Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m doing an oral history interview with Mr. Jim Shannon. I am in Lubbock, Texas. I’m on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Special Collections Library interview room. It is Wednesday, November thirteenth. It’s about 4:43 Central Standard Time. Mr. Shannon, you are in—where are you?

Jim Shannon: I am in Canton, Ohio.

RV: Canton, Ohio. Okay, great.

JS: About fifty miles south of Cleveland.

RV: Great. Why don’t we start with some basic biographical information? Tell me where you were born and when you were born.

JS: I was born in 1947 in Canton, Ohio.

RV: Did you grow up in Canton?

JS: Yes. I attended all the public schools in Canton, yes.

RV: How would you describe your childhood? Was it a normal childhood?

JS: I think so. I had four siblings, a mom that stayed at home and a dad that worked. He was a printer, a typesetter, an art that’s no longer around anymore. But, no, I think so. We were probably a middle class family in a steel town. This was a steel town back then.

RV: How many siblings did you have?

JS: Four.

RV: What were they?

JS: They were all younger. Two brothers, two sisters.
JS: I am the oldest, yes.

RV: So you grew up there in Canton. You attended the public school system there in Canton and I guess you went to high school at Canton as well?

JS: Yes.

RV: Tell me about your high school experience. What do you remember about that?

JS: High school was a difficult time for me, not necessarily because of the learning ability. High school was a difficult time because we all got stuck back then in the wrong group. You ran around in the wrong crowd or you got introduced to the wrong people. Then my sophomore year of high school, I didn’t think I needed it anymore and got involved with the wrong people. Not criminally by any stretch, but just didn’t want to go to school, didn’t try, didn’t do this, didn’t do that. Then I got involved in a pioneer program, a work experience pioneer program where they found you a little job after school and you only went to school to do the elementary things, the basics. You didn’t have to go to study hall. You went to your little job after school and then I was okay. I made it through high school.

RV: Did your family emphasize education to you?

JS: No.

RV: They did not?

JS: Obviously they were disappointed. My father extremely disappointed that I didn’t go to school every now and then. He demonstrated that with me time and time again. But no, there was no—I don’t think there was any overwhelming insistence about education. No.

RV: This must have been early ‘60s.

JS: Yes. This was early ‘60s. I started high school in 1961. There were a number of—this county was about four hundred thousand. So it’s a good-sized county. There were a number of, back then, a number of steel mills, a number of shops, a number of this that were begging for people. So you didn’t even need a high school education to go in and make three bucks an hour back then, which was good.

RV: So the jobs were there.

JS: The jobs were aplenty. Finishing high school wasn’t an absolute necessity.
RV: Did you want to drop out to go work or did you want to drop out to drop out?

JS: No. I wanted to drop out to work. I wanted a car. I wanted to be older than what I was. That necessitated having money to buy a car.

RV: This pioneer program got you back into school basically?

JS: Yes. It got me back into school, got me back to the point of doing reading, writing, and arithmetic and then going to the little job, having a little money and being able to be somewhat self sufficient. My father didn’t earn a lot of money and I won’t say we were poor, but often times there wasn’t enough to go around.

RV: So you were basically trying to be self sufficient, as much as you could.

JS: I was trying to. Eventually I did, prematurely I became self-sufficient.

RV: Really?

JS: Oh, yeah.

RV: So did you graduate in ’64?

JS: In ’65.

RV: ’65. Okay. Tell me, what kind of subjects were you interested in in school itself?

JS: I wanted to be an architect. I always had a god given skill for art and drawing, mechanically more so than portrait kinds of drawings. But I wanted to be an architect. But the times, that kind of got put on the back burner because I didn’t really like to go to school for a while there. I don’t think I’ve ever really liked to go. I think eventually enough people convinced me that I had to go. I’m not one of these people that ever said, “Oh, god. I love school. It’s such a riot.”

RV: What about your brothers and sisters?

JS: My sister two years behind me was a valedictorian, never missed a day in all of her years. Of course, that was a subject of a lot of rivalry rubbed in my nose so to speak. I think every one was pretty much—my sister excelled. My oldest sister excelled. The rest of the kids were I think pretty much marginal, right down the middle of the road.

RV: Did you play sports at all?

JS: Basketball. Yes. Organized?

RV: Yeah, at high school.
JS: Yeah, basketball.
RV: Were you good at that? Did you enjoy that a lot?
JS: Yes. Oh, yeah and I still do. I’m a sports enthusiast.
RV: Were you good enough to go play college ball?
JS: No. Of course, I don’t know. That’s a difficult question to say. I guess if you practice enough and if you have enough contacts or the right contacts I should say, that may have been, but I don’t think I was big enough. Back then though, it was different. Today, I could never compete.
RV: What do you know about or remember about, at the time, what did you know about American foreign policy? This is right in the early ’60s. Nothing’s really going on in Vietnam at the time, but by the time you graduate in ’65, the United States is getting really involved on the ground with regular forces. What did you know about it?
JS: I knew absolutely nothing.
RV: Reall?
JS: I was totally unaware. I think I can qualify that by saying I was totally unaware of what was going on outside of my own little community, my own little neighborhood, yeah.
RV: So if I asked you about President Kennedy.
JS: I would know that.
RV: Well, you knew he was president, but did you like pay attention to the Cuban Missile Crisis in ’62?
JS: No. I had no idea. When I watched *The Missiles of October*, that docu-drama that was on, I was totally unaware of all that, totally unaware. I don’t know if my parents were or were not. That is a very black and white area or gray area.
RV: So when you graduated high school, you had been working, you said in high school. Did you go full time then?
JS: Yes.
RV: What were you doing?
JS: I worked at—there’s a company in town, a large company, it was larger back then, the Tempkin Roller Bearing Company. Today it’s called the Tempkin Company. It’s the world’s largest manufacturer of tapered roller bearings. They're used in all kinds
of applications throughout the world, predominately in automobiles and railroad cars and just anything imaginable. They had a huge, huge plant here. That’s one of the things that I told you earlier that jobs were aplenty. You started, gosh I can't even imagine starting at $2.30 an hour. Isn’t that unreal? How old are you?

RV: I’m thirty-five.

JS: Okay. Well, you may have some ability to comprehend that. But you started at $2.30 an hour and if you worked midnights you got $2.90 an hour. So there was a great amount of money back then.

RV: That was a good starting—

JS: That was a very, very good place to get into. Even though it was a fact, there were probably ten to twelve thousand people that worked there. It was a large, large operation. It was piecework. There was plenty of incentive. It was a very good place to work. They did not hire everyone. They were very selective—I wouldn’t say very selective, but they were selective. If you went in there and you couldn’t read and write, you didn’t get a job. I mean, you had to have some skills, although very basic, but some skills.

RV: What did you do yourself, exactly?

JS: I ground bearings on a machine, an assembly line machine where a bearing would pop up, I would grind. A bearing would pop up, I would grind. Very monotonous kind of task. It was piecework, so the more I ground the more money I made.

RV: So that was very good motivation then.

JS: Oh, yeah. It was wonderful. We’re talking about the summer of ’65. At that time, to further complicate this, I ended up making more money than my father. I started in this plant and make more money than my father. He’s still supporting four kids. I’m at home sleeping in and all this other good stuff and I’m making considerably more money than he is.

RV: Did that cause some friction in the household?

JS: Yes. I needed a car. Well, I had a car, an old beat up jalopy to go back and forth and I wanted a newer car. There was a refusal to because in Ohio then, you couldn’t—you had to be twenty-one to have a car in your name. I was only eighteen. He
refused and my mom didn’t want to get in the middle of everything so a neighbor woman up the street signed for me. Can you believe that?

RV: You got your car.

JS: I got my car.

RV: What did you buy?

JS: I had a 1965 Plymouth Satellite, big engine, as big as I could get. That’s what you wanted back then.

RV: I think I can see it in my mind’s eye.

JS: Red, fire engine red. It was a good time.

RV: So you were doing well financially, you had your own car, a decent job, good job. Then what happens with Vietnam? Did you get drafted?

JS: Yes.

RV: Okay. Tell me how that came about. You must have gotten a draft notice in the mail.

JS: Yes, I did. I got a draft notice in the summer of ’66. I got a notice to go for a physical. Of course, everybody was doing that. All of my friends, a lot of my friends ran to the National Guard and I didn’t do that. Don’t ask me why because I have no recollection of why I didn’t do that. I got my physical notice and I went up and took the physical along with lots of other guys and came home. I think it was probably the spring of ’66. In the summer I got a forty-five-day notice to report.

RV: What did you know about the war? Obviously if you’re—

JS: I think at that time I had something going on about it. I think my dad came to me and said what’s going on and all this sort of thing because I really didn’t. Everybody was getting drafted and everybody was going, but nobody was coming home yet. That was very early in that. There wasn’t anybody coming home saying, “Oh, my God. Don’t go to Vietnam. Jesus Christ.” So I really didn’t know all that much. I got my notice that said bring a toothbrush and a change of underwear for one day. Actually, it said, “Greetings from your president, Lyndon Baines Johnson.” I wish I would have kept that, but you had to turn the damn thing in. So I reported and on to Fort Benning.

RV: Down to Georgia and you went Army.

JS: Yes.
RV: Did you have a choice or was that just what you were drafted?

JS: No. It was very interesting that day. The Cleveland reception station and I’ve been to Cleveland hundreds of times since then, I have no idea where that damn place was. But at the Cleveland reception station, they made us all stand in a line and there must have been two hundred and fifty, three hundred guys standing there. They announced that the Marines were drafting that day. I thought, holy shit, that’s all I want to—I don’t even know what I’m doing there. They came down and they went every other guy. The guy in front of me went and the guy behind me went and I went to the Army.

RV: Oh my gosh.

JS: Yeah. The guy in front of me, I went to high school with, a guy by the name of Chuck Dickerson.

RV: Do you know what happened to him?

JS: He’s back. He’s an excavator here in town now. But he went to the Marine Corps and he went to Vietnam. I thought, wow. Anyway I got on the bus and went to Fort Benning.

RV: That’s an interesting way to select Marines.

JS: Every other guy. So you can see that it was a cannon fodder mentality, but you didn’t know it then, but I recognize it now. I’ve recognized it for years that that was what it was and the Marine Corps, only the best or whatever in the hell their slogan is. They didn’t care. They just wanted bodies.

RV: What did your family feel about you being drafted and shipping off to Fort Benning?

JS: I think that my mom especially was very concerned. I think they knew more about what was going on than I did. Once again, I don’t know if I went beyond my community or my state if you will. I’m sure I was into the national news. Obviously, I knew the President had been assassinated, but I don’t know how in depth I knew.

RV: They had a better awareness of where you probably would be going.

JS: Yeah. I think they did, that’s more adult-like. I don’t think the kids today have too much of an idea of what Bush is trying to do or what Bush wants to do. So I think that’s a fair comparison between us, then and now.

RV: You took a bus from Ohio down to Georgia.
RV: What was it like on that bus? Were you anxious? Were you excited?
JS: I know it was at night. I remember it being at night. The interesting thing about it is, about five years ago, I’d known this fellow from a town in the same county. We were involved in some political things together and I’ve known him for years. We got to shooting the breeze one night and I knew he was in Vietnam, but we got to shooting the breeze and don’t ask me how it came up, but we were comparing serial numbers. His is one number off from mine, sequentially. We were on the same damn bus to Fort Benning.

RV: And didn’t know it.
JS: And didn’t know it until probably two years ago.
RV: Wow, that’s weird.
JS: I know. It’s the weirdest thing in the world. I’ve known the guy for so long. I’ve known him for probably twenty, twenty-five years and didn’t know and didn’t actually remember that he was on the bus. But anyway, it was dark. It was night. We drove down there at night and I remember we arrived in the morning and there was those guys with the big hats saying, “Get off the bus. Your mammas aren’t with you.” It was frightening. They made us pay for our haircuts and shave, seventy-five cents. You had to pay for it. You had to pay the civilian barber seventy-five cents to cut all your hair off.

RV: You would think the Army would pay for that for you.
JS: They did not. I was a smoker back then and obviously I enjoyed a couple of cigarettes, but it was a very trying time.

RV: Tell me about your basic training. How would you describe it?
JS: Basic training brought the best out of everyone. We were there. I remember being there with—I have—it’s almost like a high school graduation annual. I have an annual from my graduating class at Fort Benning. It brought the best out of everyone. Everybody bent over backwards to get through the damn thing, although we were very young. When you’re very young, it’s very easy to do. When you’re eighteen, nineteen years old, it’s very easy to do. It was just sort of like a momentary delay in life as you did these crazy things. Up at four o’clock in the morning running around, up at five o’clock in the morning, stuff to break you down so that you listen. I guess they have a reason for
that. I don’t dispute that. I think, in fact, I’m a proponent that everybody else at least try
it.
 RV: So you would favor mandatory military service for all able-bodied males?
 JS: Oh, yeah. I’m a draft proponent, absolutely. I would think so, yeah. There’s
nothing wrong with that.
 RV: What was your daily routine like there at Fort Benning?
 JS: Gosh, I don’t know. They had a regimen of things. There was a—I’m trying
to think of what the word is. I mean, you went to this school, that school, that training,
this training, that training. I don’t know what to call it. It was there. You were up in the
morning at five o’clock and you didn’t go to bed till ten. So I wouldn’t want to try it
today. It was very regimental. Everything was structured. It was a very structured
environment, which obviously it had to be.
 RV: What was the most difficult thing about your basic training for you?
 JS: For me?
 RV: Yeah.
 JS: Oh, wow. I don’t know. I don’t know if there was anything absolutely
difficult. I was not a big physical training lover. I didn’t like the push-up aspects, the
monkey bar aspects, those kinds of things. I think I was probably a marginal performer in
the physical training aspect.
 RV: What kind of weapons training did you have?
 JS: The rifle range. The typical rifle range, that kind of thing. I did excel in that,
but it was a very logical thing. I mean, you’d listen to what they told you, you lined up
the target, you pulled the trigger and the bullet went in. I mean, it was not rocket science
by any stretch.
 RV: Had you been familiar with weapons before this?
 JS: No. I had never fired a gun.
 RV: Did you train on the M-14?
 JS: M-14, yes.
 RV: Did you do small arms, the .45?
 JS: When I went to MP (Military Police) school.
 RV: Had there been any military tradition in your family before you?
JS: My father, World War II.
RV: Okay. What did he do in World War II?
JS: He was an aircraft mechanic in Germany.
RV: So there was some kind of tradition. Did he say anything about that that you were kind of following in this at all?
JS: No. No. No. There was no hand me down kind of thinking along those lines. No, none whatsoever.
RV: How much contact did you have with him while you were in basic?
JS: With my dad?
RV: Well, with your family.
JS: Oh, letters. I think I came home for Christmas because I left in September and I think I came home in December for Christmas. That was my first airplane ride coming home.
RV: How would you describe the instruction that you received in your basic training? Was it adequate?
JS: Oh, yes. Oh, I think so, very much so. I don’t know if it pointed as one might have wanted, but it served its purposes. It was elementary basic training. It indoctrinated you and yes, it was okay.
RV: Had any of your instructors been in Vietnam that you’re aware of?
JS: Yes.
RV: Did they talk to you about it?
JS: No. Well, they used it as a—I remember a couple of times that they used it as a—I don’t know what I want to say—a threat. “If you guys don’t get your asses down you’ll be shot in Vietnam.” You know that kind of thing. Everybody kept saying, “What the hell are they talking about?”
RV: So you guys were all kind of like—
JS: Yeah. We were all young men, just a few years older than maybe being a boy and thrown together in one situation with a common bond. One of my huge, huge regrets today, I can't underscore how sizeable it is, is not ever writing down anybody’s name, their home address or anything even though they might not be there, at least it was a starting place. That was a huge mistake I made. Of course, I’m sure a lot of people did,
too. Because there’s so much camaraderie, there’s so much—I don’t know—so much
desire now to want to relive all that. There wasn’t for so many years, but now there’s a
great desire. But anyway, go ahead.

RV: Desire within you or in general do you think?
JS: No, I think within me.
RV: Within you? Okay.
JS: Yeah, huge desire to want to relive that. I relive it everyday.
RV: Do you really?
JS: Mm-hmm.

RV: Your military training or your experience in Vietnam or all of it?
JS: Everything. Yes. Not in a negative way. I certainly don’t mean that in a
negative way. I relive it in a positive way. I’ve used everything that the government ever
trained me or the Army ever trained me and Vietnam ever taught me in a positive way.

RV: Do you remember any incidents from your basic training that stand out in
your mind?
JS: I was fooling around in ranks one time during mail call and they made me sit
in a small creek nearby while I opened my mail.
RV: Anything else?
JS: KP (kitchen police), peeling like nine trillion tons of potatoes. Washing
dishes till four in the morning and then getting up at five. But I do remember a lot of
things. But you know, at the tail end, when you graduated, the guy that was chewing your
ass and giving you hell and making you do all those nasty things, came up to you and
shook your hand. That made it all worthwhile.

RV: Were your parents able to attend your graduation from basic?
JS: No.
RV: When you were nearing the end of basic training, did you know what your
specialty might be or when you would go to advanced, what you might do?
JS: Yes. When you arrived at basic training when you’re being introduced, I
guess, or were registered for it, I can't remember the name of what they called it, but there
was a specific thing. They asked you, “What do you want to do while you’re in the
Army?” I’d always wanted to be a policeman, so I said, “I want to be an MP.” So about
the second or third week into basic training, I got a call to go to the headquarters. There was the first sergeant there. He said, “They're sending down here for a goddamn record check on you. What the hell are you doing?” I said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I really don’t have a clue.” Here, I’d been selected to go to MP school and they were doing some kind of screening on me or whatever.

RV: A background check.

JS: Yes. I remember the first sergeant just chewed my ass up one side and down the other because he thought I didn’t want to be an infantryman. Quite frankly, I didn’t. But it didn’t matter much ‘cause I ended up doing that just about anyway. But that’s neither here nor there.

RV: Why did you want to be policeman? Why did you choose that?

JS: I don’t know. I think I always wanted to be a policeman. There was nothing in our family, nothing whatsoever. But I just wanted to be a policeman.

RV: So you translated that into MP service while you were in the Army. It makes sense.

JS: I thought, what the hell, let’s try it and see what happens.

RV: So after you got out of basic, you go to MP school.

JS: Yes.

RV: Where was that?

JS: Fort Gordon, also in Georgia, the opposite end right across the state.

RV: When was this, 196—?

JS: Well, you know. That’s on your neck of the woods.

RV: Uh-huh. 1967? Is this the year?

JS: I went to MP school in—no I was in Vietnam in ‘6—I went to MP school in—God, when did I go? September, October, November. I went December, January, February, so I kind of went ’66-’67.

RV: Tell me about that. What did they teach you there?

JS: Once again, it was a carbon copy of basic training, up in the morning, all that rigorous crap. Although they preached to you, “When you get to your next duty station, it will be so much easier, “ there was no damn thing easier about it. It was more classroom, I guess. I guess I could say it was more classroom. A lot of notebook, a lot of studying
kinds of things. But there was still a pistol range, a rifle range. They taught you how to
drive a jeep, which, wow. There was some things that I thought were foolish.

RV: Such as.

JS: Well, driving the jeep and running a D file. For some reason this is stuck in
my mind for thirty-five years, a D file. Do you know what a D file is?

RV: No, sir.

JS: A D file is, and you’ve been through one all the time where one lane of the
highway is blocked because they’re doing some construction so they make you go down
the other side. There’s a flag man at the other end that’s stopping the traffic. He tells the
other guy, when the green Chevy comes through, that’s the last car, send the other one. It
was very silly. Anyway, I didn’t think—back then, who knows.

RV: How were you able to handle the classroom training?

JS: Oh, I was fine. I was very interested in that.

RV: Did they teach you hand to hand combat?

JS: Yes, in both basic and in MP school.

RV: How were you with that?

JS: Oh, I was fine with that.

RV: Any incidents stand out in your mind from your advanced, anything funny
happen or injures?

JS: In my advanced training, no, nothing. At Fort Gordon, nothing stands out
real big.

RV: How was your instruction there?

JS: It was fine. I think it was adequate. They're trying to push thousands of guys
through those kinds of courses. I think it was adequate.

RV: How many men were there in your platoon or unit that was going through
the MP training?

JS: Oh, wow. There was probably sixty in my platoon and there was five
platoons. It was probably three hundred.

RV: The big question is, did this training that you received in basic and
advanced, did it prepare you for Vietnam?
JS: No. Well, I shouldn’t say no. If you look at a scale of one to ten, ten being the utmost preparation and one being the least, it was probably a three, maybe a four.

RV: Why?

JS: Well, I ended up in a forward POW (prisoner of war) camp and they never taught us a damn thing about POWs. But I ended up in a POW compound and doing mine sweeps in the morning and mine sweeps in the evening and going out and looking for lost trucks and convoys. None of that was represented to us in the training episodes. There were lots of things, and I can say that when I became a civilian policeman, that the basic course I went through in civilian police life didn’t help me a damn bit because it all ends up what you learn on the street.

RV: Right. When you got to Vietnam and thinking back to this training, were you going, “God, I wished they would have taught me this. I wish they’d have taught me that.” Was it that kind of feeling?

JS: No. I don’t think I had that feeling. No. I think I was just willing. It was just another learning stage.

RV: So when did you find out you were going to Vietnam?

JS: Originally, when I told you in basic infantry training, they came to me and said, “Go see the first sergeant.” Anyway, I was getting a security clearance and I didn’t know it at the time. I later found out that I got a security clearance to go to the Defense Atomic Support Agency in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I thought, wow, I have an aunt and uncle in Albuquerque. That will be really neat. I’ll be stationed there. I can go see them. I’ll have a great time and I can go home in two years. We were two or three days before graduation and we were all assembled on the marching field or whatever in the hell they called it. They were reading off the assignments. They called my name for Vietnam and I said, “Oh, that can't be right. They must’ve made a damn mistake.” No. They didn’t make a mistake, they just changed. So I ended up going. So that’s when I found out, about three days before graduation.

RV: How did you feel besides, “Oh, my God, they had made a mistake?”

JS: I was worried. I was concerned. I remember after that and I think pretty damn immediate after that, I went to a phone and called home and told my mom and dad because now I had become more aware as everyone had of what was going on over there.
RV: Right. This is early 1967. What did your parents say?
JS: I don’t know. I don’t remember actually.
RV: How did they feel? Do you remember that?
JS: Do what?
RV: Do you remember how they felt? Were they—?
JS: I think there was an overall concern, especially with my mom. My mom was worried. I think moms worry and dads, “Go kick their ass,” kind of mentality. But moms are always, kind of, “I hope he’s going to be okay,” kind of thing. Then I graduated and went home for I think twenty days before I had to go.
RV: How was that time at home, those twenty days?
JS: Great. It was like it wasn’t going to happen. I remember going places and doing this and doing that and going out with my friends and not the least bit concerned about what was going to happen in twenty days or thirty days or forty or six months.
RV: How did you ship out of the United States? You flew from Canton.
JS: I flew from Canton to Fort Lewis and reported to the reception station at Fort Lewis and ended up flying over to Cam Ranh Bay on Northwest Orient.
RV: How did you feel when you got on that plane to go overseas?
JS: That was my second time to fly. I wasn’t frightened about it, but I don’t remember how I felt one way or another. I don’t remember a great amount of anxiety or anything like that. There were a lot of guys. I always looked at it as I do in many ways of life, there’s a lot of people in the same predicament you're in. Let’s all try to make the best of it kind of thing. I didn’t see anybody going nuts on the plane. I mean, we were on our way. We landed in Japan and got fuel, landed in Okinawa and got fuel and the next thing I remember, we were in. It was a twenty-four-hour airplane flight. It’s a pain in the ass. But we landed in Cam Ranh at the reception station and there we were. I remember the first time I ever heard gunshots though. I thought, oh, my. I was really, really concerned about that.
RV: Was that when you got off the plane?
JS: Well, we’d got off the plane. We went to this reception station. We were sleeping that night or going to bed that night and you could hear in the mountains off in the distance, “pop, pop, pop, pop, pop,” you know, “pop, pop, pop, pop, pop.” You
think, oh, shit. What did I get myself into? Little did we know that we were probably in
the damn safest place we’d be there for that whole year.

RV: Right. At Cam Ranh, absolutely. What did you think of Vietnam when you
first stepped off that plane? What were your first thoughts and feelings?

JS: I think I had, like so many people probably thought that they were going to
land me in a jungle, that somehow we were going to land in a jungle and just suddenly
race off into the jungle and just start shooting and whatever. It was so unlike that. It’s so,
once again, well orchestrated. There were safe areas, but they don’t tell you that. They
don’t say, “Well, when we land here you’ll be relatively safe. There’s not really much
going on. We have a lot of guards. This is a good area. Just get used to it.” They don’t tell
you that. You thought you were landing, at least I thought we were landing right into the
crux of everything, but that didn’t happen. It took you a while, but you eventually got a
hold of that. But when I went to Cam Ranh, I was in Cam Ranh, I think, a day and then I
went up to Nha Trang which is about fifty, sixty, seventy miles up the coast where I got
assigned at the 272nd MP Company. Hell, they had a movie theatre outside. We went to
the movie that night. I thought, last night I was scared to death because I heard gunfire up
in the hills and tonight I’m sitting outside watching a movie? It kind of hits you that
maybe all is not what it’s cracked up to be. There are some normalcies, which there were.
That was a very big area up there, a very sizeable population. It was Americanized a great
degree.

RV: Do you remember what movie you saw that night?

JS: No. I have no clue.

RV: Okay, but you felt more relaxed?

JS: Yeah. Because you met up with some people that had been there a while and
they say, “Ah, shit. Don’t worry about that. That’s okay. Those are way up in there. They
never come down here.” That kind of thing.

RV: So you get transferred to Nha Trang and how soon were you on post?

JS: I don’t remember. Our principal responsibility though is we guarded a hotel
where a bunch of generals and command staff people did their plans or things or
whatever.

RV: That was your first assignment?
JS: That was my first assignment, yes. There were a lot of us though. I remember they took us down to our guard assignment in a deuce and a half. There were like twenty-five of us, twenty-five posts on this guard thing or this hotel. We did that. I don’t know exactly how quickly after I was there, but I think it was fairly soon. I don’t remember laying around getting a tan anyway. In fact, the only damn good thing about the place, it was warm.

RV: Was the heat overbearing to you?

JS: No. Never. We went through some 110, 115 degree days and I never remember sweating.

RV: Really?

JS: No. It was weird. But I do remember on Thanksgiving of 1967, Thanksgiving Day of 1967, it got so cold that they were going to issue us field jackets. The temperature got down to eighty. It was weird. Honest to God. Strange, strange, strange thing.

RV: What was your base camp like? What were your living quarters like?

JS: It was a tent. Actually it was a tent roof. There were probably about fifteen or twenty of us sleeping on one level bunks on cots, actually cots with air mattresses and then mosquito netting. On PSP, do you know what perforated steel plating is?

RV: Yes, I do.

JS: Do you really? Damn. PSP was the walkways so you didn’t walk on the ground. You had PSP. I’m trying to remember what the floor was like in those things. I can’t remember. Isn’t that something?

RV: This is a large tent.

JS: Oh, yeah. Fifteen of us lived in that tent. There were probably thirty of them back and forth. This was when I went to Nha Trang. There were probably thirty of them back to back. At the end was the captain or the headquarters and at the other end was the latrines. That was the worst job in Vietnam.

RV: The latrine?

JS: There’s no sewer. You know how you got rid of it don’t you? You had to burn it.

RV: Exactly.
JS: You had to dump diesel fuel on it and send a match to it and it was absolutely terrible.

RV: Describe that. What steps would you go through? Did you have to go pull the buckets out?

JS: Yeah. There was a tub, probably half of a fifty-five-gallon drum that was full and you’d pull it out with a handle and dump diesel fuel on top and throw a match in and it would just burn. Oh, the stench. It was terrible. It was absolutely terrible. But anyway, it got rid of it.

RV: How often would you have to do that?

JS: I think that was a daily pecking order kind of thing. This week Sgt. Joe Shmalts’ platoon does it. The next week the next guy does it. That kind of a thing.

RV: So tell me about that tent. You had fifteen guys in there.

JS: Probably. I would think about that.

RV: What other amenities at all if any did you have in there?

JS: Nothing. Oh, nothing. There was one central shower someplace on that compound. There was one central shower. As there was one central latrine, there was one central shower. It almost—I’m sure you’ve seen MASH the television show MASH. It in a sense resembled that kind of a compound.

RV: Were you relatively comfortable or was it not good living conditions for you?

JS: It was very comfortable for what I thought I was going into, hell that was paradise. It was wonderful.

RV: Did you picture yourself in the jungle elsewhere?

JS: Yeah. When we got there, hell, guys had civilian clothes. They were going downtown because they worked eight hours a day. It was a normal job for many, many, many people. When I first got there, we worked three days on days, a day off, three days on afternoons, a day off, three days on midnights and then you got three days off and started the cycle over again. Hell, we were going downtown, taking the bus downtown, looking around, doing this, sightseeing, going to the beach, laying on the beach. I thought, what’s going on here?

RV: Is there a war going on? (Laughs)
JS: Yeah, honest to God. Nha Trang has beautiful beaches, absolutely the finest beaches in the world.

RV: I’ve been there. I’ve seen them.

JS: Oh, have you?

RV: Yes, sir.

JS: You swim out and you can still see the bottom a hundred feet out and all that other good stuff. The Le Grande hotel, you’ve been to Nha Trang?

RV: Yes, sir.

JS: Oh, wow. That’s really neat. But do you know where the Le Grande Hotel was?

RV: I do.

JS: Well, that’s where we walked guard post all around that damn place. Then all of the sudden they changed our routine to twelve hour days. You’d do twelve hours 6:00AM to 6:00PM. Then you’re off for twelve, then you come back—or twenty-four and then you’d come back and did the opposite, 6:00PM to 6:00AM. Then I got sent out to the field after thirty days. Thirty days or forty-five days and I thought, oh my God, the greatest thing that ever happened to me.

RV: To be sent to the field?

JS: Yes.

RV: Really?

JS: We had a detachment at Bong Son and I went to that detachment. There were about ten of us up in Bong Son, which is about two hundred miles north of Nha Trang right on Highway—well, yeah. Highway 1 ran right through Bong Son.

RV: You got transferred up there in March ’67 according to your records here.

JS: Yes.

RV: Let me ask you quickly, what shift did you prefer while you were doing the guard duty there at the hotel? Did you like the night shift, day shift?

JS: Yes. I liked the night shift.

RV: Why’s that?

JS: I think the night posed a mystery. I think you never knew. It kept you on your toes. Day shift, all the workers would come and go, Vietnamese workers, American
works, Joe Schmaltz, all. But nighttime is when the supervisor would come and say, “We heard information that they might attack tonight.” Although there wasn’t a Viet Cong in thirty-five miles of that place, but boy everybody’s on alert. I liked the nighttime.

RV: Did you ever have any incidents, any problems?
JS: No.

RV: Did you meet any of the generals? Did they just kind of shuffle past you?
JS: Yes. Westmoreland one time. I can't say as I met him. He walked by me. I looked at him. There was a two star that came in everyday. He had a ’66 Chevy four door sedan, OD (olive drab) green, that color, but I don’t even remember what his name was.

RV: What did you think of Westmoreland?
JS: Then or today?

RV: Then. Your impression then when you saw him.
JS: I thought he was a top general. I really didn’t have a political ideology or a philosophy or what you want to call it. I didn’t have a for or against kind of attitude back then.

RV: Did you look upon your service there in Vietnam as basically your job?
JS: Yes.

RV: After that month in Nha Trang, you go up to Bong Son. This says you sat out in the field. Describe what you mean by that.
JS: The field meant the forward area.

RV: Right. What were you guarding? Were you standing post again somewhere else?
JS: No. We had a couple of different roles out there. When I first got there, we worked at a POW camp.

RV: Housing VC (Viet Cong) or NVA (North Vietnamese Army) or both?
JS: Both.

RV: How many prisoners?
JS: Oh, God, hundreds.

RV: How many of you were guarding them?
JS: You know, forty, fifty maybe if that many. In fact one night, I think I remember I was all alone.
RV: Really?

JS: I have such fragmented—I have a fragmented memory of that. Some things I remember vividly as I’m sure you do. Some things in your past you remember outstandingly and then other things are black or gray or whatever. But no, I remember because we were right on the Bong Son River.

RV: Was this a prison facility? Were there walls? Were you inside of a building or were you basically—?

JS: No. It was a barbed wire tent kind of a thing.

RV: What were your duties there?

JS: To make sure they didn’t escape.

RV: So you stood outside the wire.

JS: Right. We had a function on one of the perimeters. I think they used a couple of the infantry companies when they would come back from the bush and from the field and when they needed a break, they would use them to guard. Because even though we were out in the field, it still wasn’t an everyday combat zone. There were some, although you had to stay on your toes, people weren’t getting killed everyday where I was.

RV: Right. So tell me what your interaction was with the prisoners.

JS: I have no recollection of that. I remember infantry companies. The infantry or somebody would bring them in. They would be interrogated by, I presume the intelligence people. They would go into the cell, or not cells, but they would go into the open, it was like a cattle barn. You couldn’t get out because of the barbed wire, but it certainly wasn’t a traditional, what you and I know as a jail.

RV: Okay. That was your first assignment there.

JS: Mm-hmm.

RV: How long did you stand guard at the prison camp?

JS: Probably about a month.

RV: What were your shifts there like? Was it the same kind of deal again?

JS: All the time. All the time. You worked all day long and at night time you drew some extra shifts at night.

RV: What was it like at night there compared to at night in Nha Trang?
JS: Oh, very spooky because these things are right on the river. We were right on this good sized river, the Bong Son River. Have you ever been up the Bong Son?

RV: No. No. I probably have driven past it.

JS: The Bong Son River is probably the size of the Ohio maybe.

RV: Okay. Good sized river.

JS: Yeah. It’s a good sized river. It’s a serious river. We were right on it. I remember there was a coconut plantation there. The coconuts would fall from the damn trees and scare the shit out of me. Finally, I learned, we ate them. We ate a lot of them. I drank a lot of coconut milk.

RV: At night, what kind of incidents would happen there that first month? Do you remember anything?

JS: No. There were no negative incidents at the POW camp. It was nothing outstanding there.

RV: No one tried to escape.

JS: No. It was a very mundane kind of assignment. In fact, I thought, what the hell am I doing up here? They said, “Oh, you’re going to the field. Oh, shit you’ll get shot.” I thought, what am I doing up here. At least you didn’t have to shine your boots and you kind of thought that maybe this is what the war is all about.

RV: Okay, sir. What was your assignment after the POW guarding? What did you do?

JS: The National Police of Vietnam. Did you see them anywhere over there? I don’t even know.

RV: Oh, yeah.

JS: Do they still have them?

RV: Well, they have the police and they're basically military. They're wearing military uniforms.

JS: They were called Con sats back then and they were the police, not the military. They had a little detachment downtown probably this is Binh Din Province. I think you can kind of equate it to the sheriff or something. He was in charge and he did all the police work in that. We had an MP station down there. That was the home of the 1st Cav and the 1st Cav had probably, oh gosh, ten thousand guys around there. So there
was a good sized contingent of American soldiers. So we had an MP station. So I ended up down there. We had four jeep patrols everyday that checked roads and looked for lost convoys and things like that. We did some what you might think as domestic law enforcement, a lot of traffic accidents. The Vietnamese had no cars. They had a lot of bikes and a lot of cyclos. You saw those damn things, didn’t you?

RV: Oh, yeah.

JS: Of course the ten ton bridge trucks would run over them. There was a lot of that, a lot of that. So we had a lot of that responsibility as well. We did some things with the National Police in terms of going out into some of the boonies and doing that. But we had pretty much a traditional law enforcement role there.

RV: Okay. Did you guys ever participate in any kind of civic action?

JS: Meaning?

RV: Meaning, assisting the civilian population with building or food or anything like that?

JS: No. I remember—do you know what a sundry pack was?

RV: Yes, I do. I think I know what you’re talking about.

JS: A sundry pack had five or ten cartons of cigarettes and had a bunch of writing material and all that. Well, being in the MP Corps, the guys that had the sundry packs were always kind to us. So I always ended up getting a sundry pack every couple of weeks. Hell, it had so much stuff in it. So there was a—I’m trying to think of that hospital. There was a hospital run by the Australians or another group close to Australia. I can't remember. I’m trying to think who those guys were and I looked them up on the internet, too. Anyway, I used to take it all down there and give it to them and they’d give it to the civilian Vietnamese that were hurt in the war and I’d take it down. I’d keep my carton of Lucky’s and the rest would go down there. Outside of that, no. I looked at it as a very us and them kind of thing because I wanted to come home. I was hell bent on coming home. I mean, I was cordial, made friends, said, “Hi, how are you?” But you know, a little stand offish when I was up there.

RV: What was your relationship with the other soldiers there?

JS: Great.
RV: Did they look up to you as MP or did they kind of have a little more respect for you?

JS: No. I was there at a time I think before the drug culture took over. In fact, people said to me, “Oh, my God. You were there and you didn’t see dope?” I never saw drugs the whole time I was there. Never.

RV: I was going to ask you about that.

JS: I was right in the front line of everything.

RV: How about alcohol use?

JS: Well, you couldn’t get it. I mean, we were out in the boon docks. I mean, the town that I was in didn’t even have electricity. Occasionally, you came upon a case of Falstaff. No. There wasn’t anything like that. When people say that to me today, they say, “Oh, you guys were a bunch of drug addicts, alcoholics.” I say, “What the hell are you talking about? I didn’t even have a beer for like nine months.” I don’t think it was that long, but damn close. Alcohol was not one of the things on my mind. Going home was key. Getting all screwed up and drunked up was not conducive to going home.

RV: Do you think that the U.S. policy of having the soldiers serve for a one year term in-country, in Vietnam was something good or something bad?

JS: I think it was alright.

RV: I’m comparing this to say, World War II where people served throughout the whole war.

JS: Through the duration.

RV: Exactly.

JS: You couldn’t have made it in Vietnam. The casualties would have been ever so great had you. Well, I don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that exactly. I think I liked it because it affected me. I had a target date and I knew that February 27th of 1968 I was going home. So it gave you something to look forward to and yes, I think in a sense it was good because it kept your morale going, yes.

RV: What were your living quarters like there at Bong Son?

JS: I lived at the police station right downtown, right amongst them. There were five of us I think that stayed down there.

RV: All Americans or were you with some of the South Vietnamese?
JS: No. No, five American MPs. We lived with the Vietnamese down there. I mean, we ate at the landing zones at the normal American mess halls. But we stayed down there at night. It amounted to a cot with an air bag and a mosquito net over in the tent. I remember I had an ammo box for a foot locker.

RV: Oh, yeah?
JS: Yeah.
RV: That’s pretty small.
JS: No. It was a good sized ammo box. It had some rockets in it. I picked it up here and there.
RV: Did you ever see any tension between draftees like yourself and lifers, people who were in career military?
JS: No. Tension in terms of, I mean, I got in a disagreement with a sergeant one time and I know he’d been in seven or eight years, but our disagreement was over a process, not necessarily a philosophy. If he would have told me the Army is the greatest thing in the world, I would have said, “You’re out of your mind.” But he wasn’t going to do that and neither was I because back then the Army wasn’t quite my goal in life.

RV: What was the disagreement you had with this sergeant?
JS: I’m sorry, what?
RV: What was the disagreement you had with this sergeant?
JS: I don’t remember. It was some prep, some clerical thing.
RV: Did you do a lot of paperwork?
JS: Somewhat, yeah.
RV: What was your typical day like? Would you wake up and eat?
JS: When I was in Bong Son?
RV: Uh-huh.
JS: It started at seven in the morning or when it became light. We had specific routes we had. There were a lot of people up there. We had the LZ (landing zone) English, LZ Two Bits, LZ Dog, LZ Pony, and there were a lot of people on that. We had our fair share of things to do in terms of maybe not necessarily criminal acts, but a lot of accidental shootings. We’d been on a lot of—whenever you gave thirty-five thousand people all a gun and all the ammunition they ever need, lots of people are going to get
hurt unnecessarily. In fact, I often said that if you took the fifty-five thousand that were
killed and divided it by two, that’s how many the enemy killed and how many each other
killed. I don’t know if that’s accurate, but there was a lot of people. I remember a guy
who dropped his M-16 in the ammo dump. He was loading ammo in the back of a deuce
and a half and his M-16 bumped over, went off, exploded, didn’t blow up the whole
damn place, but it blew up him and hit blew up a lot of other people all unnecessarily.
The two helicopter pilots that were playing quick draw one time in front of the helicopter
they had just landed and they were, “Lets screw around a little bit.” A couple of twenty-
two year old helicopter pilots and they're playing quick draw. The guy pulls up an M-79
and boom, blows him up in the chest. It goes through him, hits another helicopter. That
blows up, kills three other people. Four people are dead that day and it didn’t have a
damn thing to do with combat. It had a lot to do with horseplay. So a lot of our role out in
front was that.

RV: You would basically treat it like it crime scene?
JS: No. I don’t think we got to the point that—I don’t think I was that well
schooled to call things crime scenes back then. I think we were very much, tell me what
happened kind of a thing.

RV: Kind of write up the incident.
JS: Well, yeah. I did some testifying once during my time at up at Bong Son. I
did end up having done one court martial.

RV: Really?
JS: Yeah.

RV: Okay. Do you remember what that was about?
JS: That was an infantry platoon that was a LRRP (long-range reconnaissance
patrols). Do you remember the LRRPs?

RV: Long range patrols.
JS: Long range reconnaissance patrols. They were out and they went into this
village. It was alongside a little river. I remember the woman’s name. Her name was Do
Thi Duc. Gosh, why should I remember that?

RV: Do Thi Duc?
JS: You know, I didn’t know that until you just mentioned it. They went into this little hamlet and raped this woman, tied her husband up in mosquito netting and rolled him down an embankment into a river and he almost drowned. So those guys ended up at a court martial in An Khe. I remember I had to fly to An Khe.

RV: Did you witness a lot of this quote unquote, “atrocity,” type action?

JS: No. No I didn’t. I think that was one. I had left just before My Lai. My Lai was about twenty miles up the road from where we were. I had left before that. I don’t know if I’d been involved in that or not. But no. I’m sure they were there. I’m positive they were there. Its just I didn’t see any of them and I committed none and never need to.

RV: Well, this is kind of the stereotype of—some people’s stereotype of Vietnam veterans and the soldiers there. They were just over there raping and killing everyone.

You, as an MP, would have a really good insight into that kind of activity.

JS: Yes. We would have been the first ones to know, sure.

RV: How did you get around town? Were you on bicycle?

JS: No, Jeeps. We had five or six Jeeps assigned to us.

RV: Did you feel safe riding around in the civilian population?

JS: Yes.

RV: No threat from any Viet Cong there in the city?

JS: No. There was, unbeknownst to us, there was an underground communication system amongst the Vietnamese that when the VC were in town, they’d send signals back to the police chief in one way or another through a runner or through lights. I remember one night there was a bunch of candles out on the streets. I said, “What the hell is going on?” The chief came down and said, “The VC are in town.” I said, “Oh, shit.”

RV: Any incidents?

JS: What the hell is going on now? They were coming in town to have drinks and find the whores.

RV: Oh, yeah?

JS: Sure. Same thing the Americans did, sure. Came into town. Where I was though, the town was off limits after sunset. Sunset, that was it. There was no electricity, not to mention that the VC came to town and said, “It’s our turn now.”

RV: So they would come at night mostly.
JS: I suspect they did. I don’t really have any hard information to corroborate that, but I suspect they did.

RV: I know you wrote in your questionnaire, you answered some stuff about some combat you were in. I want to ask you about that, but specifically, can you evaluate the Viet Cong and the NVA? What was the enemy like to you?

JS: I can't tell you the veracity from a fighting stance. I can tell you that I’ve talked to them afterwards and I think they were caught up. Gosh, I hate to sound like a— but I think they were caught up in a similar thing. I’m not sure. It goes back to my philosophy today as opposed to back then. I’m not sure why we were there. I think maybe they felt the same way, too, but unfortunately, some didn’t make it. Some of us didn’t make it. I was determined to. Of course, the longer you’re there, the more determined you become, especially, we’re getting down close to thirty days, sixty days before you're going home. Boy, the anticipation of going home is incredible. The anxieties about going home were overwhelming. As loosey goosey as you may have played it the previous eight, nine, ten months, the last couple, it gets real close to the chest.

RV: What did you do specifically to protect yourself as you were getting short?

JS: I think I was more cognizant about it. I don’t know if I did anything differently. I didn’t hide out or say, “Oh, gosh. I can't go out today. I’m too short.” I don’t know if I did anything totally different other than being extremely aware.

RV: Did the other guys who knew you were short, did they kind of try to protect you or keep you out of some of the front line or the more difficult jobs?

JS: No. We all did it. In fact, I had what, I’m trying to remember. It was January thirteenth or January eleventh when they got in that, when they attacked us there. I had five weeks, six weeks to go. Shit. I thought, oh, Christ I’ve come all this way and these goof balls are going to get me now.

RV: You said you were able to talk to the enemy afterward. What do you mean by that?

JS: Well, we captured a couple. Talking to them, not like you and I certainly, but you can see them and you can see that unlike them flashes in the pan in the middle of the night, you can see they’re human beings just like you were.
RV: Right. Did you develop any kind of relationship with any of them as you’re guarding them or around them?

JS: The enemy?

RV: Yeah.

JS: Oh, no. No, certainly not.

RV: So you were describing mainly the South Vietnamese that you came across that were kind of caught up in it?

JS: When I talk about I got to know them, I don’t think I meant from a personal standpoint. I mean, I’ve talked to them, seen them even though it may have been momentarily after the battle, but I have seen them dead and alive. But no, the South Vietnamese, we had a relationship with them obviously.

RV: Right. What did you think of ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) and the other South Vietnamese military forces?

JS: The ARVN?

RV: Yeah.

JS: I didn’t have much exposure to them. But I think what I did have was probably a marginal kind of impression about them. I thought they were all—they’re culture was so unlike ours. They were pretty boys. I mean, they liked the uniform and wanted to go marching around town. It’s a strange thing.

RV: Okay. We were talking earlier about you have now fond memories of this night. Explain that to me.

JS: For a great number of years after I came back, in fact there were a number of years I didn’t want to remember it. Then there were just some where people would say or I joined a number of the veteran’s groups and all that, “Oh, you were in Vietnam?” “Oh, yes I was. No big deal, dah, dah, dah.” Because I was a policeman all those years and probably doing damn near as crazy stuff as I did over there. But now as I’ve grown older, I think about it everyday in a positive way, not in a negative way. But I think about it all the time.

RV: What do you think about?

JS: I relive the relationships. I relive, although the faces are blank to me in many ways, but I yearn to find these people. In fact, I’ve done a little bit of searching and to
relive that. The older you get, I think it becomes almost impossible. It becomes
unbelievable. Did I really do that? Was I really nineteen once, that kind of thing. But no,
I think about it all the time. I have a sizeable interest of going back. When I heard you
say you were in Nha Trang, I thought, wow, how lucky. I would love to do that some
day, dearly love to.

RV: That’s interesting because when I’ve interviewed veterans in the past, I don’t
get that they try to think about it or that they do think about it all the time. I know they
have said that they think about it often, but it’s very much usually in a negative light.
JS: No. I don’t think about it negative at all. I can't sit there and tell you that I
enjoyed doing some of the things that had to be done as a survival issue. But I have used
every second of that two years I spent in that Army and the year in Vietnam in a positive
light. I’m very proud to be a Vietnam veteran and I think there are fewer of us than what I
really think. I was reading a story the other day in the paper that there’s only 2.3 million
of us out of the population that are Vietnam veterans. Gosh, back then you just thought
everybody and their brother was in the Army, but it’s actually a miniscule number.

RV: That’s part of why we’re doing this oral history project is to get these stories
down while the population is shrinking, the Vietnam veteran population is shrinking.
JS: I’m very proud to be that. That’s why I’m not ashamed of anything that I’ve
ever done there and I think about it frequently. If I have a stressful moment, a tense
moment or I can't sleep at night or tossing and turning on the pillow, my thoughts will
turn to that. My thoughts turn to that.

RV: What do you see? Do you see the POW camp? Do you see—?
JS: Well, I see different events, what you and I have talked about in this time is
scant compared to all the things that have happened or all the things that did happen, but I
go over certain events, certain things. It’s almost, I don’t know, melancholy.

RV: Did you form some significant relationships with your fellow soldiers there?
JS: Once again, I’m very guilty and I could just kick myself in the ass for this, I
have no names, no names and no addresses. I was so eager to come home and so want to
just get the hell out of there that you don’t take the time to establish that. That’s so
critical as we grow older. But there’s a friend in Dayton that I met this summer. We had
lunch in Columbus that I was over there with, a good fellow by the name of Billy Ring. I
had talked to him a couple of times since we were over there in ’68. Just recently I found
another guy in Pittsburgh, or I’m sorry, in eastern Pennsylvania, that we were there, that
was there at the same time. So yes.

RV: Let me ask you a little bit about just kind of your basic life there. Did you
have enough supplies at all times, ammunition, clothing, food?

JS: Ammunition wasn’t a big—it was big, but it wasn’t a daily need for us. I had
a laundry bag—excuse me—a water proof laundry bag. We would go to, whenever
things on our daily chores, Billy Ring and I, we’d stop by at grave registration. I’d always
pick up the ammo that was already in the magazines. I’d throw them in this laundry bag. I
carried this laundry bag. It was a good sized laundry bag. I’d fill this damn thing up. On
that September, on that January eleventh date it came to play because I was already
loaded. I was just cramming and shooting, cramming and shooting. I crammed a full
magazine of tracers and when I shot those tracers, there was a Shell gas station down the
street from us and they had blown this Shell gas station up. You could see them running
from the high school across the street back to the Shell gas station. It was like shooting at
the local amusement park just shooting away. Then I fired these tracers, thirty tracers
came out in a solid stream of red and it wasn’t like ten seconds later a B-40 rocket hit our
bunker.

RV: Because they were following those tracers.

JS: They followed those tracers and this B-40 rocket hit the bunker and it blew
the sand bags back into my face. All these grains of sand hit my face and I thought, holy
shit. I’m shot. I’ll never forget. I put my hand across my forehead and looked and there
was not blood. I said, “Oh. Okay. Back to work.” I had a couple hundred in there and I
just fired. I had to throw the rifle away, the machine gun away the next day. The barrel
was too warped.

RV: Wow. We don’t have time to get into that tonight. We can talk about it next
time.

JS: No. Some other time.

RV: Yeah. Definitely. Definitely. Okay. We’ll go ahead and end this first session
now. Thank you Mr. Shannon and we’ll sign off here for now.

JS: All right.
Interview with Jim Shannon  
Session [2] of [#]  
Date: November 20, 2002

Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with Mr. Jim Shannon. I am on the campus of Texas Tech University in the Special Collections Library interview room. It is Wednesday, November 20, 2002 at approximately 8:40AM Central Standard Time. Mr. Shannon, you are in Ohio.

Jim Shannon: Yes.

RV: Yes and tell me again where you are.

JS: I’m in Canton.

RV: You’re in Canton. Okay. So we left off talking about some different instances, but I wanted to go back and kind of expand on your service there with service as a liaison to the Vietnamese National Police there. This was in Bong Son. Is that correct?

JS: Yes.

RV: Why don’t we start there and kind of describe what your duties were again?

JS: When I first went to the field, I don’t know, probably March or April of 1967, I was stationed at, or assigned to a POW camp in Bong Son kind of like on the river. I can't remember the name of the river, but it was a pretty good sized river. I was there for about a month and primarily guard duty, perimeter guard duty and so forth. I think the platoon that I was with had responsibility for one end of the camp. Then I ended up going downtown to the National Police station where we had a squad of MPs that lived and interacted and worked directly with the National Police. To kind of give you an idea of what you can equate that to with what we know, the Binh Dinh Province was where I was. It was broken down into Quang Nhi district which you might be able to perhaps relate as a county. So the National Police Chief, the local police chief was king. He did everything. He was judge, jury, and executioner. In fact, its ironic. After we talked last time I was going through my mind trying to think of some other events. I can't ever remember seeing a judge or hearing a trial at their level at their level, at the local level. But he was pretty much the top dog. He had a number of police that worked for him. I remember they drove green and white Land Rovers. They conducted some, what we
might think as routine or normal police business. They monitored the whores that would come to town and some of the thievery that was going on. They did some things directed towards the Viet Cong as well. They did some searches, some raids on smaller villages outside of Bong Son. They also ran what was called a CD (civil dependent’s) camp. That was directly behind the jail. I can give you some dimensions. The National Police Station was a stucco building of—it almost looked like it was Mexican. It was a stucco building and it had two small wings on it, some normal office space and then behind it there was an open field. Then behind that was what we called a CD camp or a Civil Dependent’s Camp. That was Vietnamese Nationals who aided the Viet Cong. They weren’t themselves Viet Cong or North Vietnamese but they aided, provided them shelter, food that kind of thing. When they detected them they would put them in this camp. This whole police station with the exception of the front gate, this whole compound was surrounded by a moat. I think it was probably about ten, twelve feet deep. It had German concertina wire or razor wire submerged and then of course other razor wire that was visible. That somehow, that was security. There were guard towers in the back and so forth. There was about five or six hundred there when I was there. It ranged in around that number and it was just like people that lived there. They didn’t know. They probably would have been better there than where they came from. But anyway, he did that just to set that up for you. Of course we supported him in several things. He did a lot of—I remember one instance where a young kid and they called juvenile delinquents there, they called them cowboys.

RV: Who did? The Americans or the—?

JS: No. No. The Vietnamese did. Where they picked that up, I have no idea. But they called the juvenile delinquents cowboys. I remember one day finding this, I would guess perhaps a ten or eleven year old kid who stole some tools out of an Army truck. So the driver of the truck caught him and held him and myself and Billy Ring went down and picked him up and took him back and gave him to the National Police. I remember this one guy put this—I don’t know what you would call it—some bamboo sticks that are tied together at one in. They would interlace that through your fingers and then squeeze at the other end and then of course it would break your finger. They broke all these kids fingers and called his parents or his mom or whatever and then sent him home. I thought
it’s really a crazy way, but they dealt out the sentence right then, too. He had a lot—the
chief, in fact, I had been home about a year or out of the Army about a year or so and I
got—he was probably the only one I really befriended there. I got an invitation to attend
his birthday party.

RV: You were home in the States?
JS: I was home in the States, yeah. I got an invitation to attend his birthday party.
He was very Americanized. He obviously had been to America and had been around
Americans quite a bit. He spoke English quite well. So he was very, very good with us.
They did interrogations in this one room at the police station. They did interrogations
where there was a big wooden table and they would lie the interrogatee down on the flat
on his back on this table and handcuff him to some big bolts that were in the end and then
torture information out of him.

RV: Arms by his side or over his head?
JS: Over his head, almost like a spread eagle reverse. Many a time, they carried
them out, put them in a Jeep and gone. So things weren’t quite the same as what we were
accustomed to. In a sense it took some adjusting to understand that, but that was the way
they lived there.

RV: What kind of torture did you see them implement?
JS: They used a rag and would pour water over this rag. I can’t remember, but
they put something on this rag, some soap or some kind of soap or something that would
cause bubbles or whatever. It would go down in your esophagus and down towards your
stomach and drown you because you could swallow as much as they were pouring. Then
you talked. Then you talked. It was quite simple.

RV: Were these the cowboys or were these the—?
JS: No. These were suspected Viet Cong. Where we were, the activity in the
Bong Son plain there, the activity was very strong. That was the reason for some thirty
thousand troops in and around that area. It was pretty big. He gathered a lot of
intelligence that way and for his own purposes.

RV: Did he meet with the upper echelon of American commanders in that area to
give them the intelligence or were you given that intelligence?
JS: No. You know, I was just thinking if he did it was very secretive. I don’t remember him ever going anywhere or seeing brass come to our place. No. Brass never came to us. I mean the highest guy we saw, our lieutenant, maybe once a week he’d drift in. But, no, I don’t remember him sharing that. Now, there was a group of Koreans that were also stationed nearby and a group of Turks that were stationed nearby. They had some liaison affairs with the chief. The Koreans had an MP company. They had an MP squad there because we dealt with them a number of times.

RV: What did you think of the Koreans?

JS: I thought they were, compared to the Vietnamese, they were much more elite. I mean, they looked good. They seemed to know what they were doing, especially the Korean MPs. I mean, the Korean MPs, they commanded that respect and they got it. No. I didn’t have much to do with the run of the mill Korean soldier, but the MPs we worked with occasionally.

RV: Did you notice any corruption with this chief or any of the other Vietnamese police officers?

JS: Oh, boy. No. Nothing jumps out immediately in my mind, but I would suspect that there was. It would certainly not surprise me that there was some kind of corruption. I know he used to go out and raid—there were a number of whore houses around. God, they were all over the place. I know he would go out every once in a while and he would raid these whore houses. I couldn’t ever understand why he did that, number one, because he’d let them go. So I don’t know if that was just to say, look if you don’t drop me some cash, you're history. I can ruin your business at any time. I don’t know if he did it for that purpose or not. But I remember the hamlet chiefs from the smaller burgs outside of town would come in and see him quite often. I think when I was there, I think there was legitimate strong support for the Americans. I think they acted as his eyes and ears. Not to get ahead of myself, because I want to try to deal with this chronologically, but a couple of weeks before that horrendous attack we underwent that night, he had gotten some information about that. He had relayed it to us that there was a major buildup and we should expect to get attacked because what they were doing, essentially what the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were doing is they were breaking into all these police station and overrunning all these police stations and freeing
the civil dependents. They needed that logistical pipeline again. Quite frankly I think we had done a fairly good job of stopping that or at least putting a substantial dent in it. Because they had overrun and we had got that information many, many times when they’d overrun a police station. We would know about that obviously because that would be helping survival. What are we going to do? That kind of thing. But he was very good to us. I can't say anything bad about him. He didn’t have anything to offer us other than the wonderful comforts of sleeping in a cot in a tent in this parking lot. That was kind of rude or crude. Eventually, and I don’t remember how this happened, but there were six rooms. Eventually about a month before I was scheduled to even start thinking about going home, we moved into these rooms so we had a private bedroom. We finally got hot water. We never had—we didn’t have a shower much less hot water. For about seven or eight months there we washed out of a well or at the end of the day, it was a very dirty place in terms of dust and there was no paved roads then. Part of our daily function at the end of the day was to drive the jeeps down to the river and wash the jeeps off and just bathe at the same time in that filthy, filthy, infested water. It was terrible because that was their sewer system. It was terrible. But you know, when you're nineteen and twenty years old, you can do that sort of thing. But that was some of our role there. I know there wasn’t much traditional law enforced. I mean, we didn’t have armed robberies and we didn’t have burglaries. But we had occasional fights between guys and we had just a ton of accidental shootings. We had some suicides. We had some unexplained deaths that happened out in the field where a single shot and somebody’s dead. Whether or not that was the enemy or whether or not that was reprisal for one thing or another, it was very difficult to tell. But we did some black marketing cases. Eventually, we got a CID (Criminal Investigation Division) agent that came up probably in the summer of ’67. His name was Ed Walsh and did some investigations. I worked closely with him for a couple of three months before I left.

RV: Would you say that most of your cases were with Vietnamese or with Americans?

JS: No. We did Americans. Of course, in the black market area, there was a pro jurisdiction there where the Vietnamese had an interest in that too. But predominantly or primarily, our interest was in Americans. There was a lot of black market. It was very
well known that seventy percent of the equipment, logistical supplies and so forth that
came over there never made it to us. It was all taken at the docks and put into the
underground. I remember there was a thing called a survival knife. It was like nine tools
in one or something like that. Everybody wanted one. They were issues, standard issue,
but you couldn’t get one. I ended up having to buy one at the local market down the street
and poncho liners. We wanted poncho liners because they were soft and you could put
them on your air mattress and it helped it a lot. You couldn’t find them because
everybody was—they were actually just big quilts is what they were, but they would be
stolen and turned into jackets and shirts and everything else. The enemies were very
innovative. I’ve seen them build houses that probably exist in some parts of this country
out of beer cans by flattening them out and connecting them together, using old ammo
boxes. You can imagine how many ammo boxes, wooden ammo boxes that that area
went through. They would build houses out of those. They were very, very innovative
people. In fact, I remember one night and I wish I could remember the outcome. It was
dark and it got dark there rather early. It was dark there by 6:30. I remember we got a call
that a convoy—and many of the convoys that went right in front of us up Highway 1
came from Qui Nhon and right up Highway 1 and north. The trucks would be 100, 120
trucks in this convoy. They would get spread out, really spread out. There were three or
four roads that went to different little hamlets between Qui Nhon, actually between LZ
Uplift which was about half way to Qui Nhon which was sixty miles probably and us.
There were two or three roads that went off into the boondocks into these hamlets and so
forth. We got a call that a truck, a deuce and a half was missing. It was in the middle of
the convoy, but the convoy got so spread out that it was missing. It never showed up in
the convoy. I thought, how in the hell can that happen? So we put our M-60 on the back
of the jeep, the pod on the back of the jeep. It was armor plated but not that well. It might
have stopped a couple of things. It’s dark and we’re loading up and we’re going to go
find this truck. There were two jeeps like that. We’d go along and we never did find it.
But we always thought a new bus would show up in town a couple of days later. We
always thought the deuce and a half was—they get the frame on that and just put another
top on it. We never found the truck.

RV: Do you think it went down one of these side roads?
JS: Yeah. Never found the guy either as far as I know.

RV: The American driver?

JS: Yeah, the American driver. He may still be listed, I don’t know. Strange things like that happened. We lost the truck and crazy. They had just started to pave Highway 1 when I was leaving. About a month before I left they started paving it and they put asphalt down. Well, it took away all that dirt. When it rained—because that was the primary traffic on that road everyday, two convoys coming up from Qui Nhon. It was a mess.

RV: I can imagine.

JS: Absolute mess.

RV: Let me ask you about the barter system. I’ve heard a lot of veterans talk about basically, they couldn’t get equipment in the field that they wanted such as this all in one, all purpose knife, survival knife. They would go to their CO (commanding officer) and say, “Okay, we’ve got this. Can I take it? Can we trade it behind the scenes for this knife or whatever?” Did you see a lot of this barter between American forces?

JS: Yeah. I don’t know if I saw it, but it was quite common. In a way, it was overlooked even by the authorities and by the ranking officers it was overlooked because you needed that stuff. If you found something in the open market that you needed and something they wanted, you’d trade it. Yeah. You’d trade it.

RV: Was that illegal? Would you have had to do something about that?

JS: I’m sure it was illegal. I guess it wasn’t looked upon as criminal. It was very, very hard to convince when you're talking to guys that are in the field and may be killed in one day and maybe live the whole damn time and be screwed up for the rest of their life, it’s very hard to apply home behavior to them. Do you understand what I mean?

RV: Yes.

JS: A lot of things that even they would have considered illegal and improper and wrong back here was condoned and accepted in a combat zone like that. Not so much in the rear area in Nha Trang and those places, but when you're out in the field or at the base camps like that or in the landing zones, that kind of behavior, it was very, very hard to convince them, hey, you’re not allowed to shoot your lieutenant, that kind of thing.

RV: Right. Did you ever investigate any fragging incidents?
JS: Well, that’s what I kind of meant when they’d have a combat death, an unexplained combat death where there would have been a single shot, sniper out of a tree or something like that or the grenade rolls in the tent. Yes. I can think of a couple of instances that happened. Nothing ever came of that because no one would talk about it. It was a very close knit society, much closer than you would ever, ever understand. It was very, very hush mouth. It just happened. It just happened. That’s why I think I told you earlier that you should take the fifty-five thousand and divide it by two. That’s how many the enemy killed, that’s how many we killed although I think that’s an exaggerated statement, but it serves the purpose of saying that there were many, many, many, even just in the little district I was in, many, many, many non-combat deaths even from motor vehicles even rolling jeeps over and deuce and a halves flipping over a hill. I remember they flew us up to—we had to go by helicopter up north of—I think we were almost to Red Beach up near Da Nang. Highway I went by the ocean right there and it was a big sizeable drop off almost like the pacific coast highway if you can picture that. No guard rails and nothing. I mean, the road was crude, unimproved. I remember the—it’s either a bus or a deuce and a half that had some Marines in it that went over the side of this embankment and killed like sixteen of them, sixteen or eighteen guys. I remember they flew us up there to do that, Billy Ring and I. They dropped us off and said, “We’ll be back to get you.” I said, “Huh?” “We’ll be back to get you before dark.” So we’re done and we’re sitting around waiting and everything’s been—they’ve all been extricated and gone. We’re finishing our report and here comes the helicopter back. I remember this so vividly now for two reasons, the terrible tragedy and the guy lands, we get in. I can't get my seatbelt buckled. He’s lifting off and we’re going out over the ocean because he’s going to circle back around and go right back down Highway 1 again, follow Highway 1. I can't get the damn thing buckled and he banks to the right and I’m telling you, that open door and that ocean and no seatbelt on, it scared the living shit out of me. Oh, my God. I said, “What the hell am I doing?” We go back to LZ English and get dropped off and that was that. But I remember that incident stands out in my mind. I remember we had a homicide and I’m trying to think of the circumstance. But I remember—I don’t think I investigated it, but I did, myself and one of the other guys had to take the guy back to An Khe where he was going to be held and then shipped down to Long Binh. Long Binh I
think is where they had the major jail near Saigon. I remember the helicopter pilot that
was flying us back to An Khe. It was dark and wouldn’t let us close the door, the doors
on either side. I asked him why and he said, “That son of a bitch killed this guy. I’m not
going to take any chances. So if he gives you guys any shit, just push him out.” I thought,
you’ve got to be kidding me. Anyway, we safely landed. That’s some of that stuff that
you think about today. Of course, you’ve prompted a lot of things with the questions and
so forth, but I remember that vividly.

RV: Did you ever work with any canine units?
JS: No. Never saw any dogs. Never saw a dog. Well, I saw Vietnamese dogs, but
never cats. There were no cats. Don’t ask me why. I saw a wild—I don’t know if you call
it a wildcat. Maybe it was kind of a tiger or something.

RV: Yeah. They have tigers there for sure.
JS: Yeah. That the Vietnamese had caught out in the jungle and they brought it
into town in this little square where the two roads came together. They displayed it there.
I thought, how weird. Then the snakes, the rats were the big thing.

RV: Tell me about the rats.
JS: The rats were small dogs. They were real furry, real hairy unlike the local
mouse that we see here. These things were serious. They lived—because there was so
much garbage everywhere. It was so damn unsanitary. They often came out of the moat
that surrounded the jail. I remember vividly, some nights we’d sit and shoot at them. The
bullets from our .45s—we never shot at them with the M-16s or anything—but with the
.45s the bullets would bounce off the sides of these guys.

RV: Really?
JS: Yeah.

RV: They’d go back in the water. We were sleeping. My tent was right up against
the razor wire. God almighty, I think about that crap today. One time there was a snake.
You could tell when they’d find snakes. There was a whole bunch of ruckus out on the
street out in front of the police station. We’d go out there. There was a snake and they all
Remember I told you there was a sergeant that kind picked on us a little bit. I
remembered his name. His name was Mazolla. We put it on the toilet that was out behind
the police station, put the snake in the—it was just like an outside outhouse. An outhouse
you’d expect to have seen fifty, sixty years ago. We put it there. He went out to use the
bathroom that night and you could hear him shoot this damn thing about three times.
(Both laugh)
RV: You guys were rolling I’m sure.
JS: Oh. He said, of course, “Goddamn it! Who did that? I want to know right now
so I can have you. Grrrrrrrr.”
RV: You didn’t say a word did you?
JS: Hell no. Nobody said anything so that was a nice day. But there were some
funny, funny things. If you didn’t make the best of it and if you don’t make the best of
the memories or of the experience, I think you make a mistake. Obviously, some people
can't. I think for a while that I had—and I’m getting off the point here, but I kind of ran
into a time, maybe twenty, twenty-five years ago that it bothered me a lot. Then I
gradually—
RV: Do you remember why?
JS: No. You know, I really don’t. I really don’t. In fact, I have no remorse or no
regret about anything I ever did there. I told you before that I’ve used it and continued to
use that as a positive thing. In many, many ways I use it. Sometimes I say, “I did that?” I
can't even believe it.” Now you look at yourself in latter years and you say, “I did that?”
But we were all fifty pounds lighter and a whole lot younger and a lot more open minded
perhaps than we are today. No. I never regret doing anything there. Hell, no. I came
home. That was my goal. That was my goal, not to get dusted in that damn little hell of a
place.
RV: Did you guys have any pets there with you at the police station or anywhere
else while you were there?
JS: No. I never saw them. I never saw American women and no pets unless the
rats were pets. They had little lizards, what we would think of as chipmunks.
RV: Little geckos.
JS: Yeah. Little geckos. They had those and monkeys, a lot of monkeys. I’m
trying to think of what else was there and I can't.
RV: I was going to ask you another subject, but go ahead with your train of thought.

JS: I’m trying to think of the highlighted events that happened that year in somewhat of a chronological stage. I remember speaking of a little hamlet chief that lived out in the countryside. I remember the chief asking us to go out to this one hamlet with a couple of his guys to look into an explosion or something. I can't exactly remember, but it was about ten miles out into the jungle on this road. We got there and sure as hell there was probably twenty-five or thirty half ass grass huts lining both sides of the street. Then there was a bigger house that had a little more room. It was the hamlet chief’s house. VC had booby trapped a door with some kind of a large bomb or some kind of a large explosive device. When his daughter came out of the house, she triggered this thing and it just blew her to smithereens. He had the remains of her in a box there. I remember that as a way they intimidated the locals to, “side with the Americans, see what happens,” that kind of thing. Yes. I remember that pretty vividly. I remember it might have been the first time in my life—well I don’t think first time, but that whole year was like the first time in my life of seeing dead people. I remember she had a big gap where a piece of shrapnel just went from right below her neck to all the way down into her stomach and into her groin that just laid wide open. I thought, what the hell is this?

RV: How did you deal with the death around you and the bodies that you saw?

JS: Hell, I don’t know. Once again, there’s a whole lot of difference in being young and somewhat naive and being older now and dealing with it. That’s one reason why I retired early from the sheriff because I was just sick and tired of it. I had been on the front line now, whether it be Vietnam or the Washington riots or the sheriff for thirty-two years and the party was over.

RV: You got tired of seeing the destruction?

JS: Oh, just tired of it. I have posttraumatic syndrome now, I say this with tongue-in-cheek, from my work locally, from being a cop here locally.

RV: Worse than your experience in Vietnam.

JS: More so than my Vietnam experience twenty times over. It’s worse when I think about the inhumanities to men that we can accomplish and the stupidity that we
have here locally or within this country I should say. But anyway, it’s neither here nor there.

RV: Let me ask you a little bit about some general questions. What kind of food did you guys eat?

JS: We had two choices. We could eat on the open market which on occasion I did. I would say maybe once every couple of weeks. There was one little restaurant downtown that was kind of neat. They cooked a—and I’ve tried to duplicate it a couple of times—they cooked over a ceramic pot and they had water buffalo and rice and tomatoes and onions and they cooked it all together. It was absolutely delicious and I’ve never been able to duplicate it.

RV: You’re missing the water buffalo.

JS: Yeah. I guess using steak isn’t quite the same. But that was another one of our big complaints, too. More often than not, a farmer would come into town and bitch to the chief that the guys from the helicopter had shot his water buffalo.

RV: Just for the hell of it?

JS: Yeah. Just buzzing off, crazy. But the mess hall was at LZ Two Bits which is about two miles up the road. The 545th MP Company was up there. They primarily, what they did was escorted convoys. They had a mess hall, a mess tent up there where we ate there. I’ll never forget, everyday, every single day was cherry Kool-aid, warm cherry Kool-aid. I mean it was the craziest thing in the world, warm cherry Kool-aid. The food, I guess, was okay. I have very little memory of the food, very little memory. But I do remember outside the mess tent, there was a platoon of infantry guys getting ready to go to the bush and they were going to eat first. So they had—you know what I mean by their shoulder straps, their packs and all that stuff—and they took them off and they laid them down in formation and they went in to eat. When they came out, they went to put them back over the shoulders and two got intertwined and pulled the pin on a grenade and killed six of them.

RV: Oh, God.

JS: It was terrible.

RV: You saw this happen?
JS: I didn’t see it happen, but I went there. It was terrible to see guys killed and hurt and maimed like this. Well, anyway. See, is my statement, divide them in two, becoming more true as I go through this?

RV: Yeah. It sure is.

JS: I’m telling you it was difficult. A Buddhist monk one day, the Buddhist had a big parade going through town, a Buddhist Monk and nobody ever sees this. They see this one movie or this one news clip where the Buddhist Monk sets himself on fire, did it up there right in the middle of downtown, did it up there.

RV: Did you see that?

JS: Yeah. Oh, yeah. The aftermath of it. There wasn’t much I didn’t see. That was part of the job.

RV: Right. What would you do when you would go into a scene like that where the monk burned himself or where the infantrymen had blown themselves up? You were right on the scene after the fact, what would you do?

JS: Well, we would try to figure out what had happened. Most everything was taken care of by the medics and things like that. There want much to—there wasn’t law enforcement traditionally as we think of it here. I mean, the crime scene wasn’t secured off and photographed and all these other things. It was more or less a pick up the pieces kind of thing trying your best to find out what happened and make your report and dah, dah-dah, dah-dah. There wasn’t any, “Well, don’t touch anything,” or, “Let’s take fingerprints here.” In fact, I don’t know if we even had that capability. I can't even remember. I know we sent some ballistic evidence to Japan one time, but I can't even remember if we got it back or not. But memory fades.

RV: Did you have enough supplies while you were there?

JS: Yes. But I think only because of who we were. If you’re talking about supplies in terms of personal items like paper, pencil, cigarettes, candy, that sort of thing. RV: Everything.

JS: More than plenty because of who we were. The guys in the convoy would stop and there were half a dozen of us. I think I told you there was half a dozen of us there and they’d throw each one of us a sundry box. That sundry box was supposed to be for a damn squad and we each had one. I took out the Luckies and gave the rest to the
hospital down the street. Clothing, yeah I had plenty of clothing. Ammo was not a problem. In fact, the craziness, the guy loading the ammo truck, I told you that too, I think, where his M-16 rams into the tailgate of the deuce and a half as he’s loading up. Why in the hell he’s got it slung over his shoulder I don’t know. Anyway he shoots himself through the cheek and he’s got like two days to go or three days before he’s going home, kills himself. Goofiness. But we had plenty of supplies in terms of that. I don’t remember wanting except for that survival knife, the Cadillac kinds of things.

RV: What kind of weaponry did you carry?

JS: I had a .45. I had an M-16 and we had some shot guns that were available to us. We had M-60s. We had M-79s, grenade launchers. We had—we ourselves, that squad that was assigned down there to the station had one M-60. I think the National Police had several M-60s. In fact, I know they did. They had several M-60s.

RV: What did you prefer to use when you were—?

JS: I liked that M-16. It was—the two or three times I ever shot it and of course the one night extensively, it performed adequately. I mean, it jammed a couple of times, but you were prepared for that. Everybody had a cleaning rod.

RV: Are you talking about the M-60 or M-16?

JS: Sixteen.

RV: Sixteen.

JS: Occasionally it jammed and you just ran the cleaning rod through it, pumped the shell out and off you went again. But you had to have that available and you had to know about it first of all.

RV: Were there any weapons that you did not have that you would like to have had?

JS: No.

RV: Besides your utility knife.

JS: Yeah, my nine knives in one or whatever the hell it was. No, not really. I think it was pretty much—I was pretty satisfied with what we had.

RV: So after you do the liaison duty with the National Police there, what did you do after that? Was that your duty through February ’68?
JS: Yes. Well, the Cav had moved out. We’re probably into the fall, early winter of ’67 now. The Cav had moved north. The Americal division came in and took over some of the Cav’s area of responsibility, area of operation and some of the LZs and so forth. But primarily, I think three battalions—the four battalions there and I think three of the Cav’s battalions moved north. So things kind of got slow and so on and so forth. The VC activity when the Cav moved out really picked up. That’s when the police station started getting bumped off as I told you before in a couple of weeks in advance of this January eleventh battle. The police chief got information that they were building up to attack us. That’s probably where we’re at now. But a couple of days before we got attacked, a sniper shot one of the tower guards off, the Vietnamese tower guards off in the back of the compound. So we knew that something was afoot because it wasn’t supposed to happen like that.

RV: Did you worry about snipers a lot?
JS: Yes. I was real short then. I was getting down to a month, month and a half, probably a month and five weeks before going back to Nha Trang to sign out. So I was starting to get a little nervous when all these things were picking up. So on the night in question, I was sleeping and somebody came back and woke me up. Just as I was getting up, it was about midnight, a B-40 rocket hit the front of the police station. If you remember I told you the thing was made out of stucco and this crap just flew everywhere. So I grabbed my M-16 and my helmet and dressed as rapidly as I could and ran out to a bunker, above ground bunker that we had right at the front gate. There were two National Policemen out there and a couple of—we had what they called PFs (Popular Forces).

Have you ever heard of that term?
RV: Yes.
JS: Popular Forces, PFs. There was a contingent of PFs that were there and they had like 1940s French rifles and they were doing whatever they could do. We had the gate wired with claymores and everything like that. So we were in pretty good shape. Our generators were still working. So we had lights that extended out considerably. Right next door to us was a rather sizeable one story school house. It was probably fifteen, eighteen rooms all in one floor. It had a great big front yard with a number of trees in it. That was my view is that and looking north of Highway 1. I only had one magazine. So I
had to run back to my room and get my bag. I had a bag I collected all the already loaded
magazines. I thought, thank God I got these things. So this battle goes on and we’re
firing, we’re firing.

RV: Was this your very first experience in combat?

JS: No. That extensive, yes. We’d been sniped at a couple of times when we were
out in the An Lo Valley helping the engineers blow up tunnels. We provided them
security for a few times when they were blowing up tunnels. We got sniped at a couple of
times and shot back. But actually seeing them, this was the first time. There was a hotel,
about a six-story hotel right across the street from us and they had gotten on the roof of
this hotel and they were shooting these B-40 rockets. Fortunately there were some trees
in our compound so they couldn’t get that great of a look see into it. About a half hour
into the battle, we put a lot of fire up on to that roof and that stopped it.

RV: Were you able to call in any air support or arty?

JS: We were right downtown, I mean, right downtown.

RV: What are you going to do?

JS: You blow up all the civilians? The civilians had lighted candles all in the
fronts of their buildings, shops, little houses lined up and down the street. They did that
for two reasons, to alert you that the VC were in town and to alert you so that you could
see better. But they had blown up the Shell gas station and the flames were flying high.
So they illuminated themselves pretty well. But we did have a helicopter that about two
hours into the battle, came and dropped some flares kind of like on the outskirts, but hell,
those were dangerous in their own right. They’d burn the damn town down. Then, there
was a jewelry shop, a jewelry store directly across the street. The guy had a little cart on
wheels that he wheeled out to the street, I guess. I saw a figure dart behind it. At the same
time I saw it, this guy that was in the bunker with me, this Vietnamese guy that was in the
bunker with me saw it. So we just laid like sixty or seventy shots right into that damn
thing and killed this North Vietnamese guy that had a satchel charge in his hand. What he
was going to do was come the thirty feet across the street, throw it into the gate, blow the
gate down and then here they came. Then its hasta mañana. So I’m glad we got a look at
him. But the battle lasted until about four o’clock. Then a contingent of ARVN (Army of
the Republic of Vietnam) marched down the street because the MACV (Military
Assistance Command Vietnam) headquarters was up at the farthest end of the street close
to the river. They put together a squad or a platoon of ARVN and they came down and
kind of helped us run them out the rest of the way. We captured two, killed that one. We
were told that a couple of weeks later there was seventy or eighty dead bodies found
outside of town, although I never saw them. They were supposedly in some grave outside
of town. That’s something I could never understand that they would drag away their dead
like that and put them in mass graves. I’m not sure I ever bought into that, but that was a
harrowing night. You know, I never, ever, to this day, I never heard a shot. Something
happens and I’m not sure what the hell it is, but I never heard a shot despite all that
racquet that was going on. There were some two hundred of them that they estimated
attacked us. There was probably twenty-five of us that were inside the compound.
Everybody’s shooting them and I never heard a shot.

RV: What do you mean you didn’t hear a shot?
JS: I was so focused, so intense and so focused that I had trouble with the .45
especially. The ring of the .45 hurt my ears bad, especially in practice and on the range
and so forth. The M-16, although it didn’t hurt, but it was noisy, but you never hear a
shot. I never heard anything. I was just that focused and that determined and that scared.
Of course, I wasn’t scared until afterwards.

RV: Okay. I was going to ask you how you felt in the middle of it.
JS: What’s that?
RV: How you felt in the middle of this battle.
JS: There were lull times. I mean, it wasn’t a constant. I shot everything I had. I
shot that whole bag. There were probably a couple hundred magazines in there. I shot
that whole bag and some were 30-rounders. The barrel, the gun, the barrel was warped
the next morning. I had to get a new one. But nothing was right after that. Although we
defended our position well and drove them off, I was much too short to do that again. So
they moved us out of there. We were there I think about two more weeks. Once again, the
chief kept getting intelligence that they were going to try it again. I remember one night
we finally managed to get puff the magic dragon. Have you heard of that?

RV: Yes.
JS: I think where we were they called them spookies. We finally managed to get enough information that they would put one up. They put one up and you could just watch the red, I think every seventh round was a tracer. The noise just sounded like a fog horn off in the distance and you could see the red going into the ground. One pass on a football field divided up into a square foot and they put a shot in each square foot. So it pretty much does what you want it to do. We were never attacked again there while I was there. I stayed there about two more weeks. Of course our role primarily became one of security then as opposed to one of what we had been doing, some police work, some of this, some of that. Then they moved us to LZ English. They moved all the Americans out of the police station, the six of us that were down there and moved us up to LZ English into a compound up there. If I remember rightly, we provided security up there ‘cause then about two weeks later I went back to Nha Trang and hung out there for a couple of weeks and came home.

RV: Were you ever wounded at all?

JS: No. A beer can, a Falstaff beer can during this episode, a Falstaff beer can somehow—it wasn’t an explosion, but it was in the compound. I tripped over it and cut my ankle. I don’t really tell this story to too many people. It was a band-aid treatment. It wasn’t anything serious, but, no, that was the only injury I ever had there. Although I developed, it was so dirty and apparently the way my skin is, I developed a number of sebaceous cists. I don’t know if you know what those are, but they’re deep ingrown infections that have to be cut out surgery wise. I got to know this one doctor at the 15th Medical Battalion rather well. It was just so damn dirty there. But other than that, I was fine.

RV: Did you get to take any R&Rs?

JS: No. No. I did not do R&R because I was saving my money because I wanted a new car when I got back.

RV: Right, right. I remember we discussed that previously.

JS: Yeah. I wanted a new car. I made 263 bucks a month, tax free, kept 60 and sent 203 home. So I had some money when I got home. I don’t even know why I kept the 60. You didn’t need it.

RV: How much contact did you—
JS: Some—
RV: I’m sorry. Go ahead.
JS: Somehow I managed to spend it though.
RV: I’m sure you had opportunities to spend it there in town.
JS: There were some things. You had to pay for your haircuts. You had to get
your haircut in the local market and your cleaning unless you washed your own clothes in
that filthy ass river, but the cleaning had to be done by the locals, washed your clothes
because we were there permanently. The guys who were coming into the field, coming
back into the landing zone just got new stuff. We washed ours repeatedly.
RV: Did you ever sense any resentment from the guys who were out there
fighting day to day when they came back to the LZs and you were there, did you ever
sense any tension between field forces?
JS: Between us and them?
RV: Yes, sir.
JS: No. No. Nothing. That was a rather routine event. No, I think everybody that
was out in the field was pretty much in one boat.
RV: How much contact did you have with your family while you were there?
JS: Weekly letter, maybe a couple of letters weekly from family and friends back
home. We didn’t get mail directly up there. Our mail went to the headquarters in Nha
Trang. We had to send a courier back whenever we wanted mail. So a courier had to fly
out of LZ English down to Nha Trang and then they’d spend the night there and pick up
the mail. I did it a couple of times and then bring it back.
RV: Tell me about this tunnel work that you were guarding or helping with.
JS: We went with the 15th Engineer Battalion and they were exploding tunnels.
So they wanted some security so we got assigned to do that. It was out in the An Lo
Valley. It was way, way out, as far out in the boonies as I’ve ever been. We got our jeep
so far and then they had bulldozers of course. Then we had to walk and forge a stream
and God, I think about it today and think, oh, shit. What did we do? They were turning
over stones. There was big stones almost like huge tombstones that were covering the
openings to some of these holes. Essentially what they’d do is they just put charges down
in there and blow them up. I know they were using what’s called, I don’t know if you
ever heard of this expression, willie peters, white phosphorus. Have you heard of that?

RV: Oh, yeah.

JS: You’re right there. But they used a lot of white phosphorus. In fact, I coped a
couple of grenades from them in case we ever needed them for anything. They used a lot
of white phosphorus down in those holes and just burn the shit out of whatever was down
in there.

RV: Were you just standing guard basically?

JS: Yeah. We were just kind of watching for snipers and if there ever was one,
just return some fire up in there.

RV: And you did that?

JS: Yes. But they had bulldozers and actually it wasn’t a major project. I mean, I
think there was like five of those guys and two of us and they’re bull dozer and our jeep
and they just use it to knock over those stones, bam, throw some stuff down in there and
we’d move on.

RV: Was it a day’s job?

JS: I think we did it a couple of times. I don’t know if we did it two consecutive
days, but a couple of times we went out there with them.

RV: So there’s less than ten of you out there in the middle of nowhere. Did you
feel real vulnerable?

JS: Oh, yeah. I do today. In fact, the guy that was with me that time, Bill Ring, I
think I told you he lives down in Dayton. We visited just this past summer, first time in
twenty-five years and that was one of the events we talked about. We said, “How damn
stupid of us to go out there”—of course, we weren’t fully loaded. We didn’t bring all the
ammo we could have carried or should have carried. I mean, maybe we had like a
hundred rounds on us. Here we are out there and I think, oh my God. To do that today, I
would have been more prepared, much better prepared. But that was an interesting thing.
So when I say I was an MP over there, you did so much more than traditional police work
and what people think you do as cop work.

RV: Right. Sounds like it.

JS: Especially where we were.
RV: Did you ever encounter any race issues?
JS: No. No. I like, you, probably read more about it than I ever saw. It was like
the drug scene. I didn’t encounter the drug scene either. I read more than I ever, ever
encountered. No. I didn’t see race as an issue amongst anybody, not only us. I’m trying to
think if we even had a black fellow in our squad. I don’t think we did.
RV: How aware were you of the anti war movement that was going on back
home when you were there?
JS: We were well aware. I got a newspaper now and then from my family. They
would only send me the things that they thought, you know, the pointative things. There
was a couple of cops killed in town, they sent me that one. They sent me the riots in
Detroit because it was a big deal because they had to bring troops back from Vietnam to
go to Detroit, that kind of thing. I was aware of it. I was very much a hawk back then
RV: Have you really?
JS: Oh, Lord, yes. From that position, yes. I think it’s all in part from life
experience. Perhaps if I was a stock broker or something or doing something that you
never got involved in those kinds of things, maybe I would think differently, but no, I’ve
done a 180 from that.
RV: What did you think of the Vietnam veterans who participated in the anti war
movement?
JS: Then? I was appalled. “How dare they?” I was a staunch supportive of the
war. Primarily, I’d just gotten back. In fact, I liked the Army. I didn’t think I would, but I
liked the Army. Perhaps the only reason I didn’t stay another tour was had you re-
enlisted, you were guaranteed another shot over there. If they’d had said, “Hey, you don’t
have to go back. We promise. We’ll send you to Germany, send you here, send you
there,” I might have thought about it. I would have given it some serious thought. But to
sign up and almost guarantee that you’re going back, I said, “Hell, no. I’m not doing
that.” Just not doing that. I never really had a good assignment. All my assignments were
predicated on the riots, on negative things. I never had a permanent party assignment
where you went to a post and this was your job. You worked afternoons. You worked
this, you worked that. I never had that. It was always a mumble jumble respond or react
to the events of the day.

RV: Yeah. You got back in March of ’68 and I mean this is right at the beginning
of this very tumultuous summer of ’68.

JS: Actually, I got back in February. It was odd because it was leap year. When
you cross the date line, I’m trying to think, something happened like a day never existed
in your life or something like that because of the leap year and the date line confusion.
But when I came back, I had written a letter. Ed Walsh, the CID agent, encouraged me to
write a letter because I asked for Fort Benjamin Harrison in Indiana because it was
somewhat closer to home. You know the dream sheet that they send you, “Tell us where
you would like to go,” and as a back up one I asked for Fort Wachuka, Arizona, because I
liked the west. They sent me to Fort Dix.

RV: In Jersey.

JS: Yeah. So they sent me to Fort Dix. Ed Walsh suggested that I write the
company commander of the MP company there a letter because they had influence to get
you there if they wanted to. I did and I heard back from him and he said, “Sorry, I’m just
not doing that right now, da, da-da, da-da.” So I ended up in the 514th MP Battalion. We
essentially worked at the stockade, the Fort Dix stockade. Then on April fourth, that
infamous day, I think it was the following day, they told us to pack our duds. We’re
going to Washington, D.C.

RV: To control the riots.

JS: Yeah. Now here I had my car there. We were all—primarily that battalion
was made up of guys that had six months to go because I was scheduled to get out in
September. We were just sort of going to lay low and go to the beach all summer. Wrong.
So now they motorcade or convoy us all down in your private car. If you had a car, you
took your car. If not, you rode in a bus or something. They took us down to Fort Mead
and set us up in some old barracks at Fort Mead. Then from there we went into D.C. You
went down for a week and then came back for two and went down for a week and came
back for two. Crazy.

RV: You were at Fort Mead April to September and you got out September.
JS: I got out September 18th, 1968. I got a ticket. When we weren’t going to D.C., they had us working at the stockade there, anything to keep you busy. I mean, they couldn’t let you alone even though you’d been through Vietnam. You’re not staying. You’ve got two months to go, you think, “Hey, just lay around. Have fun. Wash your car, do something.” So they had us working at the stockade like they didn’t even need us. There were like forty prisoners and two hundred guards. I remember on my way to work one day I got stopped for speeding. It was a twenty-five mile zone. I was probably, I don’t know, thirty-five to forty, no big deal. The MP, he stopped me and he says, “Gosh,” real strict guy, “I don’t know what to do with you.” I said, “Why?” He said, “Well, you’re an MP, too.” I said, “Well, if you don’t make up your mind pretty soon, I’m going to be out of the Army.” He said, “Okay, smart aleck, come back with me.” So he took me back to the provost marshal’s office.

RV: He gave you a hard time because of that comment.

JS: Oh, yeah. They took me back to the PMO (Provost Marshal’s Office) and made the duty sergeant come and get me. So when I go to get out, on the day you get out, you sit down with this lieutenant and he goes through your file. He says, “There’s this unpaid traffic ticket in here.” I said, “Oh.” He says, “We can't let you out with this unpaid traffic ticket.” I said, “Oh.” He says, “Don’t do it again.” I said, “Okay.” He says, “That’ll be your pay.” I said, “Good-bye.” I came home. That was as much of a summer of ups and downs as Vietnam was. I guess in Vietnam you expected it, but you didn’t expect it—but it wasn’t all work. I met a number of people down there. In fact, I met a friend who was in Vietnam at approximately the same time I was and we both ended up there because of our short time left. His name was Jerry Howell. We became good friends. We met these girls and I can't even remember where in the hell it was. But they lived in New Carrollton, Maryland, which is a suburb of D.C. We befriended them and had a great summer. I mean we went to concerts. I saw The Doors in concert.

RV: Did you really?

JS: Yeah. Saw The Doors, saw The Supremes. I can't even remember who else. So we had a pretty good time and we were both getting out approximately at the same time. I think Jerry was getting out a month after I was or two weeks after I was or something like that. So I took the test for the Washington Police Department,
Metropolitan Police Department because I was going to stay. I passed and they were interested and all that other good stuff. So Jerry and I got an apartment in New Carrollton. I went home, came back and had planned to stay there and for some reason I went back home and I just never went back. I just got home sick and said, “What the hell am I doing down here?” Something came over me so I came home. Jerry went back to Springfield, Ohio, which is about three hours from here. So we stayed in touch and stayed in touch and he ended up marrying that one girl he met.

RV: Really?

JS: Yeah. He had a milk truck route in Springfield and she was a nurse and she worked at the local hospital down there. He had just bought a new, I think a new, this would have been the summer of ’70, a new Chevy Convertible and they had just had a little baby. They were out for a ride and a truck went left of center and hit them head on and killed him.

RV: Killed him.

JS: Killed him and really, really hurt her badly. The baby wasn’t with them and hurt her badly. I remember I went down there to visit her in the hospital. That was a—just recently have I tried—I have not seen her and we’re going back to 1970, somewhere in ’70 and I had not seen or heard from her since then. I knew she survived, but I always wondered what happened to her and just recently have I tried to find out, but I have run into a bunch of dead ends. Trials and tribulations.

RV: Let me ask you a few more questions about just overall ideas about Vietnam. What did you think of the leadership you had there starting with your immediate supervisors and then going up to the top military and political leadership?

JS: The first level, which would have been a sergeant, was fine. I had no problem with them. I never had any problem. I understood their function, purpose. I was never abused or treated improperly. Lieutenants, I didn’t have much contact with that second echelon. I had a couple of captains that I really liked. I got some accolades that were well presented to me and I earned a couple of medals and so forth and they had a big ceremony, in fact, in Washington. Myself and four other guys that were all in the same battalion were presented these citations and these ribbons and so forth. They made everybody put on. They were pissed off at us, boy, they made everybody put on their
khakis one Sunday afternoon, had to go to the parade field and march around and
everybody wanted to be elsewhere. I had a couple of captains that I liked that seemed
fair. But the further you went up in the ranks, it seemed the more Grandpa-ish they
became. Is that right? It seemed that they became nicer because they had no contact with
you. I mean, there was brass everywhere.

RV: Jim?
JS: Yeah.
RV: Oh, okay. I’m sorry. I thought you were going to continue.
JS: Oh, no. I’m just saying. I know I’d seen Westmorland one time, but he
doesn’t say anything to me. Today, I totally disagree with him, but I didn’t know enough
back then to disagree. The political leadership, I think, once again, I can only tell you that
back then I was a hawk. I thought Johnson was doing the right thing. I thought Nixon was
doing the right thing but little did we know. Little did we know. Today, obviously I
disagree with just about everything they did. It was a total, total sham at the cost of many,
many lives.

RV: What do you think was the most or the bravest action that you witnessed in
Vietnam?
JS: The bravest action that I witnessed. Oh, boy. I think the night that we were
attacked—the night we were attacked, I got an Army Commendation medal with a V
device for valor for my activity that night. The Sergeant Mazola I told you about earlier
got a silver star. I remember a couple of times during the battle, and it was risky, that he
would go from position to position to see if we needed more ammo or to see if everyone
was okay or hurt or whatever. That’s probably about the bravest. I never really—you
know, you do things so impulsively that bravery, somehow I can even imagine why a guy
would jump on a live grenade because its done with such impulse as opposed to logic and
fear. I mean, just do it. Crazy. Those kinds of situations that you’re thrown into like that,
and it happened many times in my civilian life, too, that logic would suddenly disappear
and you just do it.

RV: I guess that’s where the training comes in.
JS: You’re absolutely right. Training, it’s like riding a bicycle. Once you’ve
learned and you're trained how to ride the bicycle you never forget. Although training
sometimes requires repetition and so forth, but yes, you do things instinctively then. You
do things instinctively. That’s why the training, when I found out I was going to Vietnam,
I was very glad that unlike many, many people in basic and AIT (advanced infantry
training) training, they did enough to get by, I always tried to get enough to know for sure
what the hell I was doing.

RV: Smart.

JS: There was no time after that. This was it.

RV: Is there anything that you would change about your service in Vietnam
while you were there?

JS: Would I change, no. No. The service in its own right, you know, I told you
that I thought about re-enlisting. I sometimes regret not doing it even though the risk was
substantial. I sometimes regret not doing it. I really enjoyed it. This may seem crazy, but
the older I get, the more I appreciated that, the more I appreciate what was happening
back then. I’m so full of nostalgia now. I have been to every post except Fort Dix. I’ve
revisited at least twice every place I was assigned. Although the barracks aren’t there, I
hold these grounds in great, I don’t know, in great—what’s the word I’m looking for—
admiration or whatever. Just recently, recently meaning two years ago, you remember
Kent State, don’t you?

RV: Yes, sir. Of course.

JS: Kent is about twenty miles from us. About two years ago in May just before
the May fourth anniversary of that tragedy, I went up there to see it from my own eyes.
Having lived here my entire life never having been there, I went up to see it. The fifty-
five thousand daffodils that are planted. The memorial is so different because it is
actually built into the everyday use where the kids were killed in the parking lot is a
parking lot, but the space where they were killed is a monument. So you may park your
car next to the space where somebody was killed. I mean, it’s so unique. It’s so different.
Although they downplay it every year and I argue and I’ve argued publicly through the
newspapers and so forth and through this one local talk show that you shouldn’t be
downplaying that. They want to forget it. There’s a big movement to forget that, to put it
in the past. Well, that’s fine, put it in the past, but never forget it. If we forget why it
happened in the first damn place that’s a big, big mistake. But that was a tragedy that at
the time it happened, I said, “Well, too bad they didn’t get more of them.” Now, today, it sickens me that our government did that. Once again, going the 180 degrees.

RV: What did you think of the Vietnamese civilians?

JS: I thought that they were larcenous. I thought they all were out to—I never met Mr. and Mrs. Vietnamese that lived in—I don’t think I ever met any that lived a good life, even comparable, even somewhat comparable to ours. But I think they all were trying to make a buck off of us. I think there was a lot of that. I think it spread down. It spread not only from the huckster on the street or the shyster who would work in the black market and redistribute the wealth if you will, back to the everyday peasant. But you could go into a dirt hut, dirt floor, one room, grass shack out in the middle of the jungle and find six cases of C-rations. So they were all involved in the taking of everything. I mean they were all involved. Hell, there were some rumors that in some of the tunnels and not in any of the ones that I ever saw out there, but in some of the tunnels they found, they found cases upon cases of C-rations, ammo, boxes and boxes of ammo that were sold that somehow managed to get back to them. So the black market hurt everybody. I don’t know. No American money was allowed over there. If you saw anybody or anybody had American money that was a pretty serious offense. I only saw it one time. This GI had American money and of course we arrested him, turned him over to his company commander and they gave us what they would call MPCs (military payment certificate). Heard of those? Military payment certificates. Then of course you had the local currency, the money of the country which I have a few, I think they were called piasters.

RV: Or dong, Vietnamese dong.

JS: Dong. Yeah, dong. I have a few of them hanging around here in case I ever go back. But the MPCs, they paid you in MPCs.

RV: What did you think of the media coverage of the war?

JS: I think it’s okay. I mean, I was there. I never really saw any of the coverage. Today when I see Mike Wallace forty years younger standing in a jungle somewhere, I think they brought it home to everybody. I think that helped fuel the fire here even though I agree with the media’s role, but I think it helped fuel the fire. I mean they told everything and not only told it, but showed it to you as it was actually happening. Then a
lot of things like the Calley affair that certainly turned a lot of people. A lot of people got
turned off, especially after Tet. Tet was a major blow, although if you talk to any of the
historians or any of the surviving generals who were in charge then, they’ll tell you that
we won the battles decisively. But I’m not sure we won the war. We won the battles but
I’m not sure we won the war. That was a pretty clear whooping that we took.

RV: We basically say—well the consensus is that it was a tactical victory for the
north, I mean a lost, a tactical lost, but a strategic victory overall.

JS: Yes. Some of the things that I’ve read about that that I agree whole heartedly
that that told everybody back home that hey, its time to move on. Time to move on.

RV: How did you feel on that flight back out of Nha Trang?

JS: Well out of Nha Trang, we left on a C-130 to Cam Ranh.

RV: Okay. You flew out of Cam Ranh.

JS: Then we flew out of Cam Ranh. I remember seeing it. Again, it was a
northwest 707 and I felt great. At that point in time, I developed a terrible fear of flying
but I didn’t then. But they had a big barrel there as you were getting on the aircraft that
said, “Please don’t take any of these things on: knives, guns, grenades,” and all this other
crap. Every guy wants to bring home a souvenir. I’m still not sure that everybody put
everything in those cans, believe me. So here we are at thirty-two thousand across the
Pacific. Then the pilot, he wants to show us an active volcano out on the Pacific, so about
another hour of circling this volcano. I thought, what the hell? I want to go home. We
got from there to Kadena Air Force Base in Okinawa, refueled. They wouldn’t let you
off the airplane. Then on to Yokota, Japan, to refuel, then up over Alaska into Fort Lewis,
actually into McChord Air Force Base. Then they wouldn’t let you off the plane for two
hours while they checked your shot records. Eventually they let you off. They put you on
a bus and took you to the same place that you were if you left out of Fort Hood, the same
place that you left out of, they took you back to. You got a shower, clean clothes. You
could either stay overnight if you wanted to or you could take a cab and go to Seattle-
Tacoma airport which is what I did.

RV: Did you have any difficulty at the airport there in Seattle?

JS: No. Coming home?

RV: Yeah.
JS: No.

RV: Were you in your uniform or in civvies?

JS: Yes. I was in my uniform, greens because it was cold there. It was cold back here. I flew from there to Chicago and Chicago into Akron Canton for one hundred dollars. I'll never forget it, one hundred dollars. They said, “You don’t have to pay tax on this because you’ve been in the country less than twenty-four hours.” I thought, well, that’s awfully nice of you. Thank you. I flew United all the way back and I got off the plane in 1968, February something of 1968 and vowed I would never get on again.

About, I don’t know, four or five years ago or four or five years after that, I got subpoenaed to a case in Florida that I was working on. I had some role up here and had to fly down. Only in the last three years have I started flying again. It just terrified me. There were so many experiences over there that I can't even begin to tell you how one feels when you’re the only guy in a C-123 and the pilot wants to check out his skills. I think, what the hell are we doing up here? Get me down.

RV: So is that what you brought back, basically a posttraumatic stress disorder of your flying?

JS: Of flying yeah. I was never frightened of flying. I’d only started flying two years before that. The only thing I can put my finger on was just those experiences over there, the helicopter ride. Although, I’m not so frightened of helicopters as I am getting into the commercial jets, which I’m not really frightened anymore, but for a long period of time—I turned down, I can't tell you how many good extraditions working for the sheriff that I turned down because I wouldn’t fly. Trips all over the country, bring back prisoners, those kinds of things because I refused to fly.

RV: Did you have any difficulty transitioning into civilian life once you got out of the military?

JS: No. In fact, if you’d have asked me when I was twenty-one, was I even in the military, I would have told you no. No, there was none whatsoever. It was almost like I never missed a step. I came back to a job that I had before I left at the local factory, the roller bearing company, Tempkin. By union contract, they were supposed to give you the same job that you had when you left and they didn’t. Of course, I filed a grievance and it didn’t go anywhere. So I opted out for a job in a suburban police department they had
advertised. I thought what the hell. I’ll take the test. I took the test, they hired me. I was there about six months and the sheriff offered me a job and here working for the sheriff is the premier job. I took it and I was there for twenty-eight years.

RV: Did you ever become sheriff?
JS: No. I had political aspirations. I worked my way through the ranks to captain. When I started there were thirty deputies and to give you an idea, when I retired there were 250. So we had a lot of, today there are four hundred. So we had a lot of hiring, a lot of moving. So there was a lot of movement within the ranks. I made my way to captain and getting there, you got to meet a lot of people over the course. The sheriffs in Ohio were political animals anyway. I had aspirations but my cards never fell right in the political party that I belonged to. There was always somebody ahead of me. So I ran for commissioner. I was asked and ran for commissioner two year ago against a sixty-seven year old woman who had a well-known political name. I get beat by four thousand votes out of 160 some thousand cast, I get beat by four thousand votes. It broke my heart. But I also said, “I’ll never do that again either.” You have to try it once.

RV: How did you feel April 1975 when you saw South Vietnam fall?
JS: Didn’t bother me at all. I don’t think I cared one way or another.

RV: Did you keep up with the war when you came home?
JS: Yes and no. I kept up with it from the standpoint of reading the paper. My life got very busy and I don’t think I watched the everyday news about it. No. No. I don’t. No, in fact, when it fell, I probably know more about it today than I did back then when it was actually happening because I have more interest in it now. I think things became more truthful and more open in recent years than the crap that we were being fed back then. I’ve often wondered, I get a lot of the veterans magazines and I always look in those ads that say, “Movies from Vietnam.” I always look in there to see if there were any of us in there but I never found out what they did with them. Who knows.

RV: Okay, Jim, do you have any songs or music that takes you back to Vietnam?
JS: Oh, yes. It’s amazing how the two notes of one particular song before you even hear the remainder can immediately bring back hundreds and hundreds of thoughts of what was going on at the time that you first heard that song. Oh, gosh yes. Armed Forces Radio was our only source. There was a girl by the name of Chris Noel was a disc
jockey on Armed Forces Radio. We didn’t have anything really major but we had a little
transistor radio and I don’t even know who in the hell had it, but somebody had a little
transistor radio that we used to listen to frequently.

RV: What songs do you remember?

JS: Oh, gosh. The Rascals were big. Groovin’ was the song when I first got to
Vietnam. The Turtles, “Happy Together,” “Apple, Peaches, Pumpkin Pie,” and I can’t
remember who sang that.

RV: Jay and the Techniques?

JS: Jay and the Techniques, you're right. That was a big song then. Some of
Herman’s Hermit things were big. I have a number of tapes of music from that era. I used
to, I haven’t done this in a long, long time, but I used to put the tapes on and get a bottle
of whiskey and sit on this little hassock in front of the tape player and play these tapes
over and over and over. When I fell off the hassock I’d turn the thing off and that would
be the end of it. But you know, it was almost therapeutic. There are so many memories
that come with that time, with that era. Moving on into 1968 when I ended up in
Washington—and ’68 was always billed the summer of love. The music then you’d come
into things like Gary Puck and the Union Gap, who were, big, big, big back then, The
Doors and the psychedelic music had started emerging, Vanilla Fudge. You’ve heard of
Vanilla Fudge?

RV: Yes.

JS: Have you? Oh really. Those bring back a lot of memories. I’m big into
nostalgia that I don’t mind going back. I know some people don’t like it, but I think it’s
emotionally healthy. There’s nothing wrong with going back and reliving that. Nobody
wants to go back and relive unpleasant things, but I don’t look at Vietnam as an
unpleasant thing. It may have seemed like it, but I made the best of it and tried to turn it
into, I don’t know if pleasant is the right word, into a bearable time.

RV: What do you think was the most significant thing you learned while there?

JS: I don’t know if I can put my finger on one particular thing, but to capsulize it,
I think it truly made me a man. I went over there as a nineteen year old boy who thought
he knew a lot of stuff. I came back much more equipped to go on with life in general
because of those life experiences. I don’t know how many—I think this is always
something one generation says to the next. I look today at nineteen year old kids and I
think, oh shit, they could never do what I did. I’m thinking my dad looked at me and
probably said the same damn thing. Of course the World War II guys always say that
their war, that was the tough one. As I said, I don’t think I can put my finger on one
particular experience. But you got to meet people that you never would have for example.
The experience of all training together under one common, no one treated any differently,
you were all for one I guess and one for all. The camaraderie of it was extraordinary. I
remember telling you and I can't underscore this enough that I regret so much not
recording the names and then addresses of people that I was with just for now. But of
course back then you don’t look, you don’t look into the future that far. Hell, you were
looking to getting home and today it’s so important to me. I’ve tried my damndest. I
found Ed Walsh. I don’t know if I told you that. But I found Ed Walsh over in Lehigh,
Pennsylvania. Surfing through the website one day, I ran across the CID Agents
Association. I sent them an email and they said, “Oh, yes. We know Ed Walsh.” They set
me up with his phone number and email address. I had not seen him since probably
Christmas of ’67. In fact, he loaned me twenty bucks one time.

RV: Did you collect? (Laughs)

JS: No. I’d like to go—he’s not that far. He’s about five hours away from where I
live over in north of Philadelphia. I’d love to go see him some time. I think at some point,
some time I will.

RV: Do you think your relationship with your father improved any when you
came home based on you growing up and becoming a man as you said?

JS: Yes and no. Once again, I can't put my finger on any one certain thing. I
remember, although he smoked, I was never permitted to smoke. Going to the Army then
allowed me to smoke unchallenged I guess. When I came home, I smoked and I never
really gave it a thought as I’m smoking in the car coming back from the airport and I
thought, oh, hell. I’m smoking” He never said anything to me after that so I got accepted
from that standpoint. He carried my bags. He carried a bag I had from the luggage
checkout to the car which I still remark about it today.

RV: That’s a very specific memory.
JS: Yes. Of course, I still had six months to go so I ended up leaving, but when I came home, I was out of the Army. I was finished. I had a good job. I was back on the circuit so to speak. Our lifestyles once again clashed. Me wanting to stay out late and play and party and have a good time and all those sorts of things. I remember he put a curfew on me. I thought, huh? After all I’ve been through and I have to be in by midnight. That never set well with me. Of course I fudged on it all the time, but I didn’t want to move. I don’t know why I didn’t want to move. I think maybe I was a little frightened to move out on my own, saying, “Oh my God. This is it. I’m really on my own.” But eventually, when I joined the sheriff in the fall of ’69, hell, I was working afternoons and had to be home by midnight. Now come on. Now, let’s be realistic. So I knew the party was over. Eventually I moved, I think sometime in 1970 I ended up moving into an apartment. Our relationship probably never went further than that although and I hate to say this. I’m somewhat embarrassed to say it, there would be a year or two go by that I wouldn’t even see my mom and dad despite living six or seven blocks up the street. I’d go down at Christmas, but I was not a routine visitor. If you ask me why today, I have no idea. I mean, I was busy. I worked a lot. I really liked my job so I did it every opportunity I could. Then of course as we got older and continued to mature, we did lunch a few times. I’d pick him up, we’d have lunch. I think deep down inside he was proud because I was getting some good publicity on some cases that I was doing. I got promoted up through the ranks. Of course they would put your picture in the paper when that happened. I think I made him proud but he never told me. He never would say. My mom, she had Lou Gehrig’s disease. I take it you know what that is.

RV: Yes.

JS: She died rather young and he continued on. We became pretty good friends, but unfortunately it was too late. I didn’t get to spend many years as I wish I would have with him, but that’s not such an uncommon story. That kind of father/son relationship, I’ve seen many times. I don’t think it’s so uncommon, but it’s tragic. But you’ve got to move on from it.

RV: When did he pass away?
JS: In 198—let’s see. My mom passed away in ’85 and my dad passed away in ’87. He was a life long smoker. That certainly didn’t help him. I quit incidentally. I hope you don’t smoke.

RV: No. I do not.

JS: Never?

RV: Never.

JS: Good. I smoked until I was fifty and I gave it up five years ago.

RV: What made you quit?

JS: I wanted to live longer. I was finally convinced that smoking was not good for you and I was finally convinced I could do it. You hear so many war stories. I thought I’d be climbing the walls, fingernails scratching down the walls. It was the easiest thing I ever did. Had I known it was going to be that easy I’d have done it ten years before.

Very, very easy, for me it was. Of course I was determined that I wasn’t going to smoke anymore.

RV: Right. Going back to Vietnam just for a bit here, what lessons do you think the United States learned from that conflict if any?

JS: Sometimes when I see what’s happening today I don’t think we learned anything. I don’t know. I don’t think we will ever find ourselves in another Vietnam although Afghanistan, there were a few critics of Afghanistan that, “Oh, my. We’re bogged down in another Vietnam.” They don’t even have what, one tenth of the people that they had in Vietnam.

RV: If that.

JS: Yeah. If that. So I don’t think we will ever find ourselves almost colonizing another country. I don’t think so. They had five hundred and fifty thousand GIs at the height of that thing over in Vietnam. Not to mention probably another one hundred thousand civilians that came over there with PA&E (Pacific Architects and Engineers).

Have you ever heard of them?

RV: Say it again.

JS: PA&E.

RV: No.
JS: Pacific Architects and Engineers. They did all the building and made just
gazillions of dollars. I don’t think we’ll ever find ourselves so deeply entrenched in
another war. I don’t think you can have another war like that now, too much gadgetry.

RV: What did you think of overall U.S. policy concerning the Vietnam War?
JS: I thought it was terrible.
RV: At the time?
JS: Yes, at the time. I could never understand, I could never, ever understand and
I think maybe once or twice did this actually ever play a role with me, but I think having
to actually put the grids, call the grids in to MACV to see if you were allowed to fire in
that area. I never did quite understand that. It would be very easy for the enemy to know
that and simply go to that area. MACV, I take it you knew what that was.

RV: Of course.
JS: Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. I’m not sure I knew what their role
was back then, but today I think I understand it pretty well. The guy was the governor of
that particular region, the American governor.

RV: That’s a good way to put it.
JS: Yes. He was the American governor of that region although he may have
been a lieutenant colonel or even, I think in our area, I think he was even a major. He was
the de facto governor. He along with his counterpart at the Vietnamese level decided
what was a free fire zone and what was not. You’d call in and say, “Can I shoot in this
area?” They’d say, “No, you can’t.” That was kind of a silly thing I thought. I thought
Vietnamization was kind of a silly thing. Hell, we were Vietnamizing them just by our
mere presence, just by giving them all the C-rations which they could have as far as I was
concerned. But just by having all the C-rations they wanted. Yet we went overboard.
We’d go out into the community or out into the boondocks and bring them all into a
camp, a safe haven. I thought that was kind of silly too. First of all, I’m not sure that half
of them even wanted us there. The half that were making money off of us did. We wanted
to be there. We wanted to be there bad just for the very sake of PA&E and a lot of the
other companies that made a gazillion dollars. How about the people that make the
bullets?

RV: War has always been traditionally pretty good for the economy.
JS: Oh yeah. War is a balance of nature. I read that somewhere. When there’s too many men in the population, you have to somehow get rid of them.

RV: That’s one way to look at it.

JS: Somebody told me that once or I read it somewhere that war is a balance of nature.

RV: Do you think the U.S. government is taking care of its Vietnam veterans?

JS: Yeah. I’m going to go way out on a limb here and say that. I’ve belonged to the Vietnam veterans for I would guess probably twenty years—Vietnam Veterans of America. I belong to the VFW (Veterans of Foreign Wars) for thirty-three years and the Legion for a number of years although I’m not active in the groups but I belong to them, I contribute. I go there and have a drink every once in a while. I do read the Vietnam Veterans of America paper, *The Veteran*. I went to a number of their meetings when I first joined and I was tired of the crying. I was tired of having the meeting dominated by one or two people who don’t want to work, who think that there is some kind of entitlement along with being a veteran. I just didn’t go to any more meetings. I really wanted to get involved in that. I really, really did, but I couldn’t take it. I know so many people that—I’m very good things with one of the judges in town, Dick Reinhold who was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam. I have know the guy for twenty-five, twenty-seven years. I’ve known all along he has because we have that bond. But you wouldn’t know it. He doesn’t tell you in the first thirty seconds. We have another guy who’s one of the prosecutors who was an infantry captain, a grunt out in the boondocks his whole year there. You’d never know it. So I’m more inclined to the people that don’t put it on front street. So I’m a little perplexed as to whether or not I think the federal government has taken care of the Vietnam veterans. How much can we do? I don’t know. How much can be done for somebody? When McDonalds is paying eight bucks an hour, I know that’s not a lot of money, but if you work eight hours a day, that’s sixty-four bucks, isn’t that better than pushing an old grocery cart around the city with your belongings in it? Somehow I lose touch with that. I’m sad for them. I’m sure they all have in their own mind a legitimate reason, but I’m not sure that the general public accepts it. I think there are many—I think in my dad’s day in the Army, they came home shell shocked. Today we call it posttraumatic stress syndrome. What will they call it when this next encounter
has subsided? I don’t know. I think there are a few people that have difficulty with it, but
I’m not so sure that they wouldn’t have had difficulty with life itself. I don’t know. I truly
don’t. I know I turned it into a positive experience because I was taught that way. I
wanted to be that way. I guess I could sit down and cry, but I can’t. My mind and my
body and my whole physical being will not let me use Vietnam or anything for that
matter that was detrimental as a negative thing, as a thing that says I can't work or I can't
feed my family or I want to go out and shoot seven people today because I remember
coming out of a bunker. I don’t know. So the answer to your question is I don’t know. I
think they have tried. I know I read the paper and I see many, many things on the agenda
in Washington, veterans affairs on the agenda. I think short of sending them a check, free
medical. I mean where I am there’s three veterans hospitals within—one within a ten
minute drive and two within an hour’s drive. There’s two in Cleveland, a medical and a
psychological hospital. So the things are there, things are there. Whether or not they're
smooth and fluid and whether or not they’re up to par with civilian care could be a
question. But there’s something there.

RV: What do you think about Vietnam today, the country itself today?
JS: I ’m probably one of the few that agreed with Clinton to normalize relations. I
know Clinton has taken a ton of heat on many, many things, a couple of things really
dastardly but I think that’s one thing that he did appropriately. I was a big Bill Clinton
fan. Even to his last day I was a big Bill Clinton fan. He was of my politics and of my—
he was a centrist, where I stand. Although he was so much anti-Vietnam, damn it, I wish
I would have been that smart back then. But I stood in line and got drafted. I’m anxious
to go back. I want to go back. The anti-flying or the fear of flying obviously put a big
dinger in that but now that I’m back flying now and then, it’s not as bad as it once was. I
think I’m working my way up there. But I want to go back before I’m eighty-five years
old. When I heard you say you had been to Nha Trang, I thought, oh wow! I’d just love to
go back and see what it is today, see what happened to a couple of people. I’d love to
know what happened to that police chief. I’m sure he’s in a cemetery some place, but I’d
love to know that. I’d love to see that again. But I think all in all as things normalize, it
becomes another—cause, actually, it was pretty beautiful, wasn’t it?
RV: Yeah. It was to me. I wanted to ask you about that too. Physically, what did you think of the country?

JS: I thought it was beautiful. As I told you, the greatest thing about it, it didn’t snow. There was no snow and the fauna and foliage. At this POW camp, there was a coconut plantation. The coconuts, you could throw rocks up and the coconuts would come down. You’d whack the top of them off and drink the coconut milk. I thought, “Oh, God. This is really neat.” It was quite pretty, quite pretty, although I wasn’t so much into the flowers. I’m a gardener now, but I wasn’t so much into the flowers and everything back then. I wish I would have known more about it. Maybe I’d appreciate it a little more. But I was just into watching Agent Orange hit the leaves and fall off.

RV: Did you ever have any exposure to Agent Orange?

JS: I don’t think so. I don’t think so. I don’t remember of any. I’ve tried to look that up because they have that pretty well documented as to where they used it and when they used it. But I don’t think I was around then. But no, I thought the country, the water at Nha Trang was so blue like the Caribbean. Have you been to the Caribbean?

RV: No.

JS: In many ways it reminds me of the Caribbean. The water was so blue. You could go out in thirty, forty, fifty feet and still see the bottom. The beaches were nice and sandy. The architecture although colonial in many ways certainly had—did you see the Le Grande Hotel?

RV: Yes.

JS: When you were in Nha Trang?

RV: Yes.

JS: Beautiful place. What is it now?

RV: I don’t remember. I want to say it’s still a hotel.

JS: Is it really? Boy, that was the headquarters of 1st Field Forces when I was there. Downtown Nha Trang. Doc Lop street I think was the main drag. Hell, I can't remember.

RV: How much contact have you had with Vietnamese here in the United States?

JS: Once or twice as a deputy sheriff I encountered. I knew some pigeon Vietnamese so I could communicate. I could communicate very fundamentally with
them. Where do you live? What’s your name? Show me your I.D. card. Those are all
things that we asked them when we did check points in Vietnam. So it made my job
easier to know that. I still know a little bit. I could probably count to ten now. But I think
a couple of times I’ve encountered. There’s not many here. I think the climate
discourages them. There’s not many here. A lot of Chinese restaurants but no
Vietnamese.

RV: Any good books on Vietnam that you would recommend or that you like
personally?

JS: No. I’m not much of a book reader even though the topic might be
interesting. I’m not much of a book reader. I’ve watched the movies that have come out.
Going back to Apocalypse Now which I thought was total Hollywood and The Deer
Hunter which I thought was absolutely ridiculous. There have been a few that—I thought
Platoon was good. I thought Hamburger Hill, although so gross was factual. I look at
things, not just the blood and gore. In fact, it was too bloody and gory I won’t even watch
it. But I look at things like do they have the patches on the right sleeve? Do they have the
markings on the jeep in the right place? The little seemingly insignificant things that
make it, that legitimize it for me. There’s one called, Don’t Cry, It’s Only Thunder. I don’t
know if you’ve ever heard of that one.

RV: I have.

JS: Have you? That was pretty good. You know what I thought the best of all was
though as far as being factual, accurate, was the weekly one called Tour of Duty. Do you
remember that one?

RV: Yes I do. I never saw it, but I remember it.

JS: I think it probably ran maybe three years, four years. But the first couple of
years, you really thought you were on patrol with those guys especially if you had been
there and could relate to that. It was so realistic. It was very good. Paint It Black was the
theme song that started the movies. The Stones. Remember? Paint It Black. But it was so
realistic. Then there was one called The Boys in Company C, that one wasn’t too bad.

Full Metal Jacket. Did you see that movie?

RV: Oh, yes. Many times.
JS: Is that the one—I get *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* confused. Is that the one
where the guy commits suicide?

RV: Yeah. That’s Stanley Kubrick’s film.

JS: On the toilet?

RV: The first half is Ferris Island Marine Recruit Training and the second half,
Tet Offensive and stuff.

JS: I didn’t care for that one as much as *Platoon*. I thought *Platoon* was a little
better.

RV: How about the most recent one, *We Were Soldiers*?

JS: I didn’t see it. I’m kind of done with that. That was about that one battle Ia
Drang Valley, wasn’t it?

RV: Yes.

JS: The very first, when they landed in a battalion of NVA. That was 1965.

RV: November ’65.

JS: I read about that. Plus I think *60 Minutes* did a one hour special on that not
too terribly long ago where the American commander and the Vietnamese commander
met on the battlefield. Boy, I’d love to do that. Wow.

RV: Have you ever been to the Wall in Washington?

JS: Oh, many times. Washington’s about seven hours from us, nice little drive,
freeway the whole way. We have a friend who lives in Washington who lives at Dupont
Circle. Have you been to D.C.?

RV: Yes. Many times.

JS: Okay. She lives at Dupont Circle and she has a company down there which,
you talk about a—she and this black guy, they're not married, they're just partners. They
bid on Navy contracts. She’s a minority and he’s a minority. They may bid on building a
submarine. I said to her, “How in the hell can you guys build a submarine?” They farm it
all out and then they sublet it sublet it sublet it. She’s made a very, very good living on
that over the years. So we’ve been down there. The last fifteen years we’ve probably
been down there ten, twelve times. Great town. Love it.

RV: What’s your experience at the Wall like when you go?
JS: I didn’t have an emotional breakdown like so many. I’m conditioned against that. I don’t know if that’s good or bad, but I’m conditioned against that. I didn’t have any kind of a reaction whatsoever. I looked up a few names and felt sad, but expressing it openly, I did not. I’ve been there half a dozen times probably. I’ve been over to the Smithsonian to look at the display on what’s been left at the Wall. I just can't relive the negative parts of it. I can't see letting it get me down like that like so many. I could never, never, ever dress up in any part of my uniform. I couldn’t get in it first of all, but any part of a uniform put on a black beret and go down there and march around. I couldn’t do that. That’s gone for me. I mean, what’s the point? I think I hold the place in reverence. There’s no question. But I’m not sure I understand the point of the constant protest. We’re still protesting aren’t we?

RV: Well, there’s a lot of different things going on I think concerning Vietnam and the Wall. There’s some people who are still protesting.

JS: Oh, yeah.

RV: I would call it.

JS: There’s still a lot. I’d go down and I say and as I said, I look. We sit around. We watch the people come by. I mean, it’s a humbling experience. But I can't let it overcome me. They had a portable wall that came here probably before I ever went to see the Wall down there. When did the Wall come into play? About ’86.

RV: It was earlier than that. ’82.

JS: ’82. It must have been about ’87 or ’88 they had a portable wall, a full size replica that came here and they took it to a veteran’s cemetery. Actually the veteran’s section of one of the cemeteries and they put it up there. I went up to it and looked at it and probably got the same reaction as I did at the real Wall. I’m sad about it but we’ve got to move on. I thought they put it in the damn wrong place to go to the cemetery. I just didn’t care for that too much.

RV: What would you tell young people today about Vietnam?

JS: Oh, wow. That’s something I’d love to do incidentally. I’ve been asked one time to go to a high school and talk about it. And I can be passionate about it but I don’t know if they really, truly, understand. You almost had to live that. I appreciate your age
and not having actually lived then, just to see the towns burn for whatever damn reason
and to see the society in general fall apart for quite a while there.

RV: I was alive but obviously too young to think of that stuff.

JS: Especially when we got into the flower generation, the summer of love, the
dropouts, the anti-draft protests and all that sort of thing, guys going to Canada and the
community as we know it just divisive was a bit much. It’s very hard to explain. But I’d
love to do that. I think I could tell them what happened as I can tell you. I don’t know if
they can feel the experience though. I don’t know. Maybe they can. I don’t think they
care. I don’t think they care. I don’t know what our textbooks even say about Vietnam.

RV: Why do you think they don’t care?

JS: Well, let me draw this comparison. I’m not sure that I care that much,
although being alive during the Korean War, I’m not sure I could tell you the year it
started and the year it ended. I’m not sure our history books—let’s see, I would have been
five, six years old then—I’m not sure our history books even included the Korean war
when I went to school. It may have said or had a paragraph. It was more earlier than that.
I’m not sure they care. Unless you really, unless you lived that and some part of it, have
some recollection, have some way of identifying with it, I’m not sure that you can
understand it. Same way with me about certain things. I think you have to have gone
through it to even have a glimpse of what it was like. You going to Vietnam certainly
gives you a much greater insight just seeing the country, just talking to the people and
getting a better understanding of that certainly puts you miles ahead of someone else your
age. No. I’m not sure they understand. I’m not sure they want to understand. People are
so—I don’t know. Vietnam still has a dirty word, dirty sound to it. Interstate 77 in the
state of Ohio is called the Vietnam Veteran’s highway and about every thirty miles,
they’ll have a sign, “Vietnam Veterans Memorial Highway.” I think are those signs going
to be there until the end of time or when the Vietnam veterans are gone, will this be
something different? Who knows.

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

JS: No. I think we’ve exploited my time in Vietnam. I can't think of anything
insightful now that I haven’t told you. I do hold Vietnam to blame for one thing. I don’t
know if life passed me by too quickly or whatever but I never had the desire to—how
should I say this? I never had the desire to do normal things. I mean like raising a family, owning a house, having children, wanting a wife, all these sorts of things. I often wonder and I’ve kind of held Vietnam responsible for that in a sense that I was so grateful, I guess at surviving that ordeal that I never really took the time to settle down. It was as if you won, now it’s time to play. Don’t get me wrong. I mean, I worked hard and enjoyed many relationships, but I never had that desire to have the split level in the country and the two cars and the shaggy dog and the kids in school. I still don’t have that desire although I got married when I was forty. I got divorced when I was forty-five for incidental reasons. I have a girlfriend today. We’ve lived together now for twelve years or so. I’m very happy at that, but now I’m starting to think I wonder what it would have been like to have a kid playing football at Ohio State and those kinds of things. But it seemed like there was just never any time. One day I was twenty-one, the next day I was forty-one. There was never time. I sometimes blame Vietnam on that. I think if you wouldn’t have gone there maybe you would have fallen into that normalcy routine that our parents did when they were young, the things that were expected of you. But we were in a generation that did things that weren’t expected of us. In fact, you’ll hear many conservative speakers talk about the decay of the family and the decay of society blame placed squarely on the ’60s, which I don’t know. I think there’s probably a lot of guys and girls that were hippies and cast outs and drop outs that are very wealthy and productive and responsible people today. I’m not sure that holds any truth. But who knows.

RV: Okay. This will end our oral history interview with Jim Shannon. Thank you, sir.

JS: Okay.