Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Congressman Sam Johnson on the 12th of March 2001 at approximately 2:30 Washington D.C. time. We are in Congressman Johnson’s office. Why don’t we begin, sir, by discussing quickly some of your experiences concerning the Korean War, and I was curious why you decided to join the Air Force when you were called to serve?

Sam Johnson: Well, I was in Air Force ROTC and back in those days ROTC was mandatory during World War II when I was in high school, so when I got to college I just stayed in it, and it was an Air Force ROTC and I think the call out for Korea was caused because the Korean War broke out while we were in summer camp, and it stopped our summer camp and they let us finish school and then gave us our bars and called the whole class up to the Korean War, for the Korean War. There were only 25 of us but they called us all up out of SMU. I decided if I was going to go to the Air Force, I wanted to be a pilot and not a supply officer, which is what I was out of ROTC as, so I applied for flying school and got it and went through it.

SM: Is that something that you…was it a land grant school?

SJ: Southern Methodist University in Dallas? No, it’s a Methodist school.

SM: Okay, I didn't know if that was part of the requirements of attending the university is if you had to enroll in ROTC for the first two years.
SJ: No, it wasn’t mandatory at SMU. It was in high school in Dallas before. All
the Dallas high schools had mandatory ROTC during World War II.
SM: And you knew immediately you wanted to be a pilot?
SJ: Yes. Well, I’d never flown an airplane before, but I figured if you’re going to
be in the Air Force, you’d better be flying.
SM: What was the most challenging thing about becoming a pilot for you in
terms of the training, the initial pilot training and then some of your specialized training
for jets?
SJ: I think that flying became an obsession with me because it was so much fun.
We started out in T-6s, which of course is a trainer. It used to be a fighter in World War
II, real early trainer fighter, but a lot of power and of course that’s the first airplane I was
ever in, doing loops and rolls and spins and that sort of thing is kind of…you know, it
became really a passion.
SM: Before you left for Korea, you obviously were old enough and mature
enough in 1949 to be aware of a lot of international affairs and what was going on around
the world?
SJ: Yes, I was 20 when I graduated from college. I started college when I was
16. So, I got my commission in the Air Force as second lieutenant when I was 20 years
old.
SM: What year was that, sir?
SJ: 1951.
SM: I’m curious what you thought about the fall of China two years previous to
that?
SJ: To be truthful, I probably didn’t have much or many thoughts about it at the
time, but since that time I’ve had a lot more time to reflect on it and I think that the
communist tide was sweeping China. I don’t think there was any way [Chang Hai Shek]
was going to hold it, and neither would we as Americans try to put enough troops in there
to hold it. If you remember Macarthur’s old saying, ‘Don’t ever get in a fight on the
ground in Asia,’ because they overrun you. That’s what happened to us in Korea, but I
think we made a mess of that politically, too.
SM: The Korean War?
SJ: Yeah.
SM: Could you tell me what you mean by that?
SJ: Well I mean that when China was starting to enter the war, we should have…you know, MacArthur might not have had exactly the right formula but I think he was right in using massive force to stop them because they’re the ones that caused the problem. In retrospect though since I’ve been here and on the U.S.-Russia Commission on POWs and MIAs, I’ve been running the Korea Task Force to try to find MIAs and I find that Russia ran that war, the Korean War, totally, and had like the equivalent of four or five divisions over there. They had 960 some odd aircraft over there and their pilots were flying them against us and Stalin ran that war. So, you know, knowing that now I can see where we made a lot of mistakes, one of which was backing off the Chinese. They were, I believe, put into that war by the Russians as tools of theirs. China also feared a cross-border incursion by the United States and we had no intention of doing that, I think, and it was made well clear at the time.
SM: What did you think about the…
SJ: But there was another problem in that war…
SM: What’s that, sir?
SJ: …and that was since you’re doing military studies, in the end of World War II we cut back our forces tremendously as you recall and when Korea broke out we had to recall a lot of our reserve troops, one, and two, train and throw a lot of guys into battle over there that never had any real combat training, and that was part of the reason for our being overrun early on. Later we got the weapons and the material and the trained people in there, and turned it around.
SM: As a pilot, did you feel that way about your entry into the war as well, or did you feel well prepared?
SJ: No, I think the Air Force was doing a pretty good job in training at least fighter pilots.
SM: And with regard to the role of China in the Korean War, of course MacArthur had a very outspoken idea about what we should do, and that led to the conflict between civilian and military authority over the war. What, as a pilot, did you hear about that, if anything concerning the Truman-MacArthur conflict?
SJ: None. Way up there in the upper levels, and it never fazed us one way or the other except the commanders changed. I wasn't over there when MacArthur was fired, so to speak, but I understand also, now, that Eisenhower told the Chinese and Russians, ‘Stop the war or there’s going to be some consequences,’ and I think they believed him, and that’s how we got the truce. You know, we don’t have peace over there yet.

SM: Were there any particular lessons that you took away from your experience in flying in the Korean War that you applied later as a pilot, especially in Vietnam?

SJ: Well in those days, the Air Force was organized on the order of World War II where as a pilot you commanded the guys that maintained the airplane. I was a flight commander as a first lieutenant and you know today you wouldn’t even think about that. We had all of the air crew and ground crew under us as a flight commander. That isn’t true today. The flight commander in today’s Air Force is over the pilot period, end quotation. It’s communist maintenance is what we call it, and when we went to that I think the idea was that it was more efficient and took less people, and theoretically provided you better maintenance because the guys working on your plane were experts in whatever they were doing, but I don’t think that’s proven true. I still think that the best team is a close knit operation where you’ve got the pilot and the crew chief and the armor and now the specialist can be separated if you want to, and they were over there. But, that’s the way you take pride in the equipment and we flew the same airplane all the time. They don’t do that now in the Air Force; whatever number comes up on the rotation you take, so you don’t know the airplane as well as I think you should.

SM: So you think that the way that the military was structured previously, men gained a stronger sense of morale, esprit, and just a sense of identity with a particular group?

SJ: No doubt about it.

SM: And now that’s absent?

SJ: No doubt about it. You don't find terrible closeness between the pilots and the maintenance people today. The officers that are running maintenance know them, but you don’t and you don’t know the airplane. There are no two airplanes alike. They’re just like cars; you get to know the little sounds that don’t sound right or squeak in the break, or you know when you start the car a little fuzzy noise or something that another
car wont have, so you get to know those things and when its not right, you know it, too. I
had an opportunity to fly the same airplane for almost two years when I was on the
Thunderbirds. We had the same airplane, and the crew chiefs. So, it was a reenactment
of the old days, actually, where you had a close association with your crew chief and
knew the people that maintained them and you knew when something was wrong and
they’d fix it for you. You’re never sure if a problem’s been fixed in today’s Air Force,
maintenance wise.

SM: And as you discovered over the skies in Vietnam, that was the case even
then?
SJ: That’s true, absolutely.
SM: Do you think that this was altered; the policy was altered in the name of
efficiency?
SJ: They thought they were going to save money with less people. They were
trying to do more with less and that’s always been the case of our military throughout the
years, try to do more with less, and we’re doing it right now today with lack of dollars
and massive deployments all over the world. Here we are in the year 2001 and we
haven’t learned a whole lot.
SM: Are there any particular things from the Korean War, additional things that
we should be applying to today’s military that you can think of?
SJ: No, I think I mention it in the book that the POWs over there were more or
less not college graduates and they were, especially the ground people, were right out of
high school so didn’t have the same ability to deal with communist diatribe that I think
we did in Vietnam. They mistreated them a lot worse over there in a different way by
starving them and putting them in underground and covering them up and all that kind of
stuff. They treated us badly in a different way, though, than what the Korean guys were.
They beat up on the Korean guys a lot more I think and their treatment was harsher from
a standpoint that the weather was cold in Korea and they kept them outside and let them
freeze, and a lot of guys died from being too cold over there. And they didn’t feed them
at all hardly. I mean, they fed us in Vietnam if you want to call it that. It was pumpkin
soup and sewer greens, but at least it was something that would keep the body going.
SM: The issue of American POWs being taken from the Korean War and into different country…?
SJ: Oh, brainwashing too is another thing that came out. Is that the question you were about to ask?
SM: I was leading up to the Manchurian Candidate, yes sir.
SJ: Well, the Koreans did do what was termed brainwashing; really, it’s thought control, where they get into your brain and try to steer you in the direction they want you to go, and they try to tear down all the basic structures that you’ve grown up with and that you believe in, and because of, again, because of the differences in educational background of the kids over there, 17 to 21 year olds versus most of us were 25 plus, and most college graduates, they’re dealing with a different type of mentality, and it was harder for them to make us believe something although they tried on occasion. But the thought control processes that the Chinese and Russians used were things they had developed during World War II and after that I think were much more sophisticated than what the Vietnamese knew, and as you know and I said in the book, the Vietnamese didn’t want to trust the Chinese or the Russians. In fact, they went to the Cubans as you know to try to get them to help them figure out how to deal with us and they made a mess of it, too.
SM: In your work more recently, have you uncovered more information and evidence about this type of activity in the Korean War?
SJ: Yes, yes. You know, our guys came out of there, the ground crews came out of there and marked every location where they knew a body was on a map. We know exactly where they are, but the North Koreans won’t let us in there to get them, or recover those bodies. They want to be paid, and I mean, come on! I think Bush has made some fairly strong statements as President recently to try to get them off dead center.
SM: Is there anything else that you’d like to discuss with regard to your experiences in Korea?
SJ: No, I don’t think so.
SM: Now the period between the Korean War and the Vietnam War, of course, if full of a tremendous amount of important historical activity, especially leading up to the Vietnam War, and while you were in the Air Force between the wars I was curious how
much you were aware of those events, in particular for instance the French defeat at Dien
Bien Phu and some of the other activities that were going on in Southeast Asia. Was it
something that you did keep up with on your own, or were briefed on, or anything like
that?
SJ: No, the Air Force tried to keep us up to speed on the current events and what
was going on in the world and I think they did a fair job. I’m not sure everybody paid
attention. You think, ‘Well that’s way over there and that doesn’t bother us,’ but
ultimately it did.
SM: Of course when you got back from the Korean War, your obligation was
probably nearly half over in terms of your active duty obligation.
SJ: No, I became a regular officer while I was over there, which means career.
SM: So you chose at that point to make it a career?
SJ: Uh-huh.
SM: In your book you mention, and I should give the title of the book really
quickly, you were co-author of your own autobiography called Captive Warriors. In
your book you talk about the dreams and aspirations that you and your wife shared before
the Korean War occurred primarily centered on the business world. What was it that
changed that made you decide career?
SJ: I think flying, flying and the comradery that was going on between people in
the Air Force at that time.
SM: A sense of fulfillment that you didn’t think you’d be able to get from a
business career?
SJ: Right.
SM: Now of course the period of 1954, after Dien Bien Phu to the beginning of
the Vietnam War, again, a lot of important international activities not necessarily related
to Southeast Asia and I was curious your thoughts on such things as the launch of Sputnik
and how that effected your career or your mentality as an Air Force pilot?
SJ: Yeah, that occurred in ’57 as I recall and I was flying with the Thunderbirds
then, ’57-’58, I cant remember which year that was, but we were on a tour of South
America at the time down there so it came home clear to us. Of course I’ve got a lot of
good friends, Buzz Aldrin being one that got into the astronaut program. Buzz and I went
to flying school together and were in Korea together in the same unit. So, it was from that standpoint I had a slight interest in it. But, we felt, we all felt like we all had to put some priority on that kind of program.

SM: Now as a member of the Thunderbirds did it ever cross your mind to maybe get into the astronaut program?

SJ: Yeah, I was stationed at Nellis which is Las Vegas, Nevada, and I got to know a lot of the guys down at Edwards (AFB) Test School and I thought about that, but I felt like that at that point it just wasn't something that I was going to do or be able to do, really.

SM: And other important international events of the early ‘60s, I was curious what your thoughts were at the time of the Bay of Pigs Invasion or the failed invasion when Kennedy took office. I would imagine that was discussed, especially since even at the time many people felt that it was the lack of a resolute application of air power that really lent to the defeat.

SJ: It was a lack of support by the President in particular that caused the failure of that and he should never have let it go as far as he did with our involvement the way it was, if he didn’t intend to carry it though. We lost some people on the ground in that thing that we shouldn’t have lost or allowed to lose, and the Navy was sitting right out there, you know that. Of course that followed on, after that debacle, with the missile crisis. I was in Florida for that, down at Homestead, and in the capacity of an Air Division Plans Officer. The Attack General, gosh, I can’t think of his name right now, decided that he wanted to have some guys be on the ground with the Army if we went in there so he picked 18 of us out of the headquarters there in Homestead. It was the 1st Air Division. We had about 100 airplanes loaded and ready to go on the field and could have gotten them all off inside of 10 minutes. So, he took 18 of us and we went to Ft. Bragg and went through Jump School and that’s how I got through Jump School and then we went back to Florida and we may have done that before…I think before we picked five vehicles that we would take with us into the jump zone and they would be air dropped. We had four six-bys and one jeep and we picked them from 100 vehicles that the Army had stashed down in Miami on a Marine base down there. And they told us, ‘Pick the best ones you can and can find,’ so we drove a bunch of them and ended up taking them
back to Homestead Air Force Base and the motor pool took them and disassembled them
totally and put them back together because the general had said he wanted them to be
able to run for 30 days without any maintenance. So when we got them back out of the
motor pool we drove them through ditches and everything else and checked the four
wheel drive and whatever, and then actually made a loading on a C-123 and just made
sure everything would work. But, we were poised and ready to go on the Cuban thing. If
Castro hadn’t have backed off, Cuba would have been demolished, their military
function, because there were three…at least three air fields in Florida that were loaded
with air craft like Homestead; Homestead, Tampa, and Orlando and the Navy had planes
down at Key West in that same operation. So, we had over 300 aircraft loaded with
bombs and rockets and ready to take the place apart; plus, the 82nd Airborne was ready to
go in and land at a field about 150 miles Southwest of Havana and that’s where we were
going in with them. And the Navy and Marines were going to make landings on the
North shore. The whole Atlantic Fleet was out there. You may not remember that.

SM: Oh no, I wasn’t born yet, sir. Just out of curiosity…

SJ: Some of that isn’t written down. That’s good to get it into the archives.

SM: Yes, sir. The presence of short range ballistic missiles, that’s been…

SJ: We evacuated Miami, by the way. Did you know that?

SM: No, I didn’t know that.

SJ: Yes, all the civilians moved up to Orlando about and they asked them to and
most of them did. We had missile defenses all along the Florida coast.

SM: Was there any concern that there might be something that was missed by
some of the intelligence over flights that you were aware of at the time?

SJ: At that time?

SM: Yes, sir.

SJ: No, I don’t think so. I think we had good intelligence and as you know we
had a U-2 guy shot down. So, I think we had good intelligence.

SM: The jump school that you went to, what was that like for you?

SJ: Well it was different. I have a deep respect, a deeper respect I guess, for the
Army Paratroopers after doing that because they just threw us in a class and took us right
through with them and when you’re younger I guess you can do it but we were running
10 miles a day with all the boots and paraphernalia on and jumping off 12 foot platforms and the whole works, and we made five jumps with the Army in all different environments. The first one was a real windy one. I didn’t get the chute collapsed and couldn’t get it disconnected and the wind was carrying me. It was about a 25 mile per hour wind and Special Forces guys ran over there and collapsed the chute for me. But, I was going through bushes. And the Air Force, to this day I’ll remember that, put me down in a bunch of trees. They put us in a bunch of trees instead of the drop zone.

SM: At that time, were they using the 250 foot towers to help prepare you for the jumps?

SJ: Yeah, sure were.

SM: It must have been a rather strange experience since jumping from a perfectly good aircraft is just not a natural act.

SJ: Two of us were majors, myself and another guy, and the rest were captains, but they put you in there by rank and he outranked me so he was first in the door, and you know you buckle up and walk down and stand in the door and then the green light comes on and he says, ‘Go!’ Well this guy froze in front of me and all I see is this sergeant’s boot, ‘Pop!’ out the door with the guy and so I just stepped over the rail and went out.

SM: Did you ever engage in a jump activity after that?

SJ: Vietnam one time.

SM: With the exception of your ejection?

SJ: No.

SM: Any other specialty training?

SJ: That was enough for an Air Force guy!

SM: Yes, sir. Did you receive any other specialty training prior to going to Vietnam?

SJ: Well I went through survival school; everybody did that. In Reno, Nevada, is where the Air Force had it at the time. I went through in December and it was cold. We crossed the Truckee River up there, wading in water that was…I don’t know how cold it was, but it was cold. Then it was snowing and then one day ran into a deer and I met face to face on the trail and we just looked at each other and walked off. The guy said, ‘Why didn’t you kill him and eat him,’ because that’s what we were out there for is survival.
SM: Did you have a firearm with you?
SJ: Oh no. I had a knife, though.
SM: You mention of course in your book the survival training that you did
receive, and I was curious, do you think there was anything they could have done to make
that training better for the ordeal that you had to endure?
SJ: Well the training at the time was based on Korea, on the Korean experience
and Vietnam was different. Let’s face it; no two wars are exactly alike, and so I don’t
know that they could have done it any better than they were doing it at the time. They
have improved on it since, but it’s based on the Vietnam experience now so the next war,
was Desert Storm even like that? No, I don’t think so. So, it’s hard to predict what your
enemy’s going to do and most of them don’t obey the Geneva Conventions on war.
SM: Well it seems that some of the most important things for you and your
fellow POWs didn’t revolve around any particular technical training but more
importantly involved moral and philosophical outlook that you had and maintained and
received, really, as training as young people. Is there anything…did they cover that at all
in survival training that you received, in that dimension of that experience that you would
have?
SJ: Not really. I think that’s the way you’re brought up with a family and a
religious upbringing that puts you in that kind of a mode and the service academies do a
lot of that. They used to make them go to church every Sunday; they don’t anymore and
I’m sad to say that I think that’s a mistake. But regardless of your religion, I think you
ought to have some reference to a higher being and belief in America and God; God and
America is basically what kept us going over there and the knowledge that there were
other Americans around us.
SM: But they did not discuss those types of philosophical issues with you in
survival school? This would become such an important dimension of it.
SJ: No, they didn’t. I think they are now.
SM: Do you think that has to do specifically with the experience that you and
others like you, and in particular Admiral Stockdale who has written on the subject
before, and you as well…
SJ: And Denton too.
SM: And Denton, yes, sir.
SJ: Absolutely. I don’t think there’s anything that kept us together more over there than Christian religion.
SM: Now your tour in Thailand, at Ubon, Thailand which is where you flew from and eventually were shot down in Vietnam, that was your second tour. You had a tour in Vietnam previous to that, and I was curious if we could discuss that a little bit in more detail. I was curious exactly what your position entailed and what your responsibilities were when you worked in Saigon?
SJ: Yes, I was in MACV headquarters, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, and when I first got there in 1965 I was working under General Westmoreland in what was called at the time the Emergency Action Center, which is where everything was. And that place was at that time a real dichotomy because in the daytime our guys were water-skiing in the river and at night you’d get up on the balcony and watch them shooting across it. Guys could go 15 miles into the jungle, rubber plantations a lot of them, and lose their whole squad. In fact, I ran across an officer, an Army second lieutenant that came up to the officer’s club. It was on top of a building there in downtown Saigon and I was up there at night. I wasn’t working that night. We worked shifts in the Emergency Action Center so it varied. He came in there, this guy was in combat fatigues, dirty, and shaking like a leaf and I said, ‘What’s the matter?’ and he said, ‘I’ve got to have a drink,’ and I said, ‘Well come on up and sit down and I’ll buy you one.’ So I got him a brandy straight and he just…and I said, ‘What in the world happened?’ and he said, ‘I had 15 guys out there in the rubber plantation and we lost them all,’ and he said…
SM: Let’s take a moment. After break. Well what were some of the more interesting things that you did during that first tour, working at MACV headquarters?
SJ: Well we started the B-52 bombing over there and I was part of helping develop that program. I think it was 101st Airborne that came in over there as a unit and they hadn’t any more landed than they got into hand to hand combat in central Vietnam and they had two battalions in reserve, they had committed three to start with, and they ended up committing the other two battalions. We lost communications with them and I was trying to find a way to get to them through the Philippines or even Hawaii and ships
you can bounce back in but they weren’t answering. The red phone rang and I picked it up and it was a guy, he said, ‘This is the White House, what’s going on over there?’ I said, ‘You don’t want to talk to me, you want to talk to General Westmoreland and I’ll get him.’ It was four o’clock in the morning. He said, ‘No, I want to talk to you. Tell me what’s happening.’ I said, ‘Well, we’re fighting a war, that’s what’s happening,’ and he said, ‘But tell me what’s going on in central Vietnam right now,’ and I said, ‘We don’t have any communication. They’re in hand to hand combat, and I imagine when they get a chance they’ll report to us.’ Phone slammed down, and I woke up Westmoreland and he came over and we found out that the press had gone in with them and when they got into hand to hand combat well the guys were sticking each other with bayonets and knives and they got scared and ran back to the coast shore and called back to Washington and told everybody that we were getting the hell beat out of us. That wasn’t the case. They didn’t lose that battle, as a matter of fact. We lost a lot of people but the Vietnamese lost. That was in ’65 and that was the first engagement with a real North Vietnamese unit against one of ours. I think it’s been written about. But Westmoreland put teletype machines in the room and made an enlisted guy sit there and watch for stuff that came over and anytime something came over he wanted to know about it, which is correct I think. Can I get another drink?

SM: Yes, please. Do you think that we had a clear and accurate grasp of the situation in Vietnam in ’65?

SJ: In what way?

SM: In both a political and a military context?

SJ: Well you know when I talked to Stockdale it was obvious that the war was a setup by Lyndon Johnson and to this day I don’t know why he did that. The geopolitical people in Washington had convinced him that this Domino Theory was going to be real, and it wasn’t. But if you look back over history and you have, I’m sure…even in World War II nobody ever got through Thailand. You know, Thailand was kind of a barrier between East and West, and even in that war Thailand wasn’t going to fall regardless of what we did and maybe they might have gone down into Malaysia, I don’t know, but it’s questionable because the Vietnamese communists just wanted Vietnam to be under one flag, maybe Laos included but I doubt even that. So, I think we totally misread the
geopolitical aspects of that war when we got sucked into it. Kennedy started it and
Johnson I don't think knew how to get out of it. But the worst mistake he made was
trying to run a country over here in a peacetime situation and run a full scale war over
there. Henry Kissinger said, and I think I quoted him, the biggest mistake we made was
in not including the people of the United States in that war; i.e. through rationing, gas
rationing, food rationing, whatever, some way so that the focus was on a war that we
intended to win, and the will to win never was there.

SM: And at the time did you and your other officers that you interacted with talk
about the lack of or the inability to mobilize the reserves on the part of the administration
for whatever reasons?

SJ: Yeah, we talked about the lack of support from the White House and the
administration, yes.

SM: Was the attitude amongst the officers pretty consistent?

SJ: Oh yeah, I don’t think there was anybody that doubted the fact that we were
not running that war right; too many rules, too many restrictions, no intent to win, and
McNamara’s idea of going in and backing off, that’s the dumbest thing I ever heard of.
You know, you go capture a town and then you back off from it, then they come back in
and you have to go do the whole thing over again. It’s crazy. It’s like the airplanes he
built, the ‘Edsell’ he built.

SM: What did you think about the eventual implementation of the attrition policy
that came really to dominate the war in Vietnam?

SJ: That was a mistake, too, I think. We were in POW camp then so I didn’t
know how it came about. Maybe you can tell me, I don’t know. But, it became a body
count thing and whoever kills the most wins. Well, there is a theory in war that if you
kill more of them than they do of you, you’re going to win, and that never happened in
Vietnam. But, it happened because we didn’t use the full force of our capability against
them, either, in weapons and so on.

SM: Now the rules of engagement…

SJ: We never attacked North Vietnam either. They were scared to death we were
going to land an amphibious force up there while we were prisoners, and they were
scared to death we were going to bomb their dykes and flood the whole place and we
never did that. There were a lot of things that we could have done short of a nuclear
weapon that would have been effective, but we didn’t do it, and that’s directly
attributable to the White House having no plan to win. They didn’t want to win.

SM: Do you think that the heavy emphasis on the law of land warfare, the
notions of atrocity, of genocide, crimes against humanity, that these things were playing a
role at all in the Johnson administration, especially since there were perhaps humanitarian
considerations in not bombing certain targets like dykes and things of that nature?

SJ: Sure, and you know, what I perceived from the press reports and we saw
seven years of them when we got out, on tape, the Associated Press put them together for
us, it was kind of neat, but our guys were griping about killing women and children. I
saw women and children fighting. I saw them training when we were captured. So, man,
it’s the way we presented that to the people in the United States that caused the problem,
not the fact that we were killing them. You couldn’t trust a kid to come close to you
because he might be carrying a grenade that has a pin out of it. I mean, come on!

SM: Yes sir. It was…

SJ: We drove around in Jeeps in the city of Saigon in ’65 when I was stationed
there with sandbags all over the bottom in case you ran over a land mine.

SM: Did you feel, also, the threat from some of the civilian sectors in Saigon
while you were there in ’65?

SJ: No, I didn’t. Saigon was a friendly town and it was a French town basically.
They still, when I was there in ’65, they still acted like a European city; French cuisine
and you drive up in your jeep to go eat it but that’s the only disparity. They had horse
racing going on down there in Cho Lon, the Chinese town, which is right there. To get to
it you had to go through a red Chinese or Viet Cong barrier and give them five bucks and
they’d let you go to the races. That’s the way that war was in those days. It’s kind of
like skiing on a river in the day and fighting at night.

SM: Yes, sir. Now were there any restrictions on American activities like that?
Americans weren’t supposed to go to the horse races?

SJ: No, they didn’t stop you as long as you paid the fee.

SM: No, I mean from the chain of command. Was that restricted in terms of
the…
SJ: I never heard anybody say anything about what you did with your own time. They probably should have. It wasn’t a real war. It was kind of like make-believe, you know?

SM: That must have changed, though, when you went to Ubon.

SJ: It did because we were flying up North a lot, in North Vietnam. But, the South, you know, is theoretically a friend so we were just helping them. That was the idea, and the more of them we killed the more likely they are to win, but it didn’t work out that way. I think McNamara’s idea of electronic fence there on the DMZ was another stupid thing that didn’t work. I mean, goodness gracious! If he wanted to stop them he could have dropped three nukes across there, ground bursts, and they wouldn’t have crossed. I mean, that would have been the easiest way without killing anybody. We had nukes in the theater.

SM: In ’65?

SJ: Sure did.

SM: I understand if you can’t answer this; was that something that Westmoreland was willing to do, do you know?

SJ: That who?

SM: That General Westmoreland was willing to do?

SJ: I don't think so. Westmoreland was, in my view, doing the best he could with the political circumstance that he was thrown into. He didn’t have a lot of choice.

SM: And just out of curiosity, I should have asked this earlier…

SJ: We did talk about it two or three times, but it never got anywhere so I’m assuming it went up channel and came back and said, ‘No.’

SM: Now when you say, ‘We talked about it,’ you and General Westmoreland talked about it?

SJ: No, he and his staff at Hue.

SM: Interesting.

SJ: The Air Force guys wanted to use the nuke, but they were worried about a ground burst, a nuclear ground burst contaminating the DMZ area or here we dropped them for 99 years or something. It’s just a big bomb. I’ve seen four of them and flown through one when I was at Nellis, the test sight out there.
SM: Yes, sir. What took you through a...I would assume a mushroom cloud?
SJ: Yeah, well to test the airplanes and see whether or not they would be
damaged flying through the nuclear explosion. When we landed they washed us off and
washed the airplane off before we got out of it, and I’m still here.
SM: Yes, sir. That’s fascinating. Did they do anything specific to the aircraft,
anything special?
SJ: Washed it down with water.
SM: That’s it? But how about before?
SJ: Before? No, it was just an ordinary airplane. That’s what we were trying to
find out if it hurt any of the systems. There’s nothing in that cloud. The radioactivity is
the alpha and beta rays that are on the ground when it blows up, and those are short lived
as you know and short range as well. So if you’re at ground zero, you’re going to die, but
if you’re at ground zero with a regular bomb you’re going to die. That’s the way I look at
it. The ground burst tests are the ones that really amazed me because I was taking
pictures at about 500 feet and it looked like about 100 miles of ground just lifted up and
went clear above me up to about 700 feet in the desert out there. I’ve never seen
anything like that. That is scary. That’s real scary. The service burst bombs aren’t very
scary I don't think, they’re just an explosion.
SM: How far out were you when the bomb was actually detonated?
SJ: On the ground burst?
SM: Yes, sir, the one you flew through.
SJ: I was 50 miles away from it.
SM: 50 miles?
SJ: Oh, the one I flew through? I flew right through it.
SM: No, I mean when the actual detonation occurred, how far away were you
from the detonation, do you recall?
SJ: Ten miles, maybe.
SM: Was there an EMP concern at that point? I mean, you had to be a certain
distance away or else the electromagnetic pulse…
SJ: We didn’t know about that in those days.
SM: So there was some significant danger involved in that mission?
SJ: We didn’t know anything about that. I remember the first one they set off when we were first stationed up there was up at Frenchman’s Flat and they did it at five o’clock in the morning and they notified everybody and they told us to pull the shades on the blinds in the house, in the bedroom. They were regular shades. We were 50 miles away, and because the light would be bright. Now I’m telling you, we got up; of course everybody got up to watch it. The light from that blast 50 miles away coming through the drawn blinds in the bedroom was like somebody setting a flashbulb off right in front of you; that’s the magnitude of that, and that was as I recall 15 or 20 kiloton weapon. It wasn’t a real big one. Then, about I guess a full five minutes later you get the shock wave and your house rattles, 50 miles away! That is impressive, and it’s a big bomb but it’s nothing to be afraid of. People talk about nuclear explosions in terms of it ruining the surface of the earth forever, they’re crazy, because we’ve set off a bunch of them out there and people still go out there to Nevada. There’s still parks around there. We used to go skiing out there on Mt. Charleston which overlooks Frenchman’s Flat, so that’s where you could go and watch them if you wanted to.

SM: Did you yourself get any of the green glass?

SJ: No.

SM: That’s pretty fascinating.

SJ: I tell you, there’s been a lot of development in my lifetime in the military and you know I was a part of a lot of those episodes I guess, and fortunate to fly almost every fighter the Air Force had from B-51s right on up through F-15s when I was active. I’ve flown the F-16 here and the V-22. It’s great being a part of our armed services.

SM: Before you got to Ubon, what was your favorite aircraft to fly?

SJ: Well, I like the F-86 H which was a higher performance than the original F-86 and a high altitude aircraft, and I was in instructor training so that’s what we taught in. But, before Korea, probably the F-4.

SM: You mentioned, you talk in your book quite a bit about some of the problems of cross application of aircraft. You’ve got this F-4 Phantom that was really developed for Navy; of course the Department of Defense forces the Air Force to use that aircraft. What would you have in Vietnam and over Vietnam when you were flying out of at Ubon? What would you prefer as a platform as an Air Force pilot?
SJ: I would have preferred the Air Force have their own aircraft. You cannot build an aircraft. Even today, we’re trying to do it again with the Joint Strike Fighter. You can’t build an airplane that is right for the Air Force, for the Navy, and for the Marines. You just can’t. I mean, that’s like saying, ‘I’m going to buy a Cadillac and use it as a truck.’ You can’t do that. It doesn’t work. I mean, maybe it will work, but not as well, let’s put it that way. We’re crazy for doing that. McNamara made such a mess of the services that you wouldn’t believe it. He came with that F111 that was supposed to be an all force fighter; the thing wasn’t even a fighter. They ended up making a bomber out of it, for crying out loud! The end commission rate was terrible on it. It is kind of like a C-5 today. C-5’s end commission rate is terrible and we need to get rid of them and get something better. C-17s, they’re easy to maintain and I found that in the F-15 when I first started flying the F-15. That thing is so easy to fly and maintain as compared to previous aircraft that it’s just amazing and the F-16 is just as good.

SM: In terms of Vietnam era aircraft, had you flown the F-100?

SJ: Yeah.

SM: And would you have preferred that over an F-4?

SJ: No.

SM: Okay.

SJ: F-100’s not as fast, won’t carry the same load, and is not as maneuverable.

SM: Was there a better platform at the time, better than the F-4 that you would have preferred?

SJ: Well you’re trying to tell me that there’s a better airplane out there, maybe the Mirage, a French Mirage or a British airplane, but the United States was governed by the Pentagon and McNamara who put us in the F-4 because it was a Navy airplane that he thought could be used by Navy, Air Force, and Marines. The dumb thing had a tail hook on it, which is extra weight. We used them in the Air Force but not very often. What you do is you restrict the ability to carry bombs and weapons and fuel when you put extra weight on an airplane. The Navy has that problem, they have to develop a different kind of airplane. The Marines want a short-range airplane with almost vertical takeoff capability. That’s why they got the Harrier and they’ve never used it in any conflict we’ve been in, and that’s what we’re fighting here in the Congress today; whether or not
to keep those Marines in that aircraft with the fan. Take the fan out and it costs a lot less and the Air Force and the Navy versions will work. I’ve been through that with tons of airplanes. The F-15 for example was first designed as a ground attack airplane. It had a system in it that would put bombs within five feet of a target and the Israelis bought it that way. We took all that out of ours and made a fighter out of it because the Congress of the United States wanted a fighter, so we bought a fighter. We bought the F-15. Guess what? We didn’t have an air to ground airplane, so the F-16, which was supposed to be a fighter, came along and they hang stuff all over it – not a lot because it’s so little – but it became the ground attack airplane and that’s never changed. That happened in the ‘50s. This country has a problem with getting the dollars out of the Congress and the Congressional attitude means a lot, which direction we’re going to go, and the people who really know what they’re doing and want to do what’s right in the Defense Department and the Executive Branch, so we’re hamstrung in a lot of ways when we start dealing in buying equipment.

SM: I forgot to ask you earlier, that telephone call that you received in the middle of the morning, did you ever find out who that was?
SJ: No, somebody in the White House, I don’t know who it was.
SM: I didn’t know if it was Secretary McNamara.
SJ: No, it wasn’t. He wouldn’t make a call like that. That was probably Lyndon Johnson’s guy.
SM: Now is that the first big indicator that it wasn’t so much that this was a heavily politicized war, but this war was really being micromanaged from the very top?
SJ: Oh yeah.
SM: Was that the first indicator that you got of that, or were there previous signs?
SJ: No, that’s probably my first experience with it, personally. I’m sure Westmoreland did, though.
SM: Did you have subsequent experiences that reinforced that?
SJ: Well when we were developing the B-52 bombing strategy, yes, that played into that again because we weren’t allowed to do total planning at MACV headquarters in Vietnam on sight, but it had to be done in Washington and then SAC headquarters and
then forwarded to us and then by the time those missions got to us, the Vietnamese knew every run that would have been made. It was a sell-out.

SM: And you cover that in your book rather well…

SJ: I try to.

SM: The fact that the bombing runs were very predictable for the enemy and that didn't make any sense.

SJ: Well even when they were bombing Hanoi is what I was talking about. They were.

SM: Well when you left from your first tour, again, were there any particular lessons or perceptions that you took away that were important, especially when you were making your decision to go ahead and sign up to come back, because you volunteered for that second tour?

SJ: Yes, but it appeared to me that we were going to get into an all-out conflict and not fight a guerilla type war. It didn’t occur of course, and if we had have it would have been a cleaner, more manageable situation. Guerilla warfare was…no one’s ever won one of those things. They claim the British did in Malaysia, but did they really? I don't know. They’re not there anymore.

SM: How legitimate…you mention that the decision was obviously made to not go all out there, standard, conventional military war. How significant at the time did you think the Chinese and potentially Soviet threat was? Of course Johnson’s attitude and what he was going on was probably from Korea and as we approached Korea in the Korean War and as we approached the Yalu River…

SJ: He made a total misjudgment in my view and I think I said that earlier. The Chinese had no intention of getting into that war. But they rattled the saber and when Johnson heard them saying they were going to, he believed them and he shouldn’t have. That’s our problem with communist countries; we believe too much of their stuff that comes out and it’s the thought control process that they try to work on POWs that they try to work the same process on everybody in the world. They used us as guinea pigs in their propaganda effort during the Vietnam War, even the Vietnamese, and they were not nearly as deft at that as the Chinese and Russians were.
SM: At the time, though, was it discussed amongst you and your fellow officers the potential for Chinese introduction of ground forces and the heavier commitment on the part of the Chinese military forces?

SJ: When we were POWs we talked about it and we didn’t think it would ever occur.

SM: How about before then, during your first tour?

SJ: I don’t think we discussed it then. That wasn’t one of our worries because it really was a localized war at that point we thought until they got one of their major armies involved and it was a little different.

SM: Well, your decision to go back to volunteer and take a second tour in Vietnam as a pilot, what did your wife think about that?

SJ: She thought it was all right. It’s one of those things that you’re escalating in the Air Force command structure and it’s a chance to do some of that that you’re trained for and it didn’t scare me at the time, or her either.

SM: How old were you when you made that decision to go back, approximately?

SJ: That would have been ’66 so I was 35.

SM: Did you know you were going to be stationed in Thailand if you volunteered as a pilot, or it didn’t matter?

SJ: Yeah, they told me where I was going to go.

SM: What kind of briefings or additional training did you receive before you went back for your second tour as a pilot?

SJ: Nothing.

SM: Did you think there was anything they could have done that might have helped prepare you?

SJ: No, huh-uh. I got briefed when I got on the ground there.

SM: What did they cover on that briefing when you arrived?

SJ: Well intelligence mostly, and what our primary mission was. We were flying night missions mostly so it was a harassment of our effort really.

SM: Well for the purposes of continuity for the interview, you do discuss this in the book, but why don’t you go ahead and describe how you understood the mission of air forces serving out of Thailand flying over North Vietnam?
SJ: Well we couldn’t work into North Vietnam unless we were fairly close to the border as Ubon and Udorn were. We refueled/air refueled on nearly every mission that we went up far North on. So, you’d go hit a tanker and then drop off up there with a full load of fuel so you had plenty of time, plenty of gas. I think the target selection by the people in Saigon was pretty poor because it wasn’t unusual to go up there and have a target that had already been destroyed or that didn’t exist. So, you know, you put your bombs on what you thought was important which really was against the rules at the time but I never would bring bombs back. I told them that. I think it’s a mistake to carry ordinance up into an enemy country and risk the fuel, time, and all that and not deliver them on something, a bridge or trucks or whatever you can find. And that was my philosophy. But I guess I learned that from talking to the guys that fought in World War II and my Korean experience. There weren't any restrictions like there were in Vietnam; not the same restrictions anyway. They didn't care if you shot at enemy or bombed a bridge and that’s what we were supposed to be doing. That’s the difference between a controlled guerilla conflict and an all-out war, too.

SM: Did you feel confident when you left from your first tour and when you arrived for your second tour that we were still on our way to winning this war?

SJ: Yes, I thought we had a shot at it because what we were doing primarily from our viewpoint at night was stopping the infiltration and the Ho Chi Minh Trail, blocking it up, and stopping weapons and equipment and manpower from reaching it. So, we were bombing the trails and the passes and roads that led down to the South and trying to stop them in that way.

SM: Did any of these operations occur under the control of a forward air controller?

SJ: None of them. No, I take that back; we were under control of another aircraft at a couple of times but it was in Laos, mostly not in Vietnam.

SM: And those were Air Force FACs flying?

SJ: Yeah, they were flying in C-130s and C-47s.

SM: And basically, these were again…

SJ: They weren’t shooting at us much over there, so you know, they were pretty safe.
SM: This is interdiction, trail interdiction?
SJ: Yes.
SM: About how many operations, do you remember approximately?
SJ: That we flew over there?
SM: That you flew into Laos and in that capacity of trail interdiction, from North Vietnam to Laos?
SJ: I only flew 25 missions before I was shot down, so I’d say probably five or six.
SM: The majority of your operations were nighttime flights into North Vietnam?
SJ: Yes. Even those were.
SM: Now were they using any kind of night vision device at that point?
SJ: They had them on the big airplanes. That’s why they had them up there guiding us, but we didn’t have any in ours.
SM: Were there any particular operations that stand out in your mind? You talked briefly about your other missions but of course the focus in your book is on the night that you were shot down. Before that, those 24 missions before that, were there any that stand out as particularly interesting?
SJ: Well we went into Dien Bien Phu one night and bombed a truck park in there. After we left there we still had some bombs so we recced the road into Hanoi from there and found a convoy of about eight trucks and we got two of them and they started unloading anti aircraft pretty heavy at us so we broke off and started back and bombed a bridge on the way back; dropped the rest of the bombs on it. That was one mission.
SM: The anti aircraft that you typically ran into, was it mostly 50s, quad-50s, similar to quad-50s?
SJ: Quad 40s, 50s, but heavier stuff on occasion, rare occasion. I never saw a SAM where we were.
SM: But some anti aircraft artillery?
SJ: Oh yeah, they had big artillery.
SM: How was the morale of your unit?
SJ: I thought it was good. I thought it was good. Fighter pilots have good morale. You’re taught to fight and that’s what you’re in there for.
SM: Was there maybe not a loss of morale but I would imagine that many of you were concerned, especially if you were sent to targets that had already been destroyed, repetitive targeting and stuff like that?

SJ: Yeah, we talked about that a lot but it didn’t destroy the morale of the guys, I think. Most of the guys were new Air Force pilots and didn’t know any different, you know. They thought that was the way you ran a war. You can run one that way, but you can’t win one that way.

SM: Yes, sir. We’ve been going for an hour. Would you like to take a few minutes break?

SJ: Yes.

SM: I think that the record you provided in your autobiography is very thorough in terms of providing the information necessary to understand the evening of your last flight and capture. But I did have some questions based on your book about your experiences as a POW and one of the interesting things you mentioned is the development of the POW policy BACKUS and I was curious if you ever had to respond to a fellow POW not adhering to that policy or that code that you developed?

SJ: Well there were five guys as you know that we called more or less turncoats that participated with the Vietnamese and we tried to make contact with them and get them back under the fold and didn’t have a lot of success, frankly, with two probably in particular; Miller being the leader of that group, and Wilber. But, as you know, they’ve all kind of destroyed their lives since they’ve been back, so I think that gnawed on them a little bit not really being with the Americans over there but capitulating to the enemy, so to speak.

SM: I know you are familiar with the expression, ‘There are no atheists in foxholes.’ Did you ever encounter an atheistic POW?

SJ: Yeah, there were a couple. I’m not going to tell you any names, but strange as it may seem with a long captivity there were guys over there that were atheists to start with or had atheistic tendings and tendencies and became Christians, because we had church service after we moved together every Sunday. And even before that we used to pray every Sunday. Some guy would give a signal and we would all kneel down together, even though we were by ourselves. There were others who turned atheistic
from Christianity and I never have figured that out. One of them was a guy that had a pretty bad asthma and he was Catholic, and I think he was waiting for God to knock the walls down and let us walk out of there and it never happened and of course it couldn’t happen that way. He didn’t and so he gave up on God. There were about two guys like that that I knew of. So, I guess it either comes from a weak upbringing or I don’t know what it is. Probably it’s a lack somewhere in his training, his bringing up, that caused that I would guess. I don’t think religion is the cause of it but it could be.

SM: I ask you because your faith seemed to be so important to you.

SJ: It was.

SM: It was really the essential thing that got you through this?

SJ: You bet you, you bet you.

SM: I was curious about the tap code. Of course this was very important in terms of communication and also obviously in coping with the solitude many of you had to endure. At the same time it seemed very basic and very simple if someone were paying attention to possibly break. Was there any indication that the Vietnamese had broken the tap code and were you ever questioned about the tap code by the Vietnamese captors?

SJ: They never questioned us about it but we knew they were trying to listen in to us because you’d get some erroneous taps every now and then. But, it was impossible for somebody who was not an American to follow that code because we ended up using one letter to mean a whole word; like Z was ‘say, says, or said,’ just the letter Z. I mean, how in the world are the Vietnamese going to figure that out? If you start tapping to a guy and you get halfway through a sentence and he knows what you’re saying he could just tap you off and you can go on to the next one. They can’t figure that out. That’s not a code, that’s just American ingenuity I guess.

SM: Yes, sir, absolutely. But, you were never questioned about it by the Vietnamese?

SJ: Well, they told us if they caught us communicating they called it, they would punish us, and that’s communicating.

SM: Did you ever hear of a prisoner being literally questioned, ‘What is this tap code? What do these taps mean?’
SJ: No, no. Some of the guys drew them on the walls in the early days and they
got punished for that. But I’m not sure just because you draw A, B, C, D on a wall they
know what it is. We changed the tap code toward the end so we had an unclassified, a
secret, and a top secret and changed the order of the letters every day and that sort of
thing. So the escape stuff would have been really tough for them to break.

SM: Speaking of the escape stuff that you obviously communicated between each
other, a couple of interesting stories that you tell in your book. The first real potential
escape opportunity was at the very beginning, and you mention that it seemed to you that
the people that first found you when you landed in Vietnam, that they might be trying to
help you? Had you heard of that happening prior to your being shot down?

SJ: No, I hadn’t.

SM: Did you hear about it afterwards?

SJ: Yeah, I ask them when I got back if we had anybody in there doing that sort
of thing and they said, ‘Yes.’

SM: Were there any successful?

SJ: I don’t know. I don’t know.

SM: Then of course another important not so much escape attempt or
communication but more of the rescue, the attempt at Son Tay, and I was curious, you
talk about having…I think you mention that you heard about it and learned about it in the
weeks and months that followed the actual raid and you yourself had heard the firing and
everything else on the sight. But I was wondering how did you actually learn about it as
a POW? Was there someone that came in and communicated to you that that attempt had
actually occurred?

SJ: I think I described that a little bit in the book. We got a tape in a piece of
candy and it was hard candy and they’d chopped it all up because they knew that our
government was trying to get things in to us. But I bit down on something and it was not
candy and it wasn’t a rock and so you know how you pull stuff out of your mouth and
when I did it it came apart and I looked at it and it was microfilm. I unrolled a strip of
film the length from here to the end of the room that was 16-millimeter size and yet it
was, oh, probably a third, maybe a tenth the size of a pea. I mean, it was really small but
it came unraveled and at that point my eyesight had deteriorated a little bit and I couldn’t
read it so we gave it to one of the young guys in the room who read it and memorized it
and then we destroyed it, and passed it around to everybody.

SM: I apologize, I missed that. I wasn’t able to get to that part of the book.

SJ: It came out of the New York Times. It was the front page of the New York
Times that they had sent us. It was a morale builder. They shot-gunned them, I wasn’t
the only one that got one in that time frame.

SM: In terms of other current events and other things that you may have heard
about - and again may have covered it but I missed it - while you were in prison, did you
hear about Johnson’s decision not to run for re-election in ’68, May of ’68 after the TET
Offensive?

SJ: Yeah, I think, you know, that’s a good question. I think so. I think they told
us. They ran a loud speaker all day long and I think they told us that, and of course we
didn’t know whether to believe them or not but it made sense.

SM: What other major events would they tell you about; for instance, Jane
Fonda’s visit? You saw her yourself, I’m sure?

SJ: No, I didn’t see her.

SM: You didn’t see her?

SJ: I refused to go see her. They played her voice on the loud speaker calling to
our troops to lay down their arms and showed us pictures of her sitting on an anti-aircraft
gun. So there’s another mistake our government made. She got over there without a
passport. She should have not let her back in the country. That didn’t happen, either.

SM: What are your thoughts on the current controversy concerning her or do you
have any you want to share?

SJ: Like what?

SM: Well, just that she’s come out and made a pseudo-apology and of course
there’s the renewed controversy surrounding her activities in Vietnam.

SJ: She hadn’t ever apologized. She’s not sorry for that. She’s claiming that
she’s a born again Christian now. I hope that’s true and I pray for her to be a different
individual, but she hadn’t ever apologized to anybody in the POW sphere and I don’t
think there’s a single guy around that believes that she did or will.
SM: Now within the POW circles while you were there in Vietnam, did you ever interact very much with enlisted men who were POWs?

SJ: Well there weren’t very many, and no, I didn’t personally. But they were in the rooms with some of the other guys so we knew about them. I didn’t meet them until after we got out.

SM: And a consistent theme throughout your book is the importance of, in addition to a number of other things, the importance of Admiral Stockdale and I was wondering if you just wanted to share some more of your personal thoughts on his role?

SJ: Jim is one of the great guys of our time, I think, and really he’s a philosopher. When he was running vice president for Perot, Perot didn’t help him at all, and Ross is a good friend of mine. I like him, he’s a real patriot, but he didn’t help Jim at all in that election, and I told Jim, I was out there when he was practicing, I told him, ‘You ought to challenge him with Aristotle and some of those philosophical theorems and they won’t know which way to go,’ but he wouldn’t do it. He’d have been better off in that scholastic environment than he was in the political environment, which he knew nothing about. And nobody was helping him and he wouldn’t listen to anyone, either. He thought he knew how to do it.

SM: But in terms of the role he played with the POWs in Vietnam?

SJ: Well, he took the bull by the horns as the ranking member at the time and structured our living environment in a posture that kept us fighting the Vietnamese the whole time we were there, and that’s part of the fighting man’s creed. I think he did a great job with it. Denton was behind him and the chain of command worked over there.

SM: Had you received much Code of Conduct training?

SJ: Yeah, we got quite a bit before we left and of course that was kind of a Korean War iteration, I believe; where it was more or less crystallized and the Geneva Conventions of War, too, were restructured after that. Even with all that, the Vietnamese still didn’t recognize the Geneva Conventions on war. They said we weren’t at war.

SM: Was there anything that you did not discuss in your book that you’ve thought of since writing your book and since thinking about your experiences in Vietnam that you’d like to talk about?

SJ: No, I don’t think so.
SM: I did want to ask you a few questions about your post war perspectives, and especially now as a member of Congress. Of course you mentioned earlier the body count, the attrition war. Do you think that the body count has had an impact on the formulation and implementation of American foreign policy, especially since it was so prominent in the Vietnam War?

SJ: Well I hope so, but you know on the other hand, we’ve gotten to the point where we want to fight a war without loosing anybody or any equipment either for that matter. I mean, everybody points to the Gulf War and the Yugoslav episode where we…what, did we lose two people in the Gulf War and two airplanes in the Yugoslav War? I just don’t think we can continue to expect those kind of results and neither can you expect to win without getting on the ground. The Air Force can’t win the war for you. They can neutralize the enemy so that the ground forces can get in there, but I think you’ve got to put ground forces in there in order to accomplish the objective you want to achieve, to wit, Bosnia. It’s just not working over there and we’re backing out already. And neither can the United Nations run it. I don’t think they’re capable of it. One of the things we’re fighting here in the Congress today and I think I feel pretty strongly about it is that we need to eliminate the influence of the United Nations on our foreign policy and our domestic policy too for that matter. This is the United States of America and we need to think about ourselves as a country, as a nation, and one of the more advanced nations in the world. To think that we’ve got to bring the rest of the world up to our status at our own expense is crazy. I think that if we can help them, that’s great. But you know we don’t need to be so environmentally or politically correct that we stifle our advances in the way we live because there isn’t another country in the world that can hold a candle to the United States, even in Europe, and even Canada.

SM: Speaking of helping other countries, what are your thoughts on the nature of American foreign policy concerning Vietnam and the normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam?

SJ: Well it’s a communist country and they haven’t proven they can deal - gentlemanly I guess is the word - in any negotiation that they do. And they’ve abrogated contracts with American businesses that have gone over there and tried to do business with them, and even though money has flowed into their hands you don’t see a great
increase in the way those people live over there. They’re still communists. So I have
opposed free trade with them until they change the way they act. I don’t like trading with
China either for the same reason and their human rights policies leave a lot to be desired.
And guys say, ‘Why don’t we trade with Cuba? It’s just like the other communist nations
in the world,’ and it is. If we’re going to trade with China and Vietnam we ought to trade
with Cuba, in my opinion. At least that’s in the American sphere. The only argument for
trade is that we can change their way of life by us being in there doing business with
them. That’s one reason. The other reason is that businesses think they can make a lot of
money in those countries. It hasn’t happened in China, it won’t happen in Vietnam, and
probably not in Cuba, either. Business is more afraid of Cuba than they are the other two,
and I don’t understand that because Vietnam has no more wealth than Cuba does and to
think that we’re going to achieve a trade balance with them is crazy. That’s the
Congressman in me coming out.

SM: Yes, sir. Normalizing relations with Vietnam and a lot of the interaction
between the United States and Vietnam has also revolved around the recovering and
repatriation of American remains. I was curious what your thoughts are on the current
POW and MIA policy and issues?

SJ: I don’t think we’ve been as strong with them as we could. Peterson’s a good
friend of mine, Ambassador over there, but he’s been afraid to push them on that issue
and go into some of the places that we weren’t allowed into. They’re still not allowing us
into a lot of places over there. For them to say, ‘Oh, we’re helping you recover all these
body parts and the wreckage sites,’ well shoot, we’ve known about those for a long time.
We’re not breaking any new ground. There is a lot of information in Russia in the Stalin
Archives that we are not allowed into and there’s a lot of information in China that our
previous administration, the Clinton Administration, refused to push China at all to try to
resolve some of these issues. I guess they thought I was going to start a war when I was
over in China with the number three communist guy. I asked him about that, and why
they wouldn’t talk to us about our guys that were shot down over China or taken into
China. He said he didn’t know anything about that, but he said, ‘We were never at war
with the United States and you never flew into China, so you didn’t lose anybody in
China.’ I said, ‘I beg to differ with you, I fought in two wars over there and we crossed
the Chinese border every day in Korea, and I’ve crossed it many times from Vietnam as
well and I watched people get shot down in China. Now can you help us?’ ‘I don’t know
anything about that,’ is the answer, and he was lying. So, it’s hard for me to trust those
kinds of guys. You know they’re lying.
SM: Well what do you think is the likelihood of any potential living POWs?
SJ: You know we left them and we left close to 60 in Cambodia, we left 10 or 12
in Laos that we knew of and never recovered them. I believe they’ve passed away since,
which is criminal on our part. When we negotiated the peace agreement we negotiated it
with Vietnam but not with Laos and Cambodia and that was a real problem. The
question that we’re approaching, both for Korea and Vietnam, is whether or not Russia
took any POWs into the Soviet Union and we are relatively certain that they did and in
fact have a couple of instances where we know they were from Korea. We’re relatively
certain they did from Vietnam, too, and transported them through Kazakhstan but I was
in Kazakhstan, I guess it’s been a year and a half ago now, and talking to a Russian
professor over there who said he saw many Americans during the Vietnam War. And so
I asked if he knew anybody, where anybody was, and he didn’t. He told us that most of
them were taken to their nuclear test sight and their space launch sight, which both of
them is in Kazakhstan. We found one guy there that looked like might be possibly an
American but we got our guys in there to interview him and he wasn’t. At least he
claimed he wasn’t, he claimed he was Latvian. Whether he was brainwashed or not, I
don’t know. You just don’t know when you’re inside a communist (country) or an
environment that was communist that is changed now and they try to cover up
everything. You just don’t know. We’ve had guys up inside the Arctic Circle on our
commission trying to find some of those old labor camps and see if there’s anybody up
there. We haven’t had any success at all. So you ask if there are any alive? I don’t
know. I rather doubt it at this late date, but there’s always a possibility. I would not ever
give up.
SM: I’m curious, you mentioned that you were speaking as a Congressman
moments ago. As a congressman, what’s the most important, or what are the most
important things you’ve taken away from your Vietnam War experience?
SJ: Well it’s given me insights here in the Congress concerning the military, especially I guess a lot of people don’t have. We’re down to nearly just 100 with any military experience at all out of the 435 members of the house and of those you can probably count them on two hands that have seen combat or fired a gun in anger. I think that that’s a little dangerous for the country, even though I’m not on Armed Services or Veteran’s Affairs or Armed Services Appropriations; I have a voice in all those committees and with the speaker, too, as far as military is concerned. So, I think you draw on those experiences to help you make positive decisions for America in the Congress of the United States.

SM: Would there be different lessons that you’ve taken away from your experience in terms of being a father and a husband?

SJ: Well I regret the time I lost with the kids when I was gone because they were in their teens. You know, some people have told my wife that I got shot down so she’d have to bring the kids up while they were teenagers. And that’s so far from the truth, but it is kind of…puts a different light on it [laughs]. They were great kids, still are, and I’ve gotten to know them a lot better now. In fact, my younger daughter barely knew me when I left and we are probably closer than any of the three.

SM: In terms of being an American, what’s the most important lesson you’ve taken away from the Vietnam War experience?

SJ: I think we have to stand tall in the saddle and be ready for any eventuality. The United States of America is the greatest nation in the world and we’ve got to work to keep it that way. It isn’t going to just stay there because we want it to. Our forefathers said it’s one nation under God, and we need to remember that every day of the week.

SM: Yes, sir. Is there anything else you would like to talk about today?

SJ: I can’t think of anything.

SM: Well thank you very much for taking the time. This will end the interview with Congressman Sam Johnson.