early on had gone on and faced the enemy and some of
them were wounded and being hauled back to the clearing and we fished them out. After
that many years in this kind of warfare, some of the operations were really just like
clockwork, really efficient.
This is Cam Duc, two kilometers from the Laotian border with a big airstrip built by the French and improved by the Americans and if you look way down there, you see a notch in the mountain. That was a straight ridge line. The French cut a notch in there so that aircraft could come in to land without going over the hump and then coming down, they could fly through the notch, like a little pass. If you look closely, you can see the wings of an airplane in there. That’s a C-130 coming in to land on the strip. This aircraft sitting down here is the air ambulance. The air ambulance was the first to land and the first to stay on the ground in the combat assault. Now, this was one of the ten biggest assaults conducted in our 20 years in Vietnam. Not one word was written in the American Press. It didn’t exist. Reporters sat around the hotels in Saigon. The only reporter we had with us was an ex-Americal soldier who came back as a freelance journalist and stopped off to visit his buddies and they said, “Hey, we’re going on a big combat assault. Want to come along?” So, he went over to the general and the general said, “Yeah, come along. You’re the only reporter whose been interested.” The rest were down in Saigon waiting for the paper handouts. This guy came in on the assault and was a freelancer. As far as I know, I never ever heard of anything he published. But it was huge. It was more than division strength. We had a total of probably 20-25,000 soldiers. ARVN were in it. Americal Division was in it. A whole battalion of aviation. We had gotten word there were 2,000 or more NVA using this airstrip as a base, resupply base, with NVA aircraft coming in to resupply them. So, the decision was, “Well, that’s great. We’ve got 2,000 all in one place. We’ll swoop in and really do them some damage, but first we have to tell the Vietnamese government that were going to do it.” The end result was that they just walked back two kilometers into Laos and left a rear guard. So, we were harassed by a rear guard of probably not more than a company of their troops; 150-200 soldiers where we were really looking for 2,000. They were in the hills around us. I’ll finish this sequence.

SM: Slide 46.

This is a little pond right near the runway on one side of the runway. Really, kind of like a playa lake. It doesn’t look like anything. The Army Engineers, U.S.
Engineers, zipped in there, set this up with reverse osmosis. We had fresh water almost immediately.

SM: Slide 47.

JB: This is the old Special Forces camp that had come into the area in the middle ‘60’s to occupy it. They were driven out during Tet Offensive and that’s the debris that was left when they were shot up and all that.

SM: 48.

JB: These are holes from 1,000 pound bombs. You can see the size of the people, the little black dots. Those are really big holes and that clay was as hard as cement. The advantage of the bombs, is we’d build our underground shelters in the shell and we didn’t have to dig for it. You’d just go build it in the bottom.

SM: Slide 49.

JB: Here we’re standing in the runway watching a fire fight up at the top. It’s a firebase at the bottom. The Viet Cong and NVAs were shooting down at us from there so we sent assault troops up the ridge from this side up to drive them off and they were driven down into the tree line on that side of the ridge. You see the two dots; the one dot in the cloud and the one dot just above the tree line? Those are ARVN, South Vietnamese aircraft. They have what we use out there at Reese, the T-37, a Cessna side-by-side jet trainer and they used them for close air support. That one that’s over the tree line had come across the ridge just shaving the ridge and took off and as he shaved the ridge, he let go of his napalm and it went tumbling down. It didn’t have fins, so it just tumbled. Here’s the ridge and it came tumbling and as it fell it fell like this. It just followed the curve of the hill. It was remarkable the way he timed it, dropped it down, and landed right there in the tree line, right where the Viet Cong were. The guy behind him in the cloud was going to follow him through and when they were through dumping their stuff, they flew around, came down and went down the runway and did a victory roll (makes aircraft rolling sound). These guys had about 2,000 hours of combat flying. Now, that’s a whole career for an American Air Force person. They wore black satin flight suit with white scarves. They were just like drugstore cowboys. They would strut in their dark glasses, but they were damn good.

SM: Slide 50.
JB: There’s the firebase that was recaptured. We were flying in to pick up a wounded person from that fighting. That aircraft had come in at this angle and hit the Viet Cong at the other end. As you see the jungle, it’s hilly in all the jungle, this is two miles from Laos.

SM: Slide 51.

JB: This is debris from the time the Special Forces were driven out. See the front-end loader with the scoop full of dirt. They didn’t even have time to dump the dirt. They scooped it up and the word was, “Get the hell out of here,” and they left it right there. The tires are no longer on the machine. We went up and looked and you could see where they cut it out for sandals. This is part of a CH-47 helicopter rotor.

SM: Slide 52.

JB: There is a C-130 from the same Tet period. Four engine aircraft was destroyed.

SM: Slide 53.

JB: This is from the French at Cam Duc. Eisenhower had given them a bunch of C-119s transport, twin boom, aircraft, flying box car they called it. It kind of reminded you how long the war had been on because here a little tree is growing up through the windows where they have been pushed off the edge of the runway.

SM: Slide 54.

JB: Here is mortar crew just sending out harassing fire. Rear guard were scattered around in the hills sniping at us. This is just to keep them a little off balance. It didn’t do much good.

SM: Slide 55.

JB: Here is a jolly green giant bringing in a load. We were there for about two months, all told. This is the size of the load the guy is sitting on.

SM: Slide 56.

JB: Here is a medic taking in that sad looking guy without a hat. He’s a pediatrician. He had about two months to go. He had done his entire duty in one of the hospitals as a pediatrician along the coast of the South China Sea; real state-side type duty, air conditioned hooch. His commander came in and said, “We need a battalion sergeant and you are it.” He was as sad as he looked when he saw me and saw that I was
a medic colonel. I came up to him and said, “How are you doing?” All he said was, “Why me, why me?” Then he told me his story, “I only had two months to go and they put me here. I’m a pediatrician from New York.” And I said, “Ease up, your not going to get hurt. This will give you something to tell your children about.” It didn’t seem to satisfy him. He really felt that he had been discriminated against, I guess(Changes to Slide 57). Digging a hole in the ground there was very hard work. This is me and the guy in the door is a black medic, hell of a nice guy, very bright. Two people were up on the roof working on the rotor. Three weeks from the time this picture was taken, everybody in the picture was dead except me. The black guy volunteered to take the place of another medic who was supposed to go out and he was sick, so he volunteered to fill in. That’s when he was killed. The other two were killed at approximately the same time. Where, I don’t know, but they were all killed

SM: 58.

JB: In this we’re getting a little deeper into the ground here. The hole is bigger. Everybody had to dig their own foxholes, including myself. Nobody came around and said, “Just because you’re an old man, we’ll dig it for you.” We had a defender on foxholes so that they were all arranged periphery, perimeter so they faced outward so that if attacked at night you could, right from your foxhole, fire toward the periphery.

SM: 59.

JB: This is the completed aid station with sandbags and air ambulance sitting there stayed there day and night. There really constitutes an awful lot of work piled up there.

SM: 60.

JB: This is An Son in the background and this guy was coming home late at night from Qui Nhon to [__________ heliport]. He passed by An Son and the Viet Cong must have been in there collecting taxes at night and one of them opened up with a machine gun and shot him down. That’s where careless lads would go for prostitution services.

SM: Did anybody survive?

JB: I don’t know. I just passed over and looked back

SM: 61.
JB: I guess we’ll stop here. That’s the 27th Surgical Hospital with the helicopter sitting on a pad. You see the amphitheater? That’s the Bob Hope amphitheater. Bob Hope, as you know, every year, when he was younger more often, would go entertain the troops. Because of who he was and all, he wanted it to be made worth his while. “If I’m going to come over I don’t want to just put on this gala performance for a couple hundred soldiers.” So, his request was that they have at least 2,500 soldiers or more. “If you want me to put on a show, I want 2,500 or more.” Martha Ray, the comedienne of the big mountain, she was a reserve lieutenant colonel in the Nurse Corp in World War II. She would come over and insist in going to small units. She would go solo, put on a solo stand-up. She was in the special protector attachment to the Special Forces camps. They flew her out on this occasion, way out in the boonies. While she was there, the NVA, Viet Cong attacked and it looked like they were obviously trying to overrun camp and her escort said look, “Miss Ray, we can get out of here if we leave right away. We can still get out on the helicopter.” She said, “No, no, I’m not just a comedienne, I’m a nurse and I’m going to stay here and help take care of any of these wounded.” She stayed through the whole damn firefight, assisting the enlisted medic take care of what wounded came in. Of course, the American medics took care of the Montagnard wounded, took care of all of them. So, she probably was not just standing there twiddling here thumbs. It was reasonably busy. Then they took her out. But, that was one instance where she would go out to the Special Forces camp for her several visits to Vietnam. They adopted her and made her an honorary member of Special Forces. At a conference I was at about four or five years ago, Special Forces conference, I was standing at the bar and I turned and looked toward the entrance of the hotel and in came Martha Ray and there was no one there to greet her. I left my barstool and went over and introduced myself and said, “Welcome.” She’s just a little thing and she reached up and kissed me on the cheek and whispered in my ear, “Where in the hell is the ladies’ room.” So, I’ll leave it at that.

SM: This will stop the interview on the 26th of January. Thank you Dr. Buessler.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Dr. John Buessler on the 36th of January at approximately a quarter ‘til four in the afternoon. Okay, sir, I guess we should pick up with slide number 62. Because we already discussed the….
JB: Those buildings in the background, that is the base camp for the Americal Division. I think it’s the 23\textsuperscript{rd} Infantry Division, but we generally call it the Americal Division. It is the same one that was involved, one of its companies in My Lai, it’s a big division. It sent a battalion with us on the Cam Duc raid, Cam Duc Operation. They had about 1,000, contributed about 1,000 to 1,500 and the ARVN contributed a couple of battalions and a whole Army of the Asian battalions. That’s their home base.

SM: This is 62.

JB: This is the 173\textsuperscript{rd} Airborne Brigade; one of its aid stations. You’ll notice it is partially underground with dirt piled up at the side. The entrance is a right angle like a Z and you go in and you turn left and you turn right so that if somebody throws a grenade in or some such rocket, it only explodes in the entrance and not in the main body.

SM: 63.

JB: This is the interior of that, partially underground. And again, the comparison in size; you see the medic here with his shirt off, standing next to across a litter from-this is Vietnamese, not Montagnard-woman, and a father sitting here. The reason there are kids on the litter, three of them, the Viet Cong wasn’t happy with the fact that the villagers were friendly to the GI’s, a nearby village, and wanted them to participate more in espionage and petty sabotage. Well, apparently they didn’t get the same positive response they want, so like in Chicago or New York where they were practicing extortion, “If you want to keep your store from blowing up, you are going to have to pay us.” But the extortion here wasn’t so much in money because they collected the Viet Cong war taxes anyway. They came in during recess while all the school kids were in the play yard and they would throw hand grenades into it, the Viet Cong. It’s very persuasive. Those are the kids that were injured by the hand grenade and the parents of course, are being taught a lesson. Yet, the only place they could take them for immediate care was to the American hospital.

SM: Slide 64.

JB: We were flying along one Sunday afternoon, no particular mission, and we saw a column of ARVN half tracks and trucks going along the road in a convoy. And while we watched looking down, the hillside on their left broke open with a lot of small arms fire and we just happened to be sitting there on top of them while they were
ambushed. They immediately came to halt and people jumped out and jumped in the
ditches. Well, we circled around and came in low expecting that they probably were
getting some wounded and here they had tossed us a smoke grenade to show us where
they were taking their wounded. There’s one of them being dragged along right there.

SM: Slide 65.

JB: This is an armored personnel carrier in which they brought the wounded from
the road to this little bare spot where we sat down. We scooped them up and took them to
the province hospital. Just by chance we happened to right there at the moment they were
hit.

SM: 66.

JB: This is where the Air Force came in to the Medevac picture. They were not
charged with transporting people within the theatre. This air ambulance is a C-141, big
four engine jet and it’s at Cam Ranh Bay where they had a large collecting hospital. The
rule was, if you could patch up a person so they could be back to duty in ten days or less,
you could keep them in the theatre. Treat them and if your estimate was that if they were
going to take more than ten days or if they took more than ten days then you had to move
them out of the theatre, so you transported them down to Cam Ranh Bay and collected
them and loaded them on one of these and this went to Japan.

SM: 67.

JB: This is at a U.S. Air Force Base in Japan in Tokyo. They have just gotten off
the 147 and they are being pushed on homemade gurneys to helicopter. The reason they
go to the helicopter is because to transport them on the ground in Tokyo in those days,
roads were narrow and very congested. It took eight hours from the Air Force Base to the
Army hospital. eight hours, stop, go, stop, go. It took 20 minutes with a helicopter. So,
we over fly Tokyo to the hospital.

SM: 68.

JB: This is one of the hospitals. There were two; one was Camp Zama and the
other was Camp Drake. This was a Japanese office building which was turned over to
the Americans, which the Americans rented and renovated into a hospital. You see the
two flags? It was a fairly decent facility.

SM: How long was the flight from Vietnam to Japan? Do you recall?
JB: I think it was close to two and a half hours, plus or minus. Two and a half, three hours.

SM: 69.

JB: The Marines had their own system of aeroMedevac. As I mentioned before the two others were the 101st and the Air Cav that had their own organic platoon there, ambulance platoon that only took care of their own people. The Medical Battalion system took care of the whole countryside. Anything that happened, they were called. The Marines had their own and they took care of only their own. They did not use dedicated crews or dedicated aircraft. A crew would get air ambulance duty by reading a duty roster, so when it was posted they’d find that next week they would be flying air ambulance. The same crew, crew chief, two pilots, two machine gunners - they had .50 caliber machine guns that they used on the front of the Navy Chinooks- and a Navy medic would be added to the crew when they were going to be Dustoff. These are the famous Marble Mountains at Danang, riddled with caves because they were literally marble forests. The Marines, when they first landed, it took them quite a while, several months of getting close and trying to route the Viet Cong out of those mountains. That’s the South China Sea over on the side. See, the beach, the long beach, that’s the famous Red Beach. There was a television program a couple of years back, they called it China Beach, but it was Red Beach in reality, but Hollywoodized.

SM: Slide 70.

JB: This is what the Marines used. That was their helicopter. They had no Hueys. They only used this period C-46. The mini Chinooks looked similar to the Army CH-47, which was about a third longer. The bulge on the side ran the whole length of the CH-47 where they carried the fuel. This is smaller, but similar configuration, twin rotors. They called it a baby Chinook. The Army didn’t think much of them, but the Marines seemed to like them.

SM: 71.

JB: This is the interior. Two .50 calibers up in the front door, two pilots, crew chief, and they’d add a Navy medic. They’d carry their wounded out on this thing (changes slide). Now, they did not like to fly going alone. Army would send in its air ambulances solo, 90 plus percent of the time with no gunship support or anything else.
We’d just duck in and duck out. But the Marines -maybe its because their aircraft was more cumbersome, or their technique, I have no idea- they hated this duty because they were more likely to be shot down flying aero Medevac than anything else. This is the aero med ship assigned to the aero Medevac out on a mission inside of it. Out through the back is the chase ship. If this one gets shot out on the ground, that one zips in and tries to rescue what's left. So, on every call, they tied up two aircraft, one to land the other to hang up their as a rescue aircraft.

SM: This is slide 72. I was curious about the Marine Corps employment of that second ship. Do you think it was because of the Army using the Huey, a faster more maneuverable helicopter and that mini- Chinoook, probably not as easy to get in quickly and get out quickly.

JB: Probably, probably.

SM: This is 73.

JB: Their aero Medevac crews didn’t fly that mission all the time and, as far as I know, they didn’t use hoists, I never did see a hoist. So, they would have to go down on land. So, the Marines would have to draw their wounded back to a clearing, all of which made them more vulnerable. This is a collecting company for the 1st Marine Division, or 3rd Marine Division was what I was with when I was over there. It’s mostly underground. As you see, it looks like a triage station, which is what it really is and here is where they get their wounded from the CH-47 that flies in. They triage them and give them life support and then they have to transport them to a hospital. Well, they don’t use Army hospitals; they use Navy hospitals. Navy hospitals are on ships, not on land. Their CH-46s were too big to land on the fan tail of the sanctuary, which is a hospital ship. See that flat platform at the back? The CH-47 could land there nicely and these things sat out in the harbor to avoid sneak attacks and terrorism.

SM: 74.

JB: Here is one coming in. The Army would them pick up the Marine wounded at the Marine collecting station. When they had a bunch of them, they would say, “Come and haul them off to the sanctuary.” They would do that and unload them here and turn them over.

SM: Slide 75, this is 76.
JB: This is a German hospital ship. They had no combat forces in Vietnam. They only provided this hospital ship as humanitarian aid. It was docked at Danang. It would go right in and dock on the port. We wouldn’t do that because the VC might come running up with a satchel charge and blow a hole in the boat. But, whenever the German hospital ship was in the harbor at dock, it was told to me, that the town was very happy, because they weren’t shelled. When the German hospital ship was not at the dock, then the VC would periodically throw some mortar shells in just as part of the harassment that goes on in warfare. They wouldn’t shell them while the hospital ship was in because the VC used it. They’d dress up in civilian garb and infiltrate the city and go down to the dock and go aboard the ship and they’d get taken care of. The Germans made it their policy, they didn’t ask any questions. It didn’t matter who, if they were ill they would take care of them, civilians or Viet Cong. Now, the ARVNs and all the other forces had their own health service support hospitals. So, really the hospital ship there took care of local civilians and Viet Cong NVA. Very Strange. We knew it and there was nothing we deemed appropriate to do. You couldn’t go down and stand at the gang way and ask for I.D. It was their ship and they were doing what they wanted to do. But again, it’s one of those funny things that happened in the war.

SM: Do you recall the name of that ship?

JB: No, I don’t. I was visiting an air ambulance base up near Hue and they got a call to go out and pick up a wounded ARVN soldier who was part of a long range patrol. They were deep in enemy held territory. When I say enemy held, which is mostly all of Vietnam because at night they held it, daytime they may shrink back into the brush and hills. But, the night belonged to pretty much the enemy. When you are on long range patrol, and you have a wounded person, it is better that they were dead than wounded because they slow you down. If dead, you'd leave them. The long range patrols were not interested in starting firefights and hand-to-hand combat way out there because they were out there to pick up intelligence information and call in other means to get after them. Sometimes, they would put together an assault force that would go in and actually start a fight about it. Here, we’re landed out there and bringing in the board and they were very happy even before this guy got in the helicopter. They were on their way, scurrying away because the enemy was chasing them. One interesting aspect was, when we were putting
together the crew to go out, which took a matter of two minutes, the pilot, co-pilot, and
crew chief were talking to the enlisted medic and the enlisted medic says, and I happen to
be standing there, and the medic says, “But I’m a short timer. I only have two weeks to
go. Do you really need me on this one?” Remembering that I was a physician, I said,
“I’ll go out as replacement for medic.” Even though my role was participant observer
ordinarily, there wasn’t any reason why I couldn't go to work. The kid with the short
term breathed a sigh of relief and I took his place. Nothing on tour had happened, but,
you know, they get nervous toward the end. They fear they’ve used up the law of
averages and its going to work against them the last few days.

SM: That was 77 and this is 78.

JB: This is again, the South China Sea and at those buildings on back in the trees
on the right there is a lepersarium run by French nuns. The French nuns were there and
the French were long since gone and the war was going on. So, how do they survive?
How do they take care of the lepers in a situation that is as fluid and chaotic as that?
Well, we’re coming in to land on the beach and go swimming. We had lunch with them.
The Sister Superior had us to lunch, French cuisine. Really first rate, wonderful food. She
took us through the lepersarium, walked down the street. There were huts and hospitals.
And about a third of the buildings had right in the stone brick, “Built courtesy of the 34th
Military Police Battalion.” “Built courtesy of the 24th Engineers.” About a third of these
buildings had been built by American GI’s in their spare time. They scrounged up the
material, got it out there, and built them. They weren't just clapboard, they were brick and
cement. That was kind of impressive. The Sister Superior reminded us that we were
welcome to use their beach. She said, “But, you remember,” she told Major Mayor,
“Don’t go beyond that clump of trees down at the far end of the beach.” Do you see
where it sticks out, those trees? “Don’t go down to or beyond those.” And he says, “Yes,
I remember,” and she said, “Okay, have a good time.” I asked him, “Why can't we go
past that clump of trees?” You see it when you are on the ground better. Do you see it
down there at the edge where that faint blue seeming smoke is coming from? That’s an
old Japanese landing barge from World War II. The hulk was sitting there rusting. Well,
it was used as an operating base and shelter by the local Viet Cong. They lived in it. You
could see their laundry hanging out drying. They got along with the nuns and the nuns
got along with them. The nuns needed the Americans and they knew that the nuns needed the Americans, so they worked out a deal with the nuns that, “Well, if you keep your American friends at this end of the beach, it will be okay. If they come down that far, we’re going to have to defend ourselves and a firefight will result.” So, she just reminded us, “Now, remember, you don’t go down that far.” Well, while we were there, a couple of guys thought they would go fishing by throwing hand grenades in the water. They threw hand grenades in the water up here where we were swimming. After a couple of those, one of the nuns came rapidly walking toward us across the beach. The Viet Cong had contacted the Sister Superior to tell the Americans to stop throwing hand grenades in the water; “That makes us nervous and we don’t like it.” So the nun sent one of here sisters to come down and tell us to stop it, which we promptly did. I was telling them that this is the lepersarium on the right and down at the end where you see very faint gray that seems like smoke, that’s from old Japanese landing craft that was rusting there from World War II. The Viet Cong live there. You can see their laundry hanging out. We could swim at this end of this part of the beach, but we couldn’t go beyond or down to that clump of trees that project out farther on to the beach. Down that far, they told the nuns, then they would have to shoot at us. As long as we stayed on this side, they wouldn’t bother us. This worked out pretty good. In addition to building to all those buildings for them, that the American GIs had done, I asked Major Mayor, “Gee, how come you are such a welcome guest.” He said, “Well, Sister Superior let me know that if I could help them in any way, it would be greatly appreciated.” And he asked what she needed and she said she needed a dozen or more mattresses. So, he managed, through the system, trade a souvenir to the supply sergeant. They loaded up the helicopter with mattresses and flew them out of there and gave them to the Sister so she could put new mattresses in some of her lepersarium bunks.

SM: 79.

JB: This is again, South China Sea, beautiful. The press made fun of it. Anything about Vietnam was ridiculed. The Vietnam soldiers were no good, which wasn’t true. We were doing all of the fighting, which wasn't true. The climate and environment was just
dreadful. Well, if you think Florida is dreadful, then you'd think Vietnam is dreadful because Vietnam is a hell of a lot like Florida, I discovered.

SM: Number 80.

JB: Here is the last slide of that 5th Special Forces Group. A quotation by Winston Churchill. I guess you can read that without my help.

SM: Alright.

JB: Should I read it for the purpose of the disk?

SM: Sure, why don’t you?

JB: Okay, the sign hanging outside of headquarters building of 5th Special Forces Group states a quotation by Winston Churchill. “Still if you will not fight for the right when you can easily win without bloodshed, if you will not fight when your victory will be sure and not too costly, you may come to the moment when you will have to fight with all the odds against you and only a precarious chance of survival. There may even be a worse case. You may have to fight when there is no hope of victory because it is better to parish than to live as a slave.” – Winston Churchill. That’s the end of this.

SM: Okay, well, thank you very much Dr. Buessler.

JB: Thank you.