Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m doing an oral history interview with Mr. Don Jellema. I am in the Special Collections Library interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. It is November 25th, approximately 1:35—excuse November 25, 2002, approximately 1:35 in the afternoon. Mr. Jellema you are in Brandon, South Dakota?

Don Jellema: That’s right.

RV: Okay, great. Sir, why don’t we start with tell me where you were born and when you were born.

DJ: I was born on January 20, 1932 in Orange City, Iowa.

RV: In Iowa, okay. Is that where you grew up, there in Orange City?

DJ: I lived in Orange City until the age of twelve and then we moved to Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

RV: Tell me about growing up—or your first twelve years there in Orange City.

What was that like for you?

DJ: My first twelve years in Orange City was really nothing eventful. I came from a family with very few means. There was nine children in the family so it was kind of rough growing up. I used to just do any kind of odd job I could to pick up some money.
RV: You were born right there at really the beginning—really the onslaught of
the Great Depression?

DJ: Well yeah, I think we were just coming out of the Great Depression when I
was born. My father was a carpenter and he had no work because nobody was building.
He used to walk through the country and just asked farmers if they had some work so he
could get some meat.

RV: Did you mother work?

DJ: No, she was busy raising nine kids.

RV: Nine kids. So you had eight siblings? Wow. Quite a large family. So, tell
me how many boys? How many girls?

DJ: I had four brothers and four sisters.

RV: Where were you in the pecking order?

DJ: I was next to the last. (Laughs)

RV: How old was your oldest sibling?

DJ: My oldest sibling now is—

RV: I guess how many years difference between you and them?

DJ: Okay, I’m seventy and my oldest sister is eighty-six.

RV: Okay, so sixteen years. Did they work that you remember when you were in
Orange City?

DJ: Yeah, wherever they could. Mostly clerking in a grocery store, the older
ones.

RV: What do you remember about your schooling there in Orange City?

DJ: My first eight years was in the Orange City Christian School, which is a
parochial school for the reformed Calvinist Church. In high school, I started high school
in Orange City, which was quite small. I was a sophomore in high school when we
moved to Sioux Falls.

RV: Why did your family move to Sioux Falls?

DJ: My dad being a carpenter and he had fallen through some scaffolding. It
broke his leg, heel and arch. He couldn’t really do the work that he would normally do as
a carpenter as far as climbing and that. He knew the Jordan Millwork people from Sioux
Falls that used to come down to Orange City as salesmen and they offered him a job as a
custom cabinetmaker. So we moved for that purpose.

RV: You were in high school as you said when you did move?

DJ: Right.

RV: Tell me about your high school years. What do you remember most about them?

DJ: Let me get on another phone a minute.

RV: Okay, go ahead sir.

DJ: My high school years, well they weren’t all that eventful. My dad died when I was sixteen and I really had no one to really push me in education. I was the only one that ever graduated from high school.

RV: Really?

DJ: So education wasn’t really a big thing to my family.

RV: Was that because of the financial situation or is it because they simply didn’t—?

DJ: Well, my parents had very little education. They never put that much emphasis on education. Primarily because financially we couldn’t afford higher education. (Technical noise) That was my wife hanging up the other phone. (Laughs) It was just really a financial deal.

RV: Okay, so you were the first in your family to graduate from high school?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: Wow. Tell me about high school. What were your favorite subjects?

DJ: I liked math. When I transferred from Iowa to South Dakota they didn’t give me all my credits because of the difference in the state regulations on certain subjects and so I was ineligible for sports. So in high school I just went out for Golden Gloves, which was a non-school sport.

RV: That was boxing, is that correct?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: You did this after school?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: Were you good at that?
DJ: For my age. I started when I was fourteen, when the legal age was sixteen. I lied about my age and got an AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) card. I won most of my fights, although I didn’t win them all.

RV: Did your mother approve of this?
DJ: Not really. (Laughs)
RV: But you did it anyway.
DJ: Yeah, it gave me something to do. In that respect I think she was happy I was involved in something.

RV: So you were good in math, did you enjoy any other subjects while you were studying?
DJ: Math was about the only thing. I wasn’t a great student. I think primarily because I had nobody pushing me.

RV: What did you brothers and sisters think about you going through high school and finishing high school?
DJ: I don’t ever recall their expressing feelings about it.

RV: Were they supportive of you?
DJ: Yeah, I would say they were.

RV: How did your father die if you don’t mind me asking?
DJ: My father died of a heart attack.

RV: You were sixteen years old?
DJ: Right.

RV: Was that a very difficult time for you? Were you close with your father?
DJ: I guess I was never really close with my parents. When you’re next to the last and my father was busy trying to make a living. I was kind of in the way.

RV: Right.

DJ: After my father died I went to work in a packinghouse in the summer and worked a night shift while I finished high school.

RV: What kind of packinghouse was it?
DJ: It was meatpacking, hogs and cattle for John Morrell.

RV: What do you remember about that kind of work?
DJ: It wasn’t exciting work; it was the best paying place in town at this time and it was a living.

RV: What did you do when you graduated from high school?

DJ: When I graduated from high school I stayed at Morrell’s. I started with them when I was sixteen and after high school I was still with Morrell’s.

RV: What year would this be when you graduated high school?


RV: Tell me about what kind of military influence you had growing up. I know World War II happened in your youth. What other military influence was there in your life?

DJ: I had two brothers that were in the service during World War II. I know my dad was always listening to the news. We heard a lot of it in the news. When we went to the theatre or to the movies there was always newsreels about the war. Being I had two brothers in it and that—the war meant a whole lot to us when we were young.

RV: Right, of course. They both came through it okay?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: Any other relative serve in the military?

DJ: Yeah, I had several cousins that served.

RV: Did that have any influence on you joining the Army?

DJ: No, I guess in some respects I was kind of military minded because of my family. The people that owned the grocery store across the street from where I lived, they lost a son in the Second World War. Then when the Korean War started my best friend joined the Navy and he was killed over in Korea. That did have an influence on me.

RV: You were twenty year old when you joined the Army?

DJ: Right.

RV: Tell me about that. Did you enlist first with the Marine Corps or did they come get you?

DJ: Well, it’s kind of funny deal. (Laughs) When I was still in high school I joined the Naval Reserve. The Korean War broke out and everybody was kind of leaving, all our friends were going in the service. Me and a couple of my buddies we
wanted to go in, but we didn’t want to go in for four years. The Navy at that time had a policy that if you missed four meetings you’re eligible for the draft. Their policy was to call you up for two years active duty for training. We decided that we wanted to go in for two years. So we quit going to meetings. The next thing I knew I had a draft notice. (Laughs) So I checked with the Reserve office and they forgot to turn our names into 9th Naval District, so I was eligible for the draft. The Navy had a waiting list, so they wouldn’t let me enlist for four years. The Air Force had a waiting list, they wouldn’t let me enlist. I talked to the gal at the draft board and she says, “Well—” She told me if I could get into the other services she’d let me go ahead. Then all of a sudden I found out I was going to be drafted into the Marines, so then I wanted to get in the Army. (Laughs)

RV: Tell me why not the Marines?

DJ: I just didn’t want any part of the Marines. I’d have rather gone to the Army than the Marines, although I really wanted to go in the Navy. Understanding my situation she said, “Well, if you’ll enlist before your induction date I’ll let you join the Army for two years.” So that’s how I went in the Army for two years.

RV: Did the Marine Corps have a bad reputation when you were there in Sioux Falls?

DJ: No, not really. Knew very little of them.

RV: You just particularly didn’t want to go into the Marine Corps?

DJ: No, I just didn’t want any part of the Marine Corps.

RV: What did you think about the Korean War, about Truman’s policy, and the United Nation’s effort to stabilize the peninsula? What did you think of the overall war?

DJ: When it started I figured that it’d be over before I got a chance to get into it. In a way I wanted to go into the service and in a way I didn’t. My older brothers and everybody, you know, it was always an obligation to serve. I always felt that’s what it was. The Korean War itself, I didn’t know anything about Korea. I wasn’t that involved in politics. I didn’t really know the politics of it. I did want to go and I didn’t want to go. It was kind of mixed feelings. I was supporting my mother at the time and I could have gotten a deferment. She had talked to the draft board and they would defer me because I was supporting her. So all I had to do was sign the papers. But having a friend killed there and then also the neighbor, the guy that ran the store across the street from us, his
son being killed in the Second World War; I think if I’d have taken a deferment from the
draft I just wouldn’t have felt right.
RV: How did your mother feel about you joining and going off to the war?
DJ: She wasn’t too happy with it.
RV: How was she going to be able to support herself? Would you send home
your pay to her?
DJ: I took out a Class Q allotment. We put it to my other brothers and sisters to
also contribute, which they didn’t do before.
RV: Had your family moved from the poverty level where you were when you
were born in the 1930s? This is 1952 when you join and go to basic training. Had your
family advanced a little bit, economically?
DJ: Yes, my grandmother died and my mother did inherit a little money. From
that my folks were really able to get out of debt so to speak and start making a living.
Things were much better by that time when I grew up. See what was really bad during
the Depression, I had a sister that died of spinal meningitis. At that time, it was such a
contagious disease that nobody would touch her. So that day she died in the morning and
they put her in a box and my dad carried her out. They wouldn’t even embalm her or
anything.
RV: Wow. How old was she?
DJ: She was five and I was just a tiny baby.
RV: Do you have any memories of that?
DJ: No. They had to burn everything in the house that she’d ever come in
contact with.
RV: Wow. Okay, so in 1952 you decide to join, right?
DJ: Yeah.
RV: You went off to basic training at Camp Breckenridge in Kentucky?
DJ: Right.
RV: Tell me about your basic training, what was it like for you?
DJ: Basic training for me was quite easy. What happened when we first got there
they needed help in the orderly room to type rosters and everything and they asked for
volunteers who could type. Well, I could type. So they put me in the orderly room just
to help catch up on rosters while the others were in-processing so to speak. The clerk got orders for Korea so he went in the hospital to get his varicose veins operated on so he could get deferred. (Laughs) They had no clerk, so they just told me to stay there. I was his substitute. When he came back out, they put him back on orders and he got his other leg operated on. (Laughs) So, I really didn’t take much of basic training. The first sergeant felt I had to be familiar with the M-1 and all that. That was about the only thing I took training on was the M-1 rifle.

RV: Did you do the PT, the physical training?
DJ: Pardon?
RV: Really? Did you do the PT, the physical training?
DJ: No, I didn’t do any physical training at all.
RV: So you just took weapons training?
DJ: I just took weapons training on the M-1 and the rest of the time I spent in the orderly room.

RV: Wow. That was a very different experience than a normal GI.
DJ: Yeah, I just spent sixteen weeks as a clerk. That was my basic training. I did go out on the rifle range with the M-1s. That’s the only training I really actually had.
RV: What did you think of the M-1?
DJ: It was about a modern a weapon as you’re going to get at that time. I knew it was a powerful weapon but that’s about all I could say about it.
RV: Had you handled the guns before this?
DJ: Yeah, primarily .22s and that.
RV: Were you a good marksman with the M-1?
DJ: Oh yeah, I did a lot of shooting with the .22 when I was a kid. I was very good firing the rifle.

RV: So, your memories of basic are basically being a clerk and that’s about it.
DJ: Right.
RV: So, it wasn’t very stressful for you I guess in that sense?
DJ: No, it wasn’t too tough for me.
RV: So that was sixteen weeks. Did you go immediately to your advanced training?
DJ: At that time the advanced training was infantry training also because everybody was going to Korea. That was all of our training. Everybody from there shipped out usually over to Korea.

RV: Tell me about your advanced training. What was that like for you?

DJ: My advanced training was the infantry, it was regular basic training. We had sixteen weeks of basic training. Eight weeks was regular infantry and then advanced infantry. So I was the clerk all through that time.

RV: What kind of training did you have before you went to Korea?

DJ: Just on the M-1 rifle and typing I guess in Army forms. (Laughs)

RV: I’m going to skip ahead for a second. When you went to Korea were you in a combat role in Korea?

DJ: Yes.

RV: But you had received really no training except on the M-1?

DJ: That’s right.

RV: Did you feel under-trained and under-prepared?

DJ: Yeah. (Laughs)

RV: Why did they send you into the combat situation like that?

DJ: When I went they had no knowledge that I never went through basic training. My records looked as if I had completed basic training just like anyone else.

RV: Oh, okay. So they had no clue that you had not been trained at all in any of the tactics?

DJ: Right.

RV: Before you go to Korea tell me how much time did you have when you ended training and then until you had to go overseas?

DJ: After basic I was shipped out overseas and I was assigned to the 24th Infantry Division in Japan. I was there about three months and then I was assigned to Korea. I was a clerk the three months I was in Japan.

RV: What did your mother think about you leaving and going overseas?

DJ: She was a typical mother and didn’t want to see me leave.

RV: How did you feel?
DJ: I kind of looked forward to it. I remembered the old geography books about Asia and how things looked and I was kind of looking forward to seeing that.

RV: So when you arrived in Japan you were a clerk for three months. What were your duties there?

DJ: I was a company clerk in a heavy mortars company.

RV: What would that job entail?

DJ: Just the morning reports, typing letters and whatever reports were required from within the unit.

RV: You did this like eight hours a day?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: What were your impressions of Japan?

DJ: Everything there was quite cheap. The Japanese people seemed to love us. I had no problems with Japan. I enjoyed my assignment there.

RV: For three months you’re a clerk and then you were sent to Korea. How did you get your orders to go to Korea?

DJ: Our regiment had a levy to send so many people to Korea and I just was one of them that went.

RV: How did you feel about knowing that you were going into a combat zone?

DJ: I was looking forward to it because I could get home sooner. If I would have stayed in Japan, I would have spent the rest of my enlistment in Japan. I figured well if I go to Korea—you earn more points a month for rotation. I figured as long as I was a clerk and everybody was always looking for clerks, I just figured, “They’ll probably make a clerk out of me again.” I really didn’t think I was going to end up in an infantry unit.

RV: You thought you might be a clerk behind the lines?

DJ: Yeah, that’s really what I figured would happen with me.

RV: But you wound up where?

DJ: I ended up with the 7th Infantry Division, 31st Infantry Regiment, Easy Company. So when I was assigned there, the unit had been pretty well shot up. My platoon sergeant was a corporal. My squad leader was a PFC (private first class) and I made PFC at that time. So they made me a machine gunner.
RV: Where were you stationed?

DJ: We were right up in the front lines.

RV: This is in '52 so was it back down near DMZ (demilitarized zone) in that area or was it north of the DMZ?

DJ: It was right up on the front lines, you know right around the DMZ area the line was fluctuating back and forth. The line had been pretty stationary for quite a while. It was all in the DMZ area.

RV: Tell me about your experiences there in infantry. Did you see a lot of combat or not?

DJ: Well, yeah. There was three times that we took a lot of casualties, three separate battles. I was in two operations that they made movies out of.

RV: Really?

DJ: Pork Chop Hill was up there and Operation Smack.

RV: What do you remember most about your combat there in Korea?

DJ: It wasn’t fighting everyday. It seemed like the times that we usually got hit or had problems was dark, rainy nights. Anytime it was clear and a full moon I slept well.

RV: You were the machine gunner?

DJ: I started out as a machine gunner, yeah.

RV: Were you stationed as a defensive guard basically?

DJ: I was with the 2nd Platoon. Our platoon usually occupied outposts anywhere from a mile to two miles ahead of the main line.

RV: So you’re right out there in the action?

DJ: Oh, yeah.

RV: What did you think of the North Koreans and the Chinese troops?

DJ: It’s really hard to say really what I felt of them. I felt they killed more of them than we did. They killed more of their own people than we did.

RV: They killed more of their own people?

DJ: Yeah, that’s my personal feeling.

RV: How did that happen?
DJ: While I was there, that war changed from the beginning toward the end.

Usually when we got hit it would always be on a dark, rainy night. The Chinese would move up to our line as close as they could get without being discovered because we’d have our listening posts out at night. Usually with rain coming down, they were just trying to keep comfortable. Then it was dark. They didn’t really hear any movement with rain coming down. The Chinese got about as far as they figured they could get before being discovered. Then they would stop and then they’d throw an artillery barrage at us. I mean it was just like raining. They would come up through their own artillery. That’s what I think killed more of them that we did.

RV: Did you make any good friends there in Korea?

DJ: Yeah. I haven’t been in contact with any of the friends I made. The change over was so fast. You never really go that close to people. One thing with our platoon being on an outpost, we didn’t really associate with the rest of the company. The only people you’re involved in is the people in your immediate area. So you really don’t get to know a lot of people. It’s kind of a strange thing. It wasn’t like other units where you’re dealing with the whole unit.

RV: Tell me about Pork Chop Hill, what was that like?

DJ: That was a two platoon outpost. We got hit three nights in a row. The first night they figured they threw an artillery barrage on us. We got hit with fifty-six thousand rounds between midnight and dawn. We got hit by about six hundred Chinks. You had a two platoon outpost, which was about a hundred men. The only thing we could do was just keep them out of the bunkers, keep them in the trenches and let the artillery get them.

RV: How successful was your artillery support?

DJ: We held the hill. (Laughs)

RV: Right. That about says it all.

DJ: When you’re in this type of situation, you’re only concerned about your immediate area. You really don’t know what’s going on around you. It’s not like watching a movie where you can see what’s happening here and what’s happening there.

RV: Were you handling a machine gun at this time?
DJ: No, I was a mortar man at the time. I had been in the unit—after they had
done—for the mortar platoon usually sat behind the hill. Before, I was the machine
gunner I was always in the front part of the hill. When they needed people in the mortar
platoon they usually took the old timers that had been there a while and asked them—
take volunteers to go back to the mortar platoon, which I was tickled to death to do.

RV: What did you think of the movie made about Pork Chop Hill?
DJ: It wasn’t real close to accurate. The movie was not about our unit. The
movie was about a unit that made the counterattack to take the hill back. They said we
lost that but we never lost it.

RV: Never lost the hill?
DJ: We never lost the hill. They were company that came to relieve us really, but
we never lost the hill. We were overrun and we were all up there, but we never lost it.

RV: Was it as bloody as the movie depicted?
DJ: Yeah, Pork Chop Hill just took so many lives.

RV: From both sides?
DJ: Yeah. I left Korea on the day they signed the armistice. Just before—I was
back in the replacement section ready to go back. The Chinks finally did take Pork Chop
Hill. I think there was a whole battalion that tried to hold it. We set up tents for the
survivors, there just weren’t many.

RV: How were the Chinese as fighters?
DJ: I never really saw them as individuals. They come in hordes. They come in
numbers. It’s like I say I think they killed more of their own people than we did. As
fighters, they had a lot of guts doing what they did. The Koreans were more fanatical. I
would be more afraid to fight a Korean than I would Chinaman.

RV: Why is that?
DJ: The Koreans are more fanatical.

RV: In what way?
DJ: They’re not afraid to die. If you put a gun to their head and told him you
were going to shoot him, they wouldn’t care. They don’t want to suffer so if you had a
knife and put it to their throat then they would be afraid. (Laughs) They were more
fanatical.
RV: Is this the North and South Koreans?
DJ: I would say the same for both.
RV: They certainly had a reputation in Vietnam as being very tenacious fighters.
DJ: Yeah, they’re tough. Chinese, I don’t think were tough they just had numbers.
RV: What did you think of Korea itself as a country when you were there?
DJ: When I was there I didn’t think it was worth one American life.
RV: Really, why is that?
DJ: They had nothing and we had older Koreans and that digging trenches and caves for us up on the line. They’d steal you blind. You didn’t dare leave dear anything because it would be gone. I never realized they didn’t have anything. That was just a matter of survival. I went back to Korea in the ’70s when I was with DASPO (Department of the Army Special Photographic Artist) and I learned to love the Koreans. I just did a 180 degree because they weren’t as desperate as they were during the war because they had nothing during the war. They stole to survive, which I didn’t realize as a young man. I just thought they were a lousy people. As I got older and gone back there I could realize the situation they were in. I’d have probably done the same thing they were doing.
RV: Can you compare the Vietnamese to the Koreans?
DJ: I think the Koreans are probably a more dedicated people as far as their nation goes. In ‘Nam, when I was there, the young men did everything to keep out of the Army. They let us do the fighting for them. I think when it comes to the country, I think Korea has more love for its country than the Vietnamese did. I wouldn’t say that’s gospel. That’s just my personal opinion.
RV: Who was a tougher opponent: the North Vietnamese or the North Koreans?
DJ: I never really fought the North Vietnamese. From what I know of them or what I thought of them, I would say they were a more dedicated people.
RV: The North Koreans?
DJ: Yeah, the North Koreans even. Most of the time in Korea the forces that we were always opposing were Chinese so I really can’t speak for North Koreans.
RV: How were the Chinese then compared to the Vietnamese that you faced?
DJ: There again all I can say was it was a matter of numbers. They had to be brave for what they’ve done. They realized the casualties they took. They could see the casualties they were taking. If they kept coming, what can you say about them?

RV: How long were you in Korea?

DJ: Nine months. In Korea you were on a point system. You got four points a month when you were up on line. The further back you were, the less points you got. If you were upon line for four months you rotated with thirty-six points. That’s what the magic number was.

RV: How much contact did you have with your family back home when you were in Korea?

DJ: I wrote home quite a bit. I wasn’t married at the time. I was going with my wife at the time and I wrote her almost daily.

RV: What did you think of General MacArthur?

DJ: I always admired him, even from the Second World War as a kid. He was kind of like an idol.

RV: That opinion didn’t change during the Korean War?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: What did you think of President Truman? Do you feel like he did a good job as president or not?

DJ: Yeah, I thought he did a good job at president. I thought he was wrong when he fired MacArthur. I think MacArthur was right and he should have listened to MacArthur rather than fire him. That’s just my personal opinion. Being he was insubordinate I could understand why he fired him.

RV: Do you think the United States fought differently in Korea versus what they did in Vietnam?

DJ: I probably looked at it a little different than most people. I figured—in Korea we were under the UN (United Nations). Under the UN while we were in Korea, my understanding was we’re not here to defeat them. We’re here to show them they can’t take land by aggression. So it was a war being fought not to win, which the American people got tired of. When I got to Vietnam, we weren’t fighting a UN war but it seemed like it was the same thing because we weren’t fighting to win. It was a war,
just to me it was political war and not fought to win. Just hoping they would get tired and
give up fighting. To me it was fought in the same way. Although I think the political
ends are different.

RV: Now, let me ask you a question separate from the military service. Had you
taken up photography at this point in your life?

DJ: No.

RV: Did you have any interest in photography at this point?

DJ: I had a brother that was a photographer. I thought it was kind of exciting
what he was doing. He was a photographer in the Second World War. He worked for a
newspaper. I thought it was just kind of an exciting type of job.

RV: Did you have interest in going into that kind of a career?

DJ: Yeah when I came back into the Army. See, after my two years I got out and
then I was out for eleven months and I came back in. Then I applied for photo school
when I came back in.

RV: You did your time, so that’s why you got out I assume. What did you do for
those eleven months in between?

DJ: Trying to get a steady job really. I had gone back to where I was but the
economy at that time—where I had worked at Morrill’s, John Morrill Packing. I had five
years plant rights there. They laid off people with seven years rights. Trying to find jobs,
you just couldn’t almost buy a job. I just had a few different little jobs. Nothing was
steady and I didn’t have a trade. I finally realized I’ve got to do something to get a trade.
If I go back in the service, I could get a trade that way. Then I went back in the Army.

RV: What was your rank when you rejoined?

DJ: I came back as a corporal. I was a sergeant E-5 when I came out of the Army
the first time then I came back as a corporal.

RV: When you rejoined did you think you were going to make a career out of it
or where you just in it for the short run?

DJ: I was just going in trying to learn a trade and get a little bit of experience so
that when I came out I’d at least have a trade to go to.

RV: What kind of trade were you interested in learning?

DJ: I went into photography.
RV: Is that when you decided to do photography? When you went back in?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: What kind of services did the Army have to train for photography?

DJ: I went to the photo school in Ft. Monmouth, which was eleven weeks; a still photography course.

RV: From there where did you go?

DJ: After I was with the 1st Armor Division at the time I went to school. Then when I got back they didn’t have any openings for me in the 1st Armor Division, so I applied for a transfer and then was sent to Ft. Sam Houston, Texas to the 4th Army Photo Lab.

RV: What was your assignment there at Ft. Sam Houston?

DJ: I was a regular still photographer. They trained me in doing lab. Also, I got into movie work.

RV: What kind of photographs were you taking?

DJ: Primarily public information type. Just activities on post, plus sports, and whatever was going on.

RV: Was this for a regular newspaper?

DJ: No, the lab we gave photo support for the whole Ft. Sam Houston complex. Brooke Army Medical Center was there, we supported them. So we gave all type of photographic support to anybody that needed it. Primarily did public information type photography.

RV: Tell me about your film work that you said you got into there.

DJ: Pardon?

RV: Tell me about your film work that got into there.

DJ: What do you mean in the movie?

RV: Well, you said you had gotten into film while at Ft. Sam Houston.

DJ: Into movie work, yeah.

RV: Okay, that’s what I was interested in.

DJ: I took on-the-job training. They were set up there to do, well not on a large scale, but we could do production work in 16 mm. We did our own film processing and
editing and sound. I got pretty good training on processing film, how to take motions and
editing and that type of thing.

RV: Did you prefer film over still photography or vice versa?

DJ: I enjoyed both. I could work either one equally.

RV: What kind of things were you filming?

DJ: I guess one of the biggest things I filmed that I did actually see in use was
International Pentathlon meets. Every year at Ft. Sam they had an International
Pentathlon meet with five different countries.

RV: Decathlon you said?

DJ: Pentathlon.

RV: Pentathlon.

DJ: I covered that and then anything newsworthy that would come along well, we’d film it. I think we also did some work for Brooke Army Medical Center, we did
some training films.

RV: What was your favorite assignment there, do you remember?

DJ: When I was at Ft. Sam I had some very good assignments. I used to travel
quite a bit with general officers as their personal photographer. General Collier, he was a
lieutenant general. He was the 4th Army commander when he retired. He selected me to
be his personal photographer on his farewell tour of the area, of the 4th Army area. I had
gone deep-sea fishing with the hospital patients from Brooke Army Medical Center. So I
had a lot of nice assignments.

RV: How long were you there at Ft. Sam Houston?

DJ: About five years.

RV: Did you do the same thing basically those five years, four or five years?

DJ: Yeah. Well, I switched from still photography to movie. It was two separate
careers there.

RV: Right, yeah, of course. From there where did you go?

DJ: I went to Munich, Germany.

RV: At this point had you decided to make a career of the Army?

DJ: Yeah, I did. When I was at Ft. Sam my four years ended and I went back
home and looked at the job prospects, thinking about getting out and staying out. I did
get out. But I went home for about less than thirty days and checked out the job 
prospects. Just couldn’t find anything better than what I already had. So then I went 
back to Ft. Sam and reenlisted and stayed there. That’s when I really decided to make it a 
career.

RV: Was your mother supportive of this?
DJ: Yeah, she didn’t like us being away, but to my knowledge she wasn’t that 
unhappy or she never displayed being unhappy with me.

RV: You went to Munich after this. What was your assignment in Munich?
DJ: I was with the Southern Area Command Headquarters and I was in charge of 
the photo lab.

RV: What was your rank there?
DJ: I was specialist 5th class.

RV: How long were you there?
DJ: Three years.

RV: What were your impressions of Germany?
DJ: It was a beautiful country; I’ll say that for them. The German people I 
thought were kind of hardheaded. I come from Orange City, Iowa which is strictly as 
Dutch community. I used to hate the old Dutch because they’re so hardheaded. When I 
got to Germany I was dealing with the same thing I had in Orange City. (Laughs) I just 
figured they were awful hardheaded. If you tried to do business with them, service in 
Europe wasn’t that great. Just hard people to do business with.

RV: This was from 1959 to 1962?
DJ: Yeah.

RV: Give me an example of the Germans being hardheaded.
DJ: My German printer, he’d started working for the American Army right after 
the war ended. We were doing 35 mm ID photo work. You know we had the old 
hundred foot roll of film camera and took IDs with that. When they processed they did it 
by hand. They would take eight by ten contact paper and cut it into about 35 mm strips 
and print just about a ten inch strip at a time. I thought well, that’s too obsolete. I 
ordered 35 mm roll papers so the paper and the film could come off together. I took a 
2x4 and some coat hangers and built a deal where they could come off together and be a
lot faster, cheaper, easier to do. He wouldn’t use it. He told me he was right for twenty
some years that he worked there. Today I come along and say it’s obsolete, no good. He
couldn’t understand why it could be right so many years and now wrong today. So, that
to me was typical of a German there, the old Germans.

RV: Right. Were you there when President Kennedy visited?
DJ: No. The Berlin Wall went up then I was there.

RV: What do you remember about that?
DJ: I know we were on alert. I remember I wished we’d have torn it down before
they got it built.

RV: Why is that?
DJ: I didn’t think the Russians would do anything if we tore it down. I didn’t
understand why we let them build it. I don’t think the Germans understood it either.

RV: Did you travel a lot out of Munich?
DJ: Not a whole lot. Did get down to Vienna and down to Garmisch and that.

It’s beautiful country.

RV: I’ve heard that about Munich actually. Up to this point you’ve served in
some really different areas. You’ve been in Kentucky, you were in Korea, Texas, and
Germany. Which of there was your favorite place to be?
DJ: Favorite place would have been Ft. Sam Houston.

RV: Were you more comfortable there doing the film and still photography
work?
DJ: Well, we loved San Antonio as a city. We used to go down to Laredo and
Mexico for shopping. We’d go down to the Gulf.

RV: You were married now right?
DJ: Yeah. All my children were born when we lived in Texas. I did a lot of
wedding photography on the side. I worked for a studio on the side shooting weddings.

Things were quite good for us there.

RV: Did you whole family travel with you to Germany?
DJ: Yeah, well they didn’t go with me. They came three months after I was
there.
RV: In Germany had you requested to go back to the States or was that where you were rotated to?

DJ: The tour of Germany was three years so I went back just normal rotation.

RV: You went to Ft. Lee, is that correct?

DJ: Went to Ft Lee, Virginia.

RV: What did you do in Ft. Lee?

DJ: I was the general equipment test activity. What we did we tested all the transportation and quartermaster items for the Army. So I just primarily documented the testing doing movie works, movie and still.

RV: You film and shot all the testing?

DJ: Yeah. We documented all the testing to show how it was tested. We made final reports both movie and still.

RV: What do you remember most about that work there?

DJ: It was interesting work. We tested all over the country. Sometimes when we tested I’d have to, on a one time test, I would have to shoot movies. I’d have to shoot 4x5 black and white, 4x5 color slides and 35 mm color slides. On a one time test you’ve got to do it all, you try to cover it all. It was a lot of work. (Laughs) It was tough.

RV: How many people did you have working with you?

DJ: I’d be by myself.

RV: Really?

DJ: Yeah. I’d be running around with all these different cameras and different films. You know, try to cover it all adequately.

RV: So you were there for two years at Ft. Lee, ’62 to ’64?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: From there you went to Chicago?

DJ: I went there in ’64. I went to Germany ’59 and came out of Germany in ’62. From ’62 to ’64, yeah I was there.

RV: How did you go to Chicago? Was this normal rotation again or had you requested rotation?

DJ: No, my mother was having a lot of medical problems. I went on leave to see her. While I was there I stopped at the recruiting station there to see about getting on
recruiting. My mother would love to have me close to home. So, I tested for recruiting, that was in Sioux Falls on leave. I stopped in Chicago and interviewed there, where the headquarters were for the recruiting district. Interviewed there and I was accepted. I thought I was going to Sioux Falls but they brought me back to Chicago.

RV: What did you think of Chicago?

DJ: Chicago wasn’t too bad. The put me recruiting in Blue Island, Illinois which is south Chicago. I lived in Riverdale, which is in south Chicago. I had a lot of relatives that area. I think that’s probably the reason—the guy that interviewed me knew my relatives. (Laughs) I think that was the reason they brought me into Chicago instead of Sioux Falls because he knew my relatives and he thought I’d have a good influence in that area or they would be a good influence for me. I think that’s why I ended up in Chicago.

RV: What do you remember most about recruiting there?

DJ: I enjoyed recruiting. I enjoyed working with young men. I think anybody that makes the military a career, once they get to a supervisory position they should put them on a tour of duty in recruiting.

RV: Why is that?

DJ: Well, when I went through basic we had a lot of old, hardnosed NCOs (non-commissioned officer). All the young men hated these darn old NCOs. In Germany I used to hate these old NCOs. I just never wanted to be like them. When I got to running the photo lab in Germany I was starting to get like them old NCOs I hated. (Laughs) These young kids, when I was younger the old NCOs would say, “These damn kids.” Then I found myself saying the same thing. (Laughs) Because these damn kids wouldn’t do what they were supposed to. When I went on recruiting then you have to learn how to work with young people. You have to talk them into doing things that you want them to do. After you learn to work with them, after I came off recruiting and went back into regular Army, I had no problem with them people.

RV: Really, so the recruiting kind of got you back in touch—?

DJ: It got me in touch with how they think and how to deal with them. Once I relearned that or I guess I did learn it. It made my military career so much more
enjoyable because I wasn’t dealing with these damn kids anymore. (Laughs) I was able
to work with them and have fun with them.

RV: Right. How did you feel was the best way to deal with young Army?
DJ: Young people, if you want them to do something, you’ve go to show them
why it’s needed.

RV: You couldn’t simply order them to do it?
DJ: You don’t order them to do it. If they understand why it’s needed they’ll do
it. I’ve also found that if you take care of them, make sure they’ve got everything that’s
coming to them, they’ll do anything for you. I had a lot of fun with them.

RV: Is that what you remember most about Chicago, working with the young,
Army recruits?
DJ: Yeah. My military career became more enjoyable once I learned how to
work with young people. It wasn’t a constant battle with them. You have to work with
them on a daily basis. If you can enjoy working with them, or if you’ve got to battle
them everyday, I’ll take enjoy working with them.

RV: You were like thirty-two years old when you got to Chicago? Sixty-four
and you were born in thirty-two.
DJ: Yeah.

RV: What rank were you there in Chicago?
DJ: I made E-6 in Chicago. I was an E-6 in Chicago.

RV: What did you think sir of the Vietnam conflict? It’s starting to heat up a bit.
This is ’64, ’65 what did you know about Vietnam? How did you follow US policy?
DJ: Everybody followed it through the news. I knew I was going to have to
serve there.

RV: Why did you know that?
DJ: Everybody was taking a tour to ‘Nam. I just figured I have to do my share
too. I figured I was going to eventually be going there. Everybody else was so I figured
I’d be going there too.

RV: What did you know about US policy towards Vietnam at this point?
DJ: Not a whole lot. I just saw what everybody else was seeing on the news. I
felt we belonged there because of the treaties and all that.
RV: Like the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: I think we had a right to be there. I thought the American people should have been more supportive. When I was in Chicago it was at the time when they were starting to not support the war. Before that the people were kind of supporting the war but then all of a sudden it was going the other way.

RV: That had to have been ’67.

DJ: Yeah.

RV: What do you remember of any of the protests there in Chicago?

DJ: The convention, when Chicago had the convention there, I remember that. Dick Daley, he would have been re-elected with a hundred percent of the vote after that. The protestors they were really aggravating the police. They were starting fires in all the trash receptacles. They were harassing the police all day long, all over the place. Finally it just got out of hand. Everybody was behind the police and Dick Daley.

RV: What did you understand about why the United States was in Vietnam?

DJ: There again I felt for the same reason—well we were there because of treaty. That I understood, but I think it was just to stop aggression. Primarily, that’s how I felt. Just like we were in Korea. I just felt we were there to stop aggression. Not there to really win it, but to show them they can’t win and hope they’ll quit.

RV: Did you see a lot of parallel between Korea and Vietnam?

DJ: I saw parallels in the way it was fought. Like I say in Korea it was under the UN. It wasn’t under the UN in Vietnam. The way it was fought, I could not understand our policy why we weren’t there to win it.

RV: Did you have that opinion before you went over or when you were there?

DJ: That’s hard to say after this many years. I’ve had that opinion. I know I had that while I was there. I probably had it when I was there. I know I had it when I was there but I probably had it even before I got there.

RV: Did you agree with the use of American ground forces or do you think it should have been under the UN kind of field, like Korea?

DJ: I thought we should have gone in to win it. I think we should have gone Nguyen Cao Ky, I know he wanted to take his army to go north and I think we should
supported them with air cover and let him go north. Let his people, it was their war. I
would like to have seen the South Vietnamese Army go north, with our support. I would
have loved to see it had been fought to win. But it wasn’t to be.
RV: Do you think the United Nations could have made a difference?
DJ: Not really. It didn’t make any difference in Korea. I was never a UN fan. I
still am not a UN fan.
RV: Why is that?
DJ: It’s going to lead to a one-world government. I felt that for many, many
years.
RV: In what way? How would it become a one-world government?
DJ: If everything is going to be done through the UN, they’re going to end up the
real power. If they can use our forces and everybody else’s forces, they’re going to be
the world power. If we turn over our troops to them, how are we going to get them back?
RV: Even like in Korea, though the United States basically its troops were
commanded by an American general?
DJ: Yeah. The UN didn’t have the power it’s gathering now. I mean they’ve got
almost control of NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) now. The UN now, even
trying Mahovlich and that, why is the UN doing it? You now they can try me the same
way they’re trying him. What’s my government going to do for me? If we give them
that power I don’t know how we’d get it back.
RV: So, you don’t think the UN really would have made much of a difference in
Vietnam?
DJ: No, I think it probably would have ended up the same way. The UN policy
was a no win policy also, like in Korea.
RV: What do you mean by that?
DJ: Well in Korea we weren’t there to win the war. We were there to stop
aggression. That’s what I think Vietnam would have been too, under the UN.
RV: How did you get your orders to go to Vietnam? Did you volunteer to go?
DJ: I volunteered. The reason I volunteered, I left recruiting I was assigned to
the 5th Army Headquarters and their photo lab. While I was there the headquarters was
on the South Shore Drive in south Chicago. It was an old eleven story hotel building.
The headquarters were going to be moved to Ft. Sheridan. I had lived in Riverdale, Illinois while I was on recruiting and while I was at Headquarters, 5th Army. My wife had a good job and the kids had a good school. I knew I was going to be going to ‘Nam before long. I figured I was about due. If they had transferred me to Ft. Sheridan and then got my orders, it would have really disrupted my family. I figured being the headquarters was moving, now would be the best time for me to go to ‘Nam because my wife would stay in a community where she had a good job and the kids were in school. It wouldn’t be as upsetting for them. I volunteered to go to ‘Nam before the headquarters moved. My wife stayed right where we were while I was gone.

RV: Could you pick where you would be in Vietnam or did you just let it be up to where very they put you in? Obviously your experience was with photography.

DJ: I figure I’d be going to a photo lab. I was assigned to 69th Signal Battalion and to the photo platoon there.

RV: Had you been able to keep up with your photography in Chicago?

DJ: Yes, in Chicago at the Headquarters, 5th Army I was the photographer.

RV: So, you had continued doing that kind of work?

DJ: Oh, yeah.

RV: Did you know that’s what you’d do in Vietnam?

DJ: I figured if they assigned me they were going to assign me in my MOS (military occupational specialty). I expected to be in photography.

RV: When you get your orders to go to Vietnam, or you volunteer to go, and you’re getting ready to go over; how did you feel about going to Vietnam?

DJ: I would have rather stayed with my family, but I wasn’t against it. I didn’t feel that being I volunteered I knew I was going to have to go eventually anyway. I just wanted to get it over with.

RV: Do you remember how your wife felt about you going into serious war, combat zone?

DJ: I imagine about the same as any wife would. It isn’t something we wanted. We would have preferred to not do it.

RV: How did you leave the United States, did you fly from the west coast?

DJ: Yeah.
RV: Were you on an all-military flight on the way over?

DJ: Right.

RV: Do you remember the mood on the plane, what was it like?

DJ: It wasn’t a joyous group as far as celebrating. We all knew what we were going into, so I guess it was kind of a somber flight going over.

RV: What do you remember when you first got off the plane? You flew into Tan Son Nhut in Saigon?

DJ: No, I flew into Cam Ranh Bay.

RV: Cam Ranh, okay. What do you remember about your first impressions when you got off the plane?

DJ: Well, when I saw the complex at Cam Ranh Bay, I said, “We’re here to stay.” (Laughs) There was no way we were going to leave Vietnam because the way Cam Ranh Bay was built up. I figured we had built that to stay and we’re not going to give it up.

RV: Right. What were your first impressions there of Vietnam itself?

DJ: It was hot. (Laughs) That’s the first thing I really noticed how hot and humid. Well, I had been to Korea and Japan and that before. The countryside wasn’t all new to me. It was similar to what I’d seen before.

RV: So, when you land in Cam Ranh, did you stay there for a period of time before you were sent elsewhere?

DJ: From Cam Ranh we were there no more than one or two days. I don’t recall exactly and then just flew into Saigon.

RV: You’re with the 69th Signal Battalion, is that correct?

DJ: Right.

RV: What was your position there?

DJ: I was the platoon sergeant of the photo platoon with Headquarters Company.

RV: How would you describe your basic duties?

DJ: It was a large platoon. We operated twenty-four hours a day. It was 134 man platoon, which is quite large for a platoon. I started out running the camera branch, working with the guys taking their film. Some of my photographers would go out on combat operations. I had about eight of them on combat operations at all times. I had I
think about sixteen of them in the camera bridge. We did regular photo support for areas
around Tan Son Nhut for other units.

RV: You ran everything out of Tan Son Nhut?
DJ: Yeah. Well we had two small detachments, one in An Khe and then one in
Cam Ranh Bay. They did mostly combat work. They did photo support for units around
there too.

RV: How would you decide who would go and do the combat photos?
DJ: I was very fortunate that all the young people I had volunteered to go on
combat operations. I always felt that I would hate to have to send somebody on a combat
operation and they get killed. Never looked forward to doing that. All the young men I
had volunteered to go on combat operations.

RV: Did you ever lose any men on those combat operations?
DJ: I lost three while I was there.

RV: Would you make up their assignment? Would you tell them what to shoot
while in combat or was it up to them?
DJ: No, I tell you the young men I had were just exceptional. They had their own
little grapevine amongst the photographers themselves. They had gone out into different
units. Some units would have commanders that went out looking for trouble. Others
went out because they had to and did everything they could to avoid trouble. They knew
who did what. They’d get amongst themselves and tell them what units, they’d go with
so-and-so and what officers—they knew the officers by name. They’d come back and
they’d have good footage, really they had good coverage.

RV: Were they filming as well as taking still photos?
DJ: Yes, they did both still and motion. I usually send a motion and still man out
together. They just did really a good job. One thing I had put a limit on them because
once they left me I had no idea where they were. They could change their mind anytime
they wanted. They had regular press passes just like civilian photographers had that they
could go anywhere in-country. They had wide-open orders. I know I finally put a limit
on them; they could stay out no longer than two weeks. I knew that they would probably
go out on combat operations a couple days. The rest of the time would be out at the
beach at Vung Tau. (Laughs) That was the R&R (rest and recuperation) center in
Vietnam.

RV: Right.

DJ: As long as they were coming back with combat footage they could have their
two weeks and I felt they deserved a break. If somebody went out consistently and came
back with nothing, nothing that was what I sent them out to do, then I would just take
them off of combat operations.

RV: What other assignments could you put them on?

DJ: We did regular PIO (public information officer) type work. So we did that.
We had a lab that ran twenty-four hours a day. At one time we were putting out 240,000
prints a month. We did a lot of business.

RV: Where would you put them out to, to Stars and Stripes or to domestic
newspapers?

DJ: The photos?

RV: Yes, sir.

DJ: A lot of them went back for records, we’d send back to Washington for
record. A lot of the prints were in support of other units. There would be several other
units that would come to us for their photographic support. They would need fifty copies
of this or seventy-five copies of that. We had enough business from enough units
bringing work to us to put out that kind of work. Plus we did regular PIO type work too.

RV: What other duties did you have besides sending the men out on combat
photography and this other PIO work?

DJ: We had to supply a task force list in case of attack on Tan Son Nhut. Just
normal everyday operations of a platoon really as far as the platoon sergeant. Making
sure everything was being done. I usually came in the morning and I use to wake up the
troops. Just seeing everything was just going normal.

RV: Can you describe life at Tan Son Nhut for me?

DJ: Tan Son Nhut, we had pretty good permanent huts. On the outside they were
sandbags that were filled with sand and cement and then they just wetted them. They
filled them with sand and cement and then wetted them and they hardened. They had
metal roofs on them and then screened all the way around on the upper half. They
weren’t the most modern things in the world. But our photo lab was really poorly
equipped. I would think for what we did and what we put out, I thought we were poorly
equipped to do it. The guys did a heck of a job.

RV: So you lived separate from your men, is that correct?

DJ: Pardon?

RV: You lived separate from your men?

DJ: Yeah, the NCOs in the 69th Signal Battalion, E-7s and above, they rented a
villa. We lived in a villa. We had maids there and we had a GI cook and then we had our
maids cooking for us, a GI mess man. We lived separate from them.

RV: Was this in Saigon?

DJ: It was in Saigon. I’d say probably a mile to mile ½ from Tan Son Nhut itself.

RV: Did you have good security at your villa?

DJ: No, not really. In fact at the time I was there things were really quite calm.

We used to joke about watching the film “Combat,” you know, the TV series. That’s
how we earned our combat pay. (Laughs) It was quite good until Tet came along.

RV: Did you feel like you had enough supplies?

DJ: We had enough supplies, yeah.

RV: Tell me about this villa you lived in. How many other men lived there with
you?

DJ: I guess there was about a dozen of us.

RV: Did you have separate rooms?

DJ: I shared a room with another man, but our first sergeant had a separate room.

It was a regular house that we had taken over and had different rooms. Some slept two,
some slept three and some slept one.

RV: Tell me your impressions of Saigon the city?

DJ: It used to be the pearl of the Orient, but while I was there was so much from
the countryside that moved in. You had beautiful places there and then you had shacks.
It was quite a contrast. You found places that it looked like they just found some old
2x4s and tacked cardboard on them and lived inside of them. Then again you had
beautiful villas. It was a noisy, hot, dirty city with the traffic and everything. It was a
crowded city.
RV: Were you able to go out in the evenings if you wanted to?
DJ: Yeah, we would go into downtown Saigon, by the embassy or through there.
I usually took one day a week off and I just kind of went around Saigon photographing different sites.
RV: On your own?
DJ: Yeah, just for my own personal collection.
RV: What kind of things would you try to shoot?
DJ: I would go down to the market areas; I’d kind of shoot the people. One thing I did, I did most everything in slides. I’ve got several hundred slides. One thing I did for my wife, I made kind of a slide show with a tape. I would talk into my tape and every time I clicked the mic off and on she knew to click the projector to the next slide because she could hear the click. I mailed that to her. She showed it to some other people. She showed it to the church and then some people from there heard about it. Then the school heard about them. She was going around giving a slide presentation. (Laughs)
RV: While you were in-country?
DJ: Yeah. Because most people they heard about the war, but they didn’t know about Saigon or the people. So, they were interested in her slides because I was showing what Saigon was like, the market, the people and the different things there. So she ended up giving slide presentations. It wasn’t shot for that purpose, but it ended up being that.
RV: Right. What do you think was the most interesting thing that you could shoot in Saigon?
DJ: I guess the market, just going down in the markets.
RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese people?
DJ: They were typical Asian people from being in Japan. I think I had a better understanding of them in Vietnam then I had of the Korean people when I was in Korea because of maturity from one thing. I understood their situation. There’s a lot of slicky boys and everything in Saigon just like there were in Korea. There again, are they crooks or are they in a desperate situation just trying to make a living? I had a better understanding of them then I did previously.
RV: How did they treat you? Were they kind to you?
DJ: Yeah, I had no problem with the Vietnamese people at all. We had maids. They did a good job. They even on the posts or around Tan Son Nhut we had Vietnamese doing clean up and all that for us. We had no problem. We had good relations with them.

RV: Did you ever form any friendships with the Vietnamese people?

DJ: Not any close ones, no.

RV: How would you rate the food that was cooked for you? Was it good?

DJ: Oh yeah. We had a mess sergeant. He wasn’t a sergeant but he was a regular Army trained cook. He set up our menus and everything. He showed them how to cook it. From experience they did a good job.

RV: What kind of weapons did you carry?

DJ: I never carried one. (Laughs)

RV: Really?

DJ: Until Tet we never had a weapon in the house, in our villa. When Tet hit we didn’t have a weapon in the house and they were firing all around us.

RV: Why don’t you go ahead and tell me about Tet. What was that experience like?

DJ: Well during the night after I went to bed I woke up, I heard some explosions, which woke me up. Which I later found out that the VC had put a couple rockets into an Air Force villa not too far from that. I was just laying there trying to figure out what was going on. One of the other NCOs came into the room and asked me if I heard that. I said, “Yeah.” He said, “What do you think it is?” I said, “Well it sounds like rockets to me.” He said, “What are you going to do about it?” I said, “What do you think, what can I do about it?” (Laughs) He said, “Well are you just going to stay in bed and lay there?” I said, “Will it help if I get out? The only thing I can do is just hope that they just quit and none of them come in here with us.” Then all hell broke loose. It was just firing all over the place and the choppers were in. There was no sense in staying in bed. We were told not to come in, because there was no way we could get into Tan Son Nhut. We just stayed in the villa all day. I went up on the deck with my tape recorder. We had an upstairs patio. There was a VC firing over our patio with a machine gun onto Tan Son Nhut. I was just taping the bullets whizzing over the house.
RV: What else? You said all hell broke loose, were they in the streets?
DJ: Not in our streets. The helicopters were hauling around firing. At night we went up on the empty USAID (United States Agency for International Development) Building and went up to the roof to watch the war. We watched the tracers going right by the building going toward Tan Son Nhut. We were up where they couldn’t get to us. The gunships were firing. They were dropping the shell cases on the roof, so we got off the roof. We were just really watching it, because we couldn’t get in. We were told not to come in. There was no way we could get in. In the immediate area we were in, there was no fighting going on, although it was going on all around us.

RV: Were you able to shoot it or film it?
DJ: No, I had no cameras or nothing with us.
RV: So you kept your personal camera on base?
DJ: Yeah, I had it, but see most of the fighting that was going on was at night, which I couldn’t have shot with my still camera anyway. During the day there was no fighting going on right where we were at so there was really nothing to photograph.

RV: Did you have any casualties in the platoon who was actually on Tan Son Nhut?
DJ: I lost one cameraman and he was on the machine gun. He was on the alert squad when Tet hit. He was on the north end of a runway and he was on a machine gun and he got killed.

RV: He was a member of your platoon?
DJ: Yeah. In fact he was probably the best photographer I had. He was just an excellent photographer.

RV: What in your mind would make a good a combat photographer?
DJ: I had two of them that to me were exceptional. They just had a nose like a newsman. They knew how to get the story. If something was happening they knew how to get to it. They put every effort into it without regard to their own personal safety. They just blocked everything else. They were trained to film. They just went out to do it. It was a desire they had to do. The other one I had was shot up quite badly at a later date, the other exceptional photographer I had.

RV: Did he survive?
DJ: Yeah, but they were two individuals I’ll never forget.

RV: Did your photographers come to you for advice at all?

DJ: What I normally did in the camera branch, I would critique their films. I would go over with them. I’ve had guys shooting things they shouldn’t be shooting on operations.

RV: Such as what?

DJ: One young man on his first combat operation he went out with a unit, they were out looking for VC but couldn’t find any. Never got any problems. They went into a village that was probably VC controlled and they couldn’t find any VC. The American troops there took old papa san and put his head under the tracks of a tanker, armored personnel carrier. You know trying to get him to talk like they’re going to run over him. Well, they never ran over him. He’s taking pictures of him with his head under the tracks. (Laughs) I said, “You don’t shoot that.” They pulled some whiskers out of some old men trying to get them to talk. He said, “Well that’s what was going on.” I said, “Yeah, but just think if something would have happened if you would have got killed and the VC would have got your camera. They’d develop the film and get pictures of our guys doing that kind of stuff; we could never live it down.” Everybody in the States would say, “Get out of there if that’s what our people are doing.” So, that’s one reason I critiqued them to make sure what was coming out would be presentable.

RV: What kind of photographs were you actually looking for?

DJ: Anything as far as combat operations going. The choppers coming in or guys coming off choppers. Anything that was going on as far as firing. You just covered it like a news story.

RV: Did you run into any censorship?

DJ: No.

RV: You could shoot what you wanted to, what you instructed your guys to shoot? You could develop and send these shots anywhere without anyone ever questioning?

DJ: No, all the stuff that we shot at a combat operation we sent that all to Washington. That was not sent to any news agencies or anything.

RV: Right.
DJ: That all went to Washington.

RV: Did you ever have any contact with the regular news people that were there?

DJ: My photographers would run into them. Personally, I hadn’t.

RV: What would they say about the media coverage there, the guys that they ran into? What would they say about them?

DJ: They were lucky. In fact I went out one time with them and we ran into some news civilians. Some of the civilian writers they had Vietnamese cameramen. Their newsmen, they’re reporting and their cameraman is shooting the war while they’re staying ducked down and they’re doing the reporting. When you see it on the news you would think they were doing it. That’s one advantage that a lot of civilians had over our guys.

RV: You said you didn’t carry any weapons before Tet, did you carry some after Tet?

DJ: No.

RV: Did you keep any weapons in your villa after Tet?

DJ: Yeah after Tet we kept weapons in the villa.

RV: What did you have there?

DJ: M-15, I think it was. M-15 or M-16 I forget.

RV: Were you trained on the M-16?

DJ: No.

RV: But you felt comfortable enough that you could shoot it if you needed to?

DJ: I think I could figure it out. (Laughs)

RV: How many operations did you actually get to go out on yourself?

DJ: The only one I actually went—I went out actually on two of them. One of them was with the command ship and the helicopters. I went with the choppers. Because it was light in weight they didn’t want me on the gunships.

RV: What do you mean your size and weight?

DJ: My photographers used to go out with the gunships. Because of their maneuverability they didn’t want a lot of weight. So I had a couple of small photographers that had no problem riding the gunships. But the bigger guys they would rather not take. That was the pilots personal choice I guess for his own preservation.
RV: What do you remember about that operation you were on with the
helicopters?

DJ: Mostly shooting. I could just observe what was going on. I could see the
other choppers coming in dropping off the troops, the troops going in. The jets were
coming in bombing. The final outcome of the operation I had no idea what happened.
We left before I think it was over with.

RV: What was the other operation that you went on?

DJ: After Tet our task force was on the north end of the runway. I took the first
relief out to go to the north end of the runway to protect the north end of the runway.
There we didn’t have any action going on, but our guys there was over five hundred dead
VC inside the fence. When we went out to the fighting positions there they were pretty
well messed up. While we were there I just told them, “Let’s rebuild the sandbags
because the other guys are coming after us. They need some protection.” We just kind
of rebuilt the fighting positions that were there. Watching the bulldozers dig pits to push
all the bodies in.

RV: Did you ever get shot at while you were there?

DJ: No.

RV: Did you ever experience, I guess besides Tet there, including Tet, did you
experience death in any way? You said you lost two guys. Did you have to go identify
their bodies or anything like that?

DJ: No I was fortunate I didn’t have to. Actually I lost three. One we lost down
in the Delta. The other two were in Saigon. I didn’t have to do that. The one thing I had
to do was go through their personal effects to be sent back. I just made sure that
everything they owned went back. What we didn’t want to do was send back anything
that would be a bad reflection of them. This one guy that was killed was an excellent
photographer. He had a lot of slides and a lot of photos that he had taken. Some guys
would go out and shoot pornography and that kind of thing. I wanted to make sure. This
kid never had any of that in there, everything he shot was just good stuff. I went through
everything he had. It’s a big loss when you know what you’re doing.

RV: How were you able to deal with that?
DJ: Oh golly, I guess maturity is the only thing I can say. In Korea we lost people but I didn’t have to go through stuff like but you know I just lost people I knew. So, I don’t know if the Korean experience came into play there or not.

RV: You said you lost two men in Saigon, what happened to them in Saigon?

DJ: The one I lost at Tet that was in Saigon. The other down at the Y Bridge the other good photographer I had that got shot up real bad, he had another kid that was really just a young man in the unit. He had a strong desire to be an excellent cameraman. He was just learning. He went out with my other photographer that I was saying was one of the excellent ones. He just kind of was his idol. So he stayed with him just to learn from him. Down at the Y Bridge there was some good action going on. My boy got shot and the kid that was helping him was carrying him out and then he got killed carrying him out.

RV: When you said good action, what did you mean by that?

DJ: There was a lot of fighting going on. The senior cameraman there he was one that never worried about his own personal safety. He was just going out to film the action and the other one was with him. He got shot, shot up pretty bad, so the other kid was carrying him out. From what I understand there was civilian photographers having to film it and that it made national news. The young man carrying him out, he was killed carrying him out. He wasn’t filming.

RV: What was your impression of the indigenous forces, the Vietnamese military?

DJ: I really haven’t had a whole lot of contact with them. I really couldn’t tell you. I know down in the Delta I had one photographer that he used to go out with them all the time. In fact they even had a bodyguard for him.

RV: Really?

DJ: He was a good photographer. He went out to get action. He would get himself in a bind where they had to get him out. He would get himself into situations—so finally the Vietnamese just had people guarding him while he was out filming.

(Laughs)
RV: Did you ever have any resistance from any of the American branches of military? Shooting their action and them complaining about you guys being there or anything like that?

DJ: I haven’t had any of that.

RV: Okay, so while you there, there was really no—?

DJ: One incident was kind of humorous. A young man was a very small cameraman. He was a still cameraman and he was on his first combat operation. He was with the infantry unit. They were going into this one village and they were on a skirmish line going in. The VC ended up shooting the young man right along side of him, an infantryman. He saw this VC running through a trench and into a cave. He was so mad he jumped in the trench and went into the cave and pulled out his .45 and shot the VC in the cave. When he came back out—the movie cameraman filmed him running through the trench and going into the cave. We didn’t get the shooting but we got him going to. When he came back out the captain of the infantry unit told him that that was their job to kill VC. “Your job is to take pictures.” So the kid just held up his camera and took a picture of the captain (laughs) which he didn’t appreciate. (Laughs) There was really no resistance.

RV: What would you say was your most important function there in Vietnam, yourself, the most important thing that you were able to do?

DJ: To me it was just keeping up the morale in the platoon, everybody doing their job. Really that was my function was to keep the whole thing working.

RV: Was it difficult keeping morale up?

DJ: No, I had no problem. To me, of all the people I’ve worked with in the military, my tour with 69th Signal in Vietnam I could never have asked for better people to work with. To me they were just exceptionally good young men. In fact, if there was a problem in one section I’ve had men come by and say, “Sarg, keep an eye on so-and-so.” I’d just keep an eye on so-and-so if it looked like he was going to be a problem I’d just weed him out, get rid of him. They really helped me. That’s the difference—to me I accredit that to my experience with recruiting, working with young people.

RV: So, that came back to help you?

DJ: Yeah, to me they weren’t damn kids. (Laughs)
RV: What was your average age there of the people in your platoon?
DJ: In my platoon I’d say early twenties.
RV: You were what, thirty-five?
DJ: Yeah.
RV: Did you see any drug or alcohol use that was a problem in your platoon or elsewhere?
DJ: It was never a problem that I knew of in my platoon. I won’t say they didn’t drink or anything, I’m sure they went out and had theirs. But I never had a problem with alcohol in my platoon that I could say it’s an alcohol problem. I’ve never seen the use of drugs or seen anybody that looked like they might be under the influence of drugs. I was just amazed at the quality of people I had.
RV: What would you do for entertainment while you were there?
DJ: In the villa we played a lot of pinochle at night (laughs) and watched TV. About once a week another NCO and I, we’d go down town until about nine o’clock at night and then come back. We’d have a beer or two and then come on back just to get out of the villa.
RV: Were you able to keep with the news back in the United States while you were there?
DJ: Oh yeah.
RV: Is that mainly from the television?
DJ: Yeah, from television. We had television. In the villa we had TV. Then *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, we all read that.
RV: Did you feel like they had good photographs in *Stars and Stripes* or were you guys doing better?
DJ: Pardon?
RV: Did you feel like they had good photographs in *Stars and Stripes* or were your guys doing better than that?
DJ: *Stars and Stripes* were primarily a newspaper. There wasn’t anything in it as far as combat photos or anything of that nature. I never compared them to what our guys were doing.
RV: How much contact did you have with home?
DJ: Being with a signal company, we had telephone people and signal. Sometimes in the middle of the night I would make a priority call and get my wife on the phone. (Laughs) It was just through the operators, we were 69th Signal. We had the telephone and the operators knew who we were and they would let us put priority calls into home.

RV: How many times were you able to do that?
DJ: I would try to do it oh, once every couple of weeks. We weren’t authorized to do it. We just were able to do it because at two o’clock in the morning there wasn’t a lot of traffic. The operators knew we were 69th Signal and they just cooperated with us.

RV: Did you get to take any R&Rs (rest and recuperation) while you were there in Vietnam?
DJ: Yes, I did.

RV: Where did you go?
DJ: I went to Hawaii.

RV: Were you able to see your wife there?
DJ: Yeah, I met my wife there.

RV: How long was your R&R?
DJ: Five days.

RV: Did that help you as far as continuing your service there in Vietnam?
DJ: Yeah, I mean it was something I really looked forward to and really enjoyed.

RV: When did that come in your tour?
DJ: Right toward about ¾ of the way through. While I was in, I reenlisted. I took a thirty day reenlistment leave while I was there which happened to be in December. I was home for our anniversary, Christmas and New Year. That was about six months into my tour. Then three months after that I met my wife in Hawaii, so both deals were a good breakup for my tour.

RV: Right. Did you get to attend any USO (United Services Organizations) shows while there?
DJ: No, I didn’t.

RV: How about Korea?
DJ: Korea I did.
RV: Tell me about that.

DJ: Saw Dick Contino, in fact I went over on the boat with Dick Contino. We saw a couple USO shows and I forget exactly who was all there. But Dick Contino I remember because I remember talking to him on the boat going over to Korea.

RV: Did you ever experience any racial issues in Vietnam and in general while in the military?

DJ: I never really had a problem with racial issues. I’ve been accused of it sometimes when it comes to discipline. If they happened to be another race and if you’re trying to discipline them the same as you would anybody, they accuse you of being racial.

RV: Who? The person you were disciplining or the other guys?

DJ: Yeah the person that I’d be disciplining if he happened to be of another race and you were trying to discipline them, they would try to make it racial. To me, it was never racial.

RV: Did you ever come across any wild animals or anything unusual over there?

DJ: No, I hadn’t.

RV: Did your platoon adopt any pets?

DJ: Yeah, in Saigon at our villa we had a dog. When I was there at DASPO (Department of the Army Special Photographic Office) we had a dog. You know really with the USO shows I did film two Bob Hope shows in Korea.

RV: Were you able to get very close, up on stage?

DJ: Oh yeah. Yeah we were right there with them. The Golddiggers were there. We filmed the Golddiggers shopped at the PX (post exchange) and everything. In fact, we filmed them coming off the airplane and everything right there. I was standing right alongside of Bob.

RV: What would you say was the most humorous event you experience in Vietnam?

DJ: In Vietnam?

RV: Yes, sir.

DJ: I don’t really recall any real humorous events.

RV: You wrote in your questionnaire about a teddy bear.
DJ: That was in Thailand.
RV: Okay.
DJ: When we were in Thailand we had a young lieutenant—this is with DASPO. I had a team in Thailand. We had a young lieutenant just come new to the unit. So they send him for thirty days to Vietnam, thirty days to Korea, and then thirty days to Thailand. Just to see how we operate in each country so he can get familiar with it. So we worked with him for thirty days. He was just a young lieutenant. He was blonde and blue-eyed and he just reminded me of Lieutenant Fuzz in “Beetle Bailey.” In fact when I met him I didn’t really know whether to salute him or pinch his cheek. He was just a lot of fun and we had a lot of fun working with him. When he left the guys wanted to just do a little something. We bought him this big red teddy bear, actually they bought it. When he was going back to Hawaii, we waited until he had all his bags and everything checked. Just prior to getting on to the plane we presented it to him so he couldn’t check it in, he had to carry it on. When he carried this big red teddy bear on there’s a lot of full bird colonels and everything else on this flight. So a young second lieutenant coming on the airplane with a teddy bear they weren’t too impressed with him. (Laughs) He said the teddy bear really got him in good with the stewardesses. They all noticed his teddy bear. He said he used it for a pillow. When he got back to Hawaii the CO (commanding officer) we had he met every flight coming in, the first sergeant and the CO and major, and he got like in the middle of the night. When the major saw him come off the airplane with the teddy bear he was about fit to be tied. (Laughs) To me that was probably the most humorous thing we ever pulled off.
RV: Did you ever have any exposure to Agent Orange or any other defoliants that you are aware of?
DJ: Not to my knowledge.
RV: This is ’68, so what month did you leave in 1968?
DJ: In June.
RV: Where did you go from there?
DJ: I went to the Pentagon?
RV: Was this a temporary assignment or was this permanent?
DJ: This was permanent but I did not want to be in the Pentagon.
RV: What was your assignment there in the Pentagon?

DJ: I was in the camera branch.

RV: You requested a transfer?

DJ: I found Washington was an extremely expensive place to live. I really couldn’t afford to live there. I couldn’t afford to be stationed there. I told the colonel I was working for, “Starting today, I’m looking for a new home.” It took me three months to find a new home. As a photographer in the Pentagon I got to go to the different sections. I took photographs in the assignment branch, so I go to know some people in the assignment branch. I told them to keep their eye open for me. If an opening came up for a photographer some place to let me know. One day after I was there about three months he called me and said, “We’ve got an opening in STRATCOM (United States Strategic Command) Hawaii. Would you want to take that?” I said, “Sign me up.” I said, “I’ll put in my request for transfer.” So when the colonel saw my request he said, “We don’t want to lose you. But as long as you’re going to get out of here and if you want to go to Hawaii, we’ve got a DASPO team in Hawaii. He said, “I would rather send you there and keep you. Would you want to go to Hawaii to DASPO?” I said, “Fine with me.” So, that’s how I went to DASPO.

RV: So tell me what your duties were with DASPO.

DJ: My duties?

RV: Yes, sir.

DJ: Well in DASPO we had three detachments: one in Vietnam, one in Thailand and one in Korea. We would take photo teams out for a three-month period. We really like had six teams, three out and three in. Then we’d go out and come back every three months. While we were back in Hawaii it was more like a training type deal because we didn’t have any real assignments to cover. When we were out we did strictly what the Pentagon requested. We worked strictly for the Pentagon. They would give us coverage objectives or assignments. We would just fill that while we were out, just fill the assignments. If we got to a point where we had no specific jobs to shoot for the Pentagon then we would develop stories. A lot of times if there wasn’t really anything going on we’d go out and find a signal site and film it and document a signal site. They liked that at the Pentagon because it’s all signal. So we always managed to find jobs to shoot.
RV: What kind of assignments did the Pentagon give you?

DJ: We did some for Congressional Record, historical documentation, training, updating training films. For example, if the artillery school wanted to update their training on how to change gun tubes in the field and how it is actually done we’d find a unit that was getting ready to change gun tubes and tell them—or find a unit and tell them, “Hey when you’re ready to change gun tubes give us a call and we’ll send a camera crew out there and see how it’s done under actual conditions.” We’d film it that way.

I’ve shot stuff for Congressional Record. We took a side trip into Japan because the VC were knocking out a bunch of armored personnel carriers and that every month. We were shipping them back to Japan to be rebuilt. The manufacturers back in the States were complaining that we were spending too much money into Japan and that we should be giving the business to their, you know, keep the money in the States. We went out and filmed that they could rebuild an armored personnel carrier where if we shipped it back to the States it would cost more to repair it than a brand new one would because Japanese were very proficient at welding aluminum. We documented exactly how they rebuilt these things. They were like brand new APCs when they came out on the line at a fraction of the cost a new one would be. That was for Congressional Record.

RV: Would you actually go out in the field on these three month out tours?

DJ: Oh yeah, I’d work right with the crews.

RV: Okay, what was that experience like for you going out with the crews? I guess would you attach yourself to some infantry units, depending on what your assignment was?

DJ: Yeah it was dependent what our assignment was who we’d work with. We’d usually find someone that would fill the qualifications of our requirement. One time we even shot a film for the Navy, we got conned into that. We’d find units doing what was required. When I went out with them my policy was, these young men they’re learning. I would just tell them what our objective was and asked them how they wanted to do it. They’d look over the situation and they would tell me how they wanted to shoot it. If I felt it covered what we were looking for in our coverage objective I’d say, “Go ahead, you know, shoot it.” Just let them go because they would rather do it their way than have me tell them what to do. They would do a better job doing it their way than if I told them
what to do. So I would let them do it their way as long as I felt it covered what the
objective was. Also I told them that if I didn’t think that was meeting the coverage
objective then I would direct what would be shot, what I felt would fill coverage
objective. I would take the critique on the treatment but they had to critique on the
camerawork. That was the condition we worked under and I found it very enjoyable.

RV: How much time did you spend in Vietnam on this tour in Hawaii?

DJ: When I was in ‘Nam with the 69th Signal I was there [twelve] ninth months.
Then when I was in ‘Nam with the 69th Signal it was a little over three months.

RV: Okay, so but when you were stationed in Hawaii, how many times if you go
to Vietnam?

DJ: I went to Vietnam once, I went to Thailand twice. I went to Korea once.
Then I made trips into Japan and the Arctic Circle.

RV: Do you remember anything specific or anything interesting about your time
in Vietnam when you were with DASPO?

DJ: Okay, when I was with DASPO I really didn’t go out in the field with the
guys because we had a thirteen man team and we had several things going on at one time.
I usually ran the villa, because we rented a villa. I had to charge board and room. I did
shopping at the commissary and get out the film shipments. Just everything to keep the
team going. Order supplies, whatever needed repair, sent it back. It was a full time job
just running the villa.

RV: What about Korea and Thailand anything interesting occur there, besides the
red teddy bear?

DJ: (Laughs) It was good working with the— in Thailand we were working a lot
strictly with the Thai Army a lot of the stuff we did. It was with the military advisors.
We could never film the military advisors. We did a lot of the Thai training. Working
with the Thais I enjoyed it. I know one time we were shooting their artillery training.
When you’re dealing with people that can’t speak English—I know this one colonel we
were working with, he was upset because he was afraid we were going to shoot his
people doing the wrong things. We couldn’t direct them because they couldn’t
understand what we were saying. I would tell him what I wanted them to do and I’d just
say, “Just keep doing it over and over.” Then our guys would move around to keep
shooting it from different angles. But they were afraid that we would be filming them
doing something wrong and that we would show that. He didn’t want that. I said, “Well
when it goes back to the States and when they show the film they’re not going to show
the error because that would indicate that our people were teaching them wrong. Being
we have advisors there we’ll have technical experts only putting in only what is being
done right.” That’s what I had to explain to them. He was quite upset there wasn’t
anything because he was afraid we were going to shoot them doing wrong things and put
it in the film. (Laughs) Those were interesting assignments.

RV: What about the quality of men you worked with at DASPO compared with
the 69th Signal Battalion?

DJ: I would say pretty darn close. DASPO, I think we probably had a little bit
higher educated. They were your honor graduates out of the photo school and that. We
had some very, very exceptional young men. With a 134 man photo platoon I had quite a
range of ability. You know from little or none to a great deal. Where in DASPO I would
say overall I had a higher caliber of experienced cameramen as far as their abilities were

concerned.

RV: Tell me what assignment you had in the Arctic Circle?

DJ: In the Arctic Circle, so many flights are now going over the Arctic Circle.
They felt that one day there was going to be an air crash in the Arctic Circle. They had
us simulate an air crash and use an airborne on a simulated rescue. We filmed the
simulated rescue.

RV: So you were stationed in Hawaii for four years?

DJ: Three years.

RV: You left in ’72 and you went back to recruiting is that right?

DJ: Yeah. Well there was a reason for that. (Laughs) Just when I was getting
ready to go rotate from Hawaii, Colonel [Del] Vedo who was at the Pentagon when I was
there, he came over and visited Hawaii and he knew I was ready to come back. He said,
“We’ll see you back in the Pentagon.” (Laughs) I said, “No way, I ain’t coming back to
the Pentagon.” He kept insisting I was going back and I was insisting I wasn’t. So,
finally to end the argument I said, “Okay, I’ll see you.” (Laughs) When I was in Hawaii
I was living in government quarters and I had a government phone so I remembered some
contacts in the Pentagon. (Laughs) I called the Pentagon and talked to the gal that I
told her where I wanted to go. I only had about
two years left in the Army and I figured, “Well, I’ll try to get close to home and retire.” I
called her and she said, “Well call me about once a week and I’ll let you know where
we’ve got openings.” Finally I called her and they had openings in South Dakota. So, I
went back to South Dakota rather than back to he Pentagon.

RV: Was your mother still living at this time?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: Did you have any trouble transitioning out of Vietnam, out of DASPO back
into civilian life after you finished your recruiting? You stayed in the military, you didn’t
go right back into civilian life, but you were there for three ½, four years in Sioux Falls
recruiting?

DJ: Yeah, I when I went on recruiting I went on recruiting duty in Huron. Then I
made, was promoted to E-8. Then they sent me to Sioux Falls as the operations sergeant
in the recruiting district headquarters. So I was there for two years before I retired. I had
about a year in Huron as a recruiter and then two years as operations sergeant.

RV: Did you have any trouble transitioning back to the United States from
Southeast Asia?

DJ: No.

RV: I guess starting when you were in Hawaii and then when you came back
home, how much did you follow the war effort? Obviously when you’re in Hawaii you
traveled to Vietnam and you traveled to Southeast Asia. How much did you keep up with
US policy?

DJ: I kept up with the news all the time. One thing when we talked about the UN
earlier, after I thought about what I had said I’d like to clarify that just a little bit.

RV: Sure go ahead.

DJ: When I was real young when it come to the UN, I thought the UN was a
body to promote world peace and everybody is for that. That’s how it was brought out in
the news. To me, I thought the UN was a good deal for promoting world peace. So in
Vietnam when we went under there under the UN—

RV: Korea, you mean.
DJ: —or into Korea, the UN to me was a good organization. I just kind of believed that the countries got together and said, “Hey let’s get together and stop these people.” I didn’t consider us under control of the UN. I thought we were there with their approval more than under their control. I look at the UN today as trying to control everything. That’s the difference between then and Vietnam. How I would have looked at in Vietnam, if it would have been there, I would have looked more of them as trying to control the war. Where as in Korea I thought we were there with their blessing, so to speak and they didn’t have control of us. I look at the UN different now wanting control. That’s why I say it was the world government. I look at them as a one world government wanting control.

RV: Do you think they’ve gained power over the years?

DJ: The UN?

RV: Yes, sir.

DJ: Everybody is giving them power in my estimation.

RV: In April 1975, how did you feel when Vietnam fell?

DJ: I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t believe that we actually got out of there. Like I said when I first got to Cam Ranh Bay, when I saw that installation and they had really built that I said, “There is no way we are ever going to get this out.” In Tan Son Nhut, 69th Signal was stationed out of Tan Son Nhut. We built up Tan Son Nhut. The money we have poured into that country I said, “There is no way we are going to get this stuff out. You just turned and let them have it.” It turned out that’s what we did. I could not believe it.

RV: Did you have any faith in the Vietnamization policy of turning the war over to the Vietnamese slowly as we would get out?

DJ: Well, I was all in favor of that. I thought if we would have supported it more, if the American people would have supported it more—this is my personal feeling—I think it would have worked because before Tet, the people in the countryside, they really didn’t have a government that they thought was working for them. The North was just as bad and the South they considered equal. It was just a matter of who’s going to control them. The North Vietnamese were coming south and using them and then the South Vietnamese I think were using them. But after Tet was the first time that I think
the Vietnamese government did something to try to help the people. I think the people were starting to get more faith in their government. I know in Saigon that the government started giving them building materials so they could rebuild. I think the people were finally realizing that the government was trying to help them. So I think if more effort would have been put that way, the people would have got behind the government. I don’t think the people were behind the government before Tet. They were just abiding by whoever controlled them.

RV: So in April, 1975 you were surprised at what had happened?
DJ: Yeah, I was surprised that we gave up supporting them and let them fight it on their own without giving them more assistance when we cut off their funds, when Congress cut off the funds to support them. I felt terrible about it. After we had sacrificed so many people, so many good people, you know fifty-eight thousand people is a lot of good young men. Why would we just give that up? It just floored me. I could not fathom us giving that up. That’s when I look at the Wall today it leaves me blank. When I look at it, I see a loss.

RV: Have you been to the Wall on Vietnam?
DJ: Yes, I’ve been to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington and I’ve also been to the small one.

RV: The Traveling Wall?
DJ: Yeah.

RV: What have your experiences been, you just described it briefly, but what have they been like?
DJ: When I looked up the names and saw the names of those I knew, I served with, but when I look at the Wall, it’s just black. I’d rather see a different memorial for them. To me, I’m looking at a loss of fifty-eight thousand men. It bothers me.

RV: What kind of a memorial would you rather see?
DJ: Now the Korean War Memorial, I saw that while I was in Washington here recently. It’s got several soldiers going out on a patrol. I saw that and that one moved me. Because I knew if those people were alive, if those statues were alive I knew what they would say. Because I’ve been there. I think that one is a really fitting memorial because that’s what it was. I guess a black Vietnam Memorial is fitting too, because it’s
a loss. It just shows a loss. That Wall just left me blank. I just would rather have seen
something different.

RV: Do you think the United States was able to achieve peace with honor as
Richard Nixon said?

DJ: I think achieving peace with honor—you can’t have it unless you win. We
never went there to win it, so there’s no way you could have honor.

RV: Can you expand on that thought about we didn’t go there to win it?

DJ: Well, if the VC say controlled a hill for example. We would go up and run
them off, losing men doing it. Then we would leave the hill and let them have it back.

How do you win a war when you give it back to them? The only way you can ensure
peace is be prepared for war. If you go into a war you’ve got to win it. There is no draw
in war.

RV: Do you think the United States learned any lessons in Vietnam?

DJ: No, we’ll do it again. (Laughs)

RV: Really?

DJ: Well, we did it in Korea. We didn’t win in Korea; we didn’t go out to win.

We didn’t do it in ‘Nam. If the situation arises we’ll do it again. They’re worried about
public opinion more than the national security I believe.

RV: For you personally, what do you think was the most significant thing you’ve
learned for your service in Vietnam?

DJ: How much that I learned?

RV: Yes, sir.

DJ: That’s kind of a tough question. I don’t really know how to answer it. I
guess to me one thing we learned if we’re going to go into any place with combat, go into
win. That’s the one thing I’ve learned, you’ve got to do it or you—there is no victory
outside of winning.

RV: How about for you personally, what did you learn while in Vietnam?

DJ: I learned it was really a political war more than a war to liberate people. It
was run by strictly by Congress. The military had no control of how the war was fought.

RV: How do you feel today about your service in Vietnam?
DJ: I’m proud of the service. I think we had a reason to be there and I was glad that I had a part of it. I’m not happy the way the results were. I don’t look back as a bad experience in my life. In fact, the experience of ‘Nam was good experience for me because of the caliber of people that I worked with.

RV: That was my next question. How has it most affected your life?
DJ: I guess I am more critical of my government and how we do things.
RV: Have you ever wanted to go back to Vietnam?
DJ: Yes.
RV: Would you like to go back?
DJ: Oh, yes.
RV: Where would you go, what would you do?
DJ: I would like to go back to Saigon and see the places where I’d been. I’d like to go back to Can Tho; I had a few chances to go into Can Tho, just to see those places again. I’d just like to see if there’s a big change in their way of life compared to what it was when I was there.

RV: Without having been back, what do you think of Vietnam today?
DJ: I really don’t give Vietnam a whole lot of thought, but they’re surviving.
RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?
DJ: No.
RV: Do you think the US government is taking care if it’s Vietnam veterans?
DJ: Not to the extent that they can. In fact, I don’t think the government is taking care if the veterans like they had promised.

RV: In general, you mean?
DJ: Yeah.
RV: How so?
DJ: When I was in the service they always said as a career you always got the VA for your medical and everything. It’s always going to be free. Well, I’m paying for part of my medicines. (Laughs) There was time they told me I couldn’t go there. The only reason I could go back there is because I have ten percent disability on my knee from tearing the cartilage in my knee. I had no benefits there for a while as a military
retiree. The only benefit I got was for my knee which I tore the cartilage bowling.

(Laughs)

RV: Bowling in Vietnam?

DJ: No, it wasn’t even in Vietnam. But I tore the cartilage in my knee bowling one night. When they had cut me off there for a while that I couldn’t go back. Then they said I could go back because I had a ten percent disability on my knee. Here they were giving me some VA benefits based on a torn cartilage in my knee which I did bowling, not the fact that I’m a Purple Heart retiree. I earned more benefits bowling I guess.

(Laughs)

RV: Does your Purple Heart come from Korea?

DJ: Yeah.

RV: What happened in the incident?

DJ: It was a minor wound really. It was on Operation Smack. Hand grenade shrapnel, got a small piece, kind of an L-shaped piece struck right below my eye, stuck in my eyelid. It bled pretty good and it stung and burned. The medic saw me and he told me, “Get back down the hill.” He bandaged it when I got back. The blood had dried my eye shut. They pulled out the little piece of shrapnel that was stuck there and they washed out my eye with alcohol and then I thought I was blind. (Laughs) They wanted to check and see if there was more shrapnel in there. I said, “No.” I didn’t want to back. I didn’t want to go back to the aid station I just wanted to back to the unit. The next day I woke up I had a big black eye, my eye was all swelled up. When the swelling went down I had a big lump in my eyelid. They went back and they x-rayed and they found there was another piece of shrapnel in there. Cut that out. It wasn’t a serious wound it was just enough to get me out of there. They gave me a Purple Heart for it.

RV: Any songs or when you hear something on the radio does it take you back to Vietnam?

DJ: No.

RV: How about any good books on Vietnam that you would recommend that you’ve read?

DJ: No, I don’t do a lot of reading. I know when I watched Black Hawk Down that brought back a lot of emotions because the guys that were going through there I
knew the emotions. If you’ve gone through that and you’ve seen that, you know, it does affect you. Same way the Korean War Memorial affected me more than the Vietnam Memorial. Because if those images were alive, I knew their feelings. I knew what they would say.

RV: For young people today, what would you tell them or teach them about the Vietnam War?

DJ: What I would tell them?

RV: Yeah.

DJ: I’d tell them that we deserved to be there. I wouldn’t just say that we were there as an aggressor or whatever tag they want to put onto it. I would say we had every right to be there. Primarily because of international grievance and that. All I can say is we just didn’t fight to win it.

RV: Do you think the government basically has not learned from that experience?

DJ: I don’t think so.

RV: Is that based on what you’ve seen today, what’s happening in today’s world?

DJ: Well, it’s a little different world today. It’s an entirely different mentality today as far as the military is concerned.

RV: In what way?

DJ: Well everything now is, “Let’s bomb it.” We’re not using that many troops to do the work. We’re relying more on technology than we are on manpower. It’s a different mentality to me.

RV: Do you have trouble relating to today’s military?

DJ: In some ways, yeah. Everything is so much more sophisticated than when we were there. I know when we were in Washington with the 55th Signal Company at combat camera, the equipment and their technology is entirely different from what we had. They operate entirely different. Well, in some respects it’s the same operation but they do it in an entirely different manner.

RV: Sir, is there anything else you’d like to add to our conversation today?

DJ: No, I hope it ain’t too jumbled up for you. (Laughs)
RV: Sir, not at all, not at all. We’ll go ahead and end it then. Thank you sir for
the interview.

DJ: Okay.