Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mrs. Shirley Johnson on the 12th of August, 2002 at approximately 3:30. We are at her home in Plano, Texas. This interview is part of the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. Well, ma’am first I’d like to start with a discussion of your early life and if you would tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

Shirley Johnson: I was born in Brady, Texas in McCullough County. At about five years old I believe we moved to Dallas. I had lived in Dallas until I went through high school at Woodrow Wilson and through SMU and Hockaday, which is a girls school here. I met Sam when we were seniors in high school. The year started with him on the library council and it wasn’t too long before he was asked to leave the library council because he was talking so much. So, I guess we double dated during high school. In college we started going together and we were married in our senior year of college at SMU. Shortly after, he graduated and went into the Air Force. That was the summer of ’51. [He] graduated from flying school there in ’52. We spent until 1965 traveling around. We were at Nellis and we were at an Air Force Base in Las Vegas. We were stationed at Montgomery, Alabama. He spent a year in Korea then we were back at Nellis. We were out there quite a few times. But we were at Nellis when he was transferred to Vietnam. We came back. Our children, we had three children by that time. They were Bob, who is our oldest, (James Robert) and Gini (Shirley Virginia) and
Beverly Neil. He left in November because of ’65 to go to Vietnam. That year we had Thanksgiving one weekend and Christmas the next [in Korea]. He left and returned back to Dallas because of an injured knee. Then he went back to Vietnam and then was shot down then in April [April 16, 1966]. They came on a Sunday to tell me that he had been shot down.

SM: Well, let me take you back for a minute. I wanted to ask you a little bit about growing up in Texas, in particular what you remember from growing up around Brady. I guess your more formative experiences probably occurred after you moved to Dallas.

SJ: Yes.

SM: What was it like growing up in Dallas during that period?

SJ: Well, very different from what it is right now. We lived in North Dallas in the area of SMU around Greenville and Mockingbird Lane. It was a lot of neighborhood play and going to school that was very close to home. I remember on Saturdays riding the streetcar to Oak Cliff to take music lessons. I think anymore you wouldn’t even [go] for starters there’s no way to get over there. So, you just wouldn’t do that now. I had lots of friends and our family was very active in church. I have one brother who is younger than I. So, he was just sort of a little pest for a long time (laughs). But he finally grew up and became a good friend.

SM: What about your mom and dad, what did they do?

SJ: They are both deceased.

SM: What did they do for a living?

SJ: He was an area manager for Allis Chalmers Tractors and Farm Machinery and she was a homemaker. I guess we had a pretty normal life. We did go back to Brady a lot because my mother’s family was from there. So, I spent a lot of summers out there on a couple of ranches that belong in our family.

SM: Now was that in the summer would you go back there and spend extended periods of time?

SJ: Yes.

SM: What was it like compared to what you were experiencing in Dallas to go back into more of a ranch environment, or was it that much different?
SJ: Well, it was different because just being a small town, that part of it was different. When I went out there I became the visiting princess or something, you know? Because everybody had to have an excuse for a party and I became the excuse. They’d have some for tea, nothing wild, but just girls parties. It was fun and I always enjoyed it. They had the July Jubilee in Brady that I liked. It was just a good time.

SM: Was that like a fair?

SJ: It’s a fair. There’s horse racing out there. (Was a good time to do).

SM: Did you take up horse racing yourself or horseback riding, I should say?

SJ: I did ride. I was not a very good rider because I found that [I] could either run or walk. I couldn’t do anything in between. [Never a lesson to learn to ride].

SM: As you were growing up in Dallas, what did you enjoy about school? Were there any particular subjects you enjoyed most?

SJ: Well, I always like math, probably more than any other subject.

SM: When you went then from high school to SMU, did you follow up on that as a major?

SJ: No. I didn’t and I should have. But I didn’t [and I don’t know why]. I majored in Home Ec and interior design. Got married before I ever had a job, so I never did work. I had to get my social security number when I was probably 24, 25 years old because I was doing some modeling and I was going to get paid for it, which I had never gotten paid for anything. I had to have that social security in order to get paid. It was you know, like a one-day deal.

SM: What were you modeling?

SJ: Oh, it was a [the Officer’s] wives club thing. At one of the big hotels in Las Vegas, which was sort of exciting.

SM: Was that a Dallas wives club?

SJ: No, it was an Air Force wives club.

SM: So, this was when you were stationed near Las Vegas?

SJ: At Nellis. Yeah, Las Vegas, [Nevada].

SM: How would you describe the community in which you grew up here in the Dallas area? Was it small, close knit? Was Dallas at that time starting to expand and become a little bit more diffuse?
SJ: No. Our house, which was right at Mockingbird and Greenville is downtown, almost Dallas right now. There were no houses behind us. We were out on the edge of town when we came here. I don’t know the population number at that time, but of course Dallas has really boomed since then. It was before Central Expressway was built. It was back in the olden days it sounds like.

SM: Wasn’t that long ago.

SJ: No, it really wasn’t. But it was a smaller town. We had a lot of friends here. My parents belonged to quite a large Sunday school class, just had a lot of things going on with that. Sundays [after church] we usually had dinner with either had people to our house or we went to somebody’s house for dinner. We had a good group of I guess they were young children and then young adults in our neighborhood. We spent a lot of time together. Initially, playing and playing hide and seek and all those good games like that. It’s I guess just normal growing up.

SM: Did you play any sports especially in high school or at SMU?

SJ: No.

SM: Did they offer women’s sports at the time?

SJ: Not really.

SM: They didn’t.

SJ: You did PE and you know volleyball and basketball, baseball. But it never went out of the period of school.

SM: I see, so they didn’t have a women’s volleyball like they might have a male’s baseball team?

SJ: No. Not at all. Or at least not that I knew about. I probably wouldn’t have done that anyway.

SM: But still, that’s a development I guess that’s occurred slowly over time. You mentioned that you and your family belonged to a church in town. Which denomination was that?

SJ: Highland Park Methodist Church.

SM: It was Methodist.
SJ: Which is on the campus of SMU. It’s a large church now and it was a pretty large one, you know back then. In fact, the church is the same building that it was then. It hasn’t changed.

SM: Did your father serve in World War II?

SJ: He served in World War I, my father did.

SM: Your father served in Word War I? Did he talk much about that experience?

SJ: No, he didn’t. The only thing I remember him saying was that he was a dental assistant. After listening to stories since then I sort of have my doubts that that’s actually what he did.

SM: It was his way of…

SJ: His way of not saying anything. He had told his age wrong and he was younger than he should have been, but I think there are a lot of them like that. I think he used that age for so long, I’m not sure that he actually knew how old he was for a long time.

SM: How about uncles or any other relatives that served in the military as you were growing up.

SJ: I have a cousin who was in Word War II, in the Air Force. He was a prisoner of war. He was a pilot and shot down and captured. He was captured by the Germans and they were transporting them in northern Italy. They had to stop because of some bombing and he ran quite a distance from the truck and when they were gathering them up, he just stayed where he was. He was able to get with a family in the area who kept him until the Americans came.

SM: Good for him. What a remarkable story.

SJ: I know.

SM: How long was he in captivity?

SJ: I don’t know.

SM: Couldn’t have been for very long, just a few days maybe.

SJ: No I don’t think it was. I think it was probably just a few months. It may have even been weeks. I just don’t know.

SM: That’s remarkable. Was he a pilot?

SJ: He was a pilot, yes.
SM: I’m sorry. You were…
SJ: I was 12 then so I was not totally interested in what he was doing.
SM: Well, as a teenager what was most interesting about growing up in Dallas? Was there much in terms of music going on here?
SJ: Oh, yes. There was wonderful music. It was all big bands. Lots of dances and if you had a date you probably went to Lou Anns, which was I guess a dance hall. It was mostly college students, high school and college students. They had records. They never had anybody live or anything like that, but they played. It was just a fun place to go.
SM: Did you have a favorite big band?
SJ: Oh, dear.
SM: Was one of them a mainstream Benny Goodman?
SJ: You’ve really caught me off guard with all these questions.
SM: Glenn Miller? I know.
SJ: I haven’t thought about this in ages.
SM: See, I’m a big band fan too. That’s why I ask.
SJ: I can remember a song, but not him. Probably Benny Goodman and some of the ones in that era. Glen Miller probably was a favorite. There were a lot of good movies and like Laura and Gone with the Wind and you know, things like that that came out.
SM: Did you have a favorite actor or an actress growing up?
SJ: That probably changed with every movie I went to.
SM: Ok.
SJ: I was not quite that enamored with it. I was following after only one. I don’t think so.
SM: What was the church leadership like and what were your parents like with regard to some of the activities you just mentioned. Going to Lu Anns, going to dances and things like that? Was there very much restriction?
SJ: Well, they kept pretty close track of me. They always knew who I was with. I can’t remember that I ever had a date with only one person. It was usually maybe four or six people going someplace. A lot of times it would be a bunch of girls going
someplace so it wasn’t a one on one situation. We used to ride the streetcar to Dallas to
the movies. I remember Sam and me doing that to the Palace Theatre and The Majestic
and The Tower, which were downtown. That was fun to do. You didn’t have a whole lot
of money to spend and it was after World War II, but gas rationing was still around. You
didn’t take advantage of the streetcar. He did have a car when we were dating, which
that was a plus.

SM: That wasn’t very common, I would imagine. Was it?
SJ: No, it wasn’t. But I think maybe he had a car because his mother worked. I
think that you know it was like his junior or senior year in high school that he had a car
and in college. There was no transportation from where we lived over to SMU. I mean
the transportation ran north and south. It did not go east and west.

SM: How did you get east to west then?
SJ: Well, you had somebody pick you up and take you. It was a little bit too far
to walk, so you really did have to depend on other people. Seems like ever day
somebody would have a car. You’d be calling around you know. Are you going? And
would you come by and get me.

SM: Not too much has changed then.
SJ: No.
SM: Kind of like a lot of kids today.
SJ: It hasn’t.

SM: You mentioned rationing. The gas rationing had continued now. What do
you remember about rationing and also about any of the drives that occurred during
World War II and did you and your family participate in the activities?

SJ: In the drives?
SM: The drives. The rubber drives, tin drives.
SJ: The tin foil, we did. I remember putting tin foil on. Starting out it was
something little and making a ball out of it. We did that. We had sugar rationing. You
had sugar coupons and gas coupons. Because my father traveled he had additional gas
coupons for that, but I don’t know how much because he didn’t really travel that long
[far]. You know that far in distance. So, I don’t know what he needed. I remember
going as probably a 10 or 11 year old with my mother to I think they were folding
bandages or something in a group for the Red Cross. It was not at the Red Cross or
anything like that, but I guess the women just gathered together and did whatever they
were doing and we were playing. So, I don’t know what they were doing for the Red
Cross.

SM: You think it was folding bandages? Wow.

SJ: I’m assuming they folded and then they disinfected them or whatever they
had to do.

SM: Do you remember when the War ended? When World War II ended?

SJ: No. I remember when Pearl Harbor was bombed just because of what I was
doing. It was a Sunday afternoon and I was at the swimming pool. I remember people
talking about it and getting all excited about it. As far as D-day and some of these things,
I knew them. I was just at an age I think that I really wasn’t really paying that much
attention to them like I should have. I know that we discussed them in school and my
parents did. I was, in 1942, which was I can’t remember if that was the beginning or the
end of the war, somebody invaded then. I was 12. So, I don’t have a good recollection
of that. Probably because it did not affect anybody that I really knew.

SM: As you were getting older, after the War ended and of course the
relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union very quickly became tense.
And then of course, the Cold War. The Iron Curtain descended and then the Cold War
started. Was that much a topic of conversation in your family? Especially at the dinner
table, politics and things like that?

SJ: Well, it was in Sam and my’s family because we were married in 1950, so
that anything that occurred after that you know that was military we certainly knew about
it and were aware of it. But, again we were with the families. They were not active in
anything like that, the wives. You’re asking the wrong person.

SM: I’m just curious what.

SJ: I knew about it.

SM: But it wasn’t a major concern for you.

SJ: It was a worry you know because I never knew when he was going to have to
go. Of course, right after we got married he went to Korea for a year. It’s I guess I went
through thinking that he was infallible and that nothing could happen to him. I don’t
know why I thought that, but it’s just such a strong feeling with me. You know that he
can take care of things and manage.

SM: You felt very secure?

SJ: I did. We were stationed at Nellis after he got back from Korea we went back
to Nellis again. They had a plan that they were going to evacuate the wives out there.
All they were going to do was put us on a school bus and drive us out to a spot in the
desert where they had water. We never did do that, but I just thought I would really have
felt safer in my house than driving on that school bus with who knows where we were
going. That was one of their plans that never got instigated at all. Which was good.

SM: It certainly doesn’t inspire confidence.

SJ: Not at all.

SM: That was their plan. Now as this in the event of a nuclear attack?

SJ: Yeah. Of course we were sitting out there. They were testing nuclear bombs
just north of Las Vegas at Yucca Flats. Sam flew a plane through the cloud of a bomb.
One morning I guess they exploded one and they told us it was going to be like 3:00 or
4:00 in the morning. We could watch it but to pull the shades down. We had cloth
shades on our windows, which we did. We could see the outline of the cloud and the
mushroom and it was 50 miles away. I guess that’s the only one that I saw. You know
he’s been around them, maybe that’s the reason I think nothing can happen to him.

SM: How bright was it when that bomb hit?

SJ: It lit the room up. It was like a flash bulb going off.

SM: Could you feel anything?

SJ: He says you can. I don’t remember a rumble from it or not. I didn’t think so.

SM: But supposedly you were 50 miles away from the explosion and you could
see the mushroom cloud.

SJ: I don’t know. I guess we could have gone outside and looked at it, but they
were afraid for us to. That it would blind you because it would be so bright. I can
imagine it was. You know it was pretty bright through that shade, well you know how
thick those are.

SM: Well, the initial flash most definitely.

SJ: It was underground.
SM: After the initial flash and as you were just watching the mushroom cloud for were you able to look just through that glass, not through the shade itself. Did you ever look at it with a naked eye at the mushroom cloud?

SJ: No, because we couldn’t see it then. It was too far away. Once the flash went, that was all we could see.

SM: That’s all you could see. So at the time of the flash you could actually see the mushroom cloud?

SJ: Yeah.

SM: Wow. What did that do in terms of your perceptions and your ideas about atomic warfare, nuclear warfare. I mean here’s this bomb going off a few miles away and you have these after effects that you can witness yourself.

SJ: Well, I’ve always been a little afraid of them. He says it’s just another bomb. I don’t know. I don’t know what you do, there isn’t any way you can stop one if it’s coming your way.

SM: Well, did he or did you in your family have your own plan in the event of an atomic or a nuclear strike? Did you guys have a fall out shelter or anything like that?

SJ: No. We were in base housing and there was nothing there. As I say we were going out in the desert, going to Yucca Flats.

SM: Well, that was the official plan that the Air Force put together.

SJ: The official plan. Well, if anything had happened he would have been called away or called up. You know we would have been left there by ourselves. I guess, I’m not sure what I would have done. I really never did. There wasn’t any talk then about a plan to do anything. I mean all that’s relatively new. You know these escape plans and all this. The only plan you had back then was what you did if there was a tornado. But, there were no tornadoes in Nevada, so we didn’t have that out there. But, all the time, the military and the government, their idea is the person that’s in the service. The rest of you sort of fend for yourselves sometimes I mean if something like that happens. I always felt like somebody would rise to the occasion and help us, but they never did have to so I don’t know.

SM: So, how were you treated as the wife of an Air Force pilot? What were the family services like on the Air Force base?
SJ: They were always pretty good. I think since we married and went right into
the military, I just sort of accepted what they did and what was offered. I took advantage
of what I wanted to. If I didn’t want to I didn’t. I never felt forced to do anything at all.
But there were Air Force wives club, officer’s club and NCO club and enlisted wives
clubs. Plus squadron get-togethers. They just never, I think the squadron commanders
wives never allowed anybody in the squadron to feel like they weren’t welcome and that
they had a family there. When you would transfer, you know I really felt like I was
leaving my family and I was leaving these good, good friends that I had. We’d get to the
next base and there would be some of our other good friends that we’d met. So, it was
just going from one group to the other that you knew each other.

SM: Well, how many transitions did you have between the time you went into the
Air Force until the time Sam was in Vietnam? Was it four or five?
SJ: Moves?
SM: Moves.
SJ: I have those written down and there are 19 total moves that we made. Let me
think. Probably at least 10 or 12 of them. Oh, no not that many. Let’s see. Sit there and
count.
SM: I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that. No, I have them down.
They’re in Washington.
SM: But he went to Korea for one tour.
SJ: Yeah, he left Dallas and went to Korea and came back to Dallas. We moved
to Las Vegas. Before he’d gone to Korea we were at Bartoe, Florida for training. Moved
down there, then we went to Brian Air Force Base. All this was about six months. Then
out to Nellis and from Nellis we came back to Dallas. We stayed in Dallas with my
parents and his parents sort of back and forth. We had one son at that point. Our
daughter Jenny was born about six months after he left and six months before he got
home. So, she was a good-sized little girl before he came home. Then we went back to
Nellis after he got back from Korea. From there we went to schools. We went to school
in Maxwell in Montgomery, Alabama. We went to Valdosta, Georgia to two different
schools. You know back to Nellis each time.
SM: You did a lot of moving around.
SJ: Yeah. Form Nellis he went to Korea. I’m sorry that isn’t right. At Nellis he was director of Ops. at the weapons school. He was on the Thunderbirds. I guess he was on the Thunderbirds first and on a flying demonstration team. They were flying about 300 shows a year or something like that. It was a huge number and all over the United States. So, that they were gone you know 360 days out of the year or something like that. It was a whole bunch for two years. Probably not quite that many, but I haven’t counted that up yet either.

SM: Sounds like quite a hardship tour.

SJ: Well, it was. But that little group of wives, all the Thunderbird wives we had a lot of activities we did. We joined each other for Sunday dinner at the Officer’s Club or the Officer’s Mess. Our children were all about the same age so spent time at the swimming pool and doing things with them. Then after the Thunderbirds we went to Europe and we went to France for a years to Chamo. Chamo. C-H-A-M-O. I think. While we were there it was when DeGalle decided that all of the military should move out of France. So, they transferred us, the whole wing up to England to Lakenheath. When we transferred Sam got orders to go back to Nellis to go through the weapons school, which he had not been through. So, he went to Nellis and the children and I drove from France up to England, took the ferry, went up. We stayed in this huge manor home that they had turned into quarters for people that were coming on into England, because this whole wing was going up there. We were about the first ones to go because you couldn’t go until you had a place to live. Because he was leaving they had gone ahead and let us move up. So, we moved up there into a tiny, tiny trailer. We had friends of ours who, he got his wife up there under the guise that they were going to live with us. So, they moved into this little trailer with us. They finally got a house so we all moved to the house because it was so much bigger. We were in England for two years and our children Bob and Jenny both went to public school in England. A village school in Lakenheath. Bob is a physicist today and Jenny she actually has her degree in interior design, but she’s a math wizard also. I give the credit for that for the English schools because every math problem they did, their multiplication and division they did in pounds and shillings and pins. They were all different values. They had pages. You know one math problem would go on forever because you divided and then you had to get in 10s or
back into something. Anyway, they’re good math students. Beverley was around by that time. She went to first grade in England. We came back. To back up a little bit we lived in a house in Lakenheath. We did not ever get a house on the base up there. We lived in the town of Lakenheath in a wonderful two-story brick house. Our address was The Gables, Lakenheath, England. It sounded grand. It was not grand, but it was very comfortable. Anyway, we came back to Nellis again. We were out there and then went to another school. I can’t remember. He went to joint schools and to the Airwar College and Air Command and Staff and Senior schools after he got back. Anyway, we stayed there until he went to Vietnam. You didn’t count and I didn’t either.

SM: No, but that’s as awful lot of moving going on there. Wow. Well, how were you treated in France as an American family?

SJ: Well, out in our village they were very nice. The only thing they wouldn’t speak English with you. I had taken French in college, which I didn’t learn it very good. But I would try to speak with them. I don’t think I ever conjugated a verb (laughs). It was I think to be, instead of I am. I think we got along pretty well, but they just really would not speak English and most of them know how.

SM: I was just going to ask you did most of them know?

SJ: Yeah, we were over in France last year and we found that more of them are speaking English. I can imagine that they probably felt uncomfortable more than anything. I don’t think they were not talking to be mean. But, I don’t know (laughs).

SM: How about in England? Were you treated differently or nicer perhaps in England perhaps than in France?

SJ: They were very nice up there. I don’t know we just never have lived any place that we weren’t treated nice. We lived on the economy in England. Our neighbors around there were, the man that lived next door, we lived next door to him for two years and we talked about the weather all the time. So, they’re very polite and our children made friends with the English children in the neighborhood because I don’t think there were any other Americans living in the town, from the base. They had a lot of friends around.

SM: This life style that you’re existing at this pointing in your life, how does this compare to or measure up with your expectations of what married life would be like and
what a family life would be like? When you got married to Sam and you knew he was
going in the Air Force did you have any idea that it was going to be like this?
SJ: When we got married and he was going to be a real estate agent.
SM: Oh, so you didn’t know he was going in the Air Force.
SJ: I didn’t have a clue he was going in the Air Force. NO, I didn’t. When he
went to Korea he loved flying. He had never flown. He’d never been in an airplane until
he got in the Air Force. He was in ROTC at SMU, it was when Korea broke out. They
called up the whole class. He was supposed to be a supply officer. He decide that was
not what he wanted to do, he wanted to fly. He graduated second in his class and he got
to choose what he wanted. Well, actually he just chose then. When he got through flying
school he graduated second in the class. So, he got to choose whether he went to fighters
or not. Of course, he chose fighters. After I think he had been in Korea and the first year
after he got back we had a long discussion about whether or not he should stay in the
military. He decided that he would like to become a regular officer as opposed to a
reserve officer. So, we did. Hs mother used to say that some day he was going to get a
real job. She was I think the one that really wanted him to come back and be some
executive or something, but it was just not what he wanted to do. There were a lot of
times obviously that we were separated. We’ve had times that he was on alert, going to
fly as the military said at o’dark hundred, which was you know pitch dark outside. He’s
leaving or coming home late. I think what you find in the military is the wives probably
do more of the raising of the family. Not because they’re not there and not supportive,
but they’re not physically there a lot of times. You know it just falls on your shoulders to
do that. I didn’t know any better so I did it.
SM: What would you say was the greatest challenge you faced as an Air Force
wife at that time in your life? Was that carrying?
SJ: I think probably just taking care of our house. When he was on the
Thunderbirds it’s a prestige thing for them. I think the wives felt like they should act nice
and be polite, make sure your children don’t get in trouble so that it doesn’t reflect on
your husband’s career, which it can. Because you’re living right there on the base most
of the time. I’ve had Bob brought home from the end of the runway watching the
airplanes take off. Which we lived so close to it, they didn’t say anything much except
ma’m, would you please keep your son at home? There’s a camaraderie between the
wives and the men. We still keep up with a lot of Air Force friends that we’ve had
through the years. Some of them haven’t seen for probably 20 years, but if that length of
time goes by you can sit right down and start talking again like you had seen them
yesterday. It’s I don’t know. It’s not a bad life. It’s certainly a different life than the
people in Dallas were doing. I was here when he was in Korea and when he was in
Vietnam. I had a group of friends that we had gone to high school with. We got together
pretty often. They can’t believe us, I don’t think. They just wonder if we’ve lost our
minds sometimes. You know we got to live in France and we got to live in England. He
got to live in Korea. When he came back from Vietnam, we went to Washington D.C. to
the Airwar College up there, which is a big senior joint service college. It’s a year. At
the end of that year they have a trip. I don’t know whether they’re still going on trips or
not, but they flew him down and had a tour of South America. Which was you know a
great opportunity for him. They didn’t invite the wives to go. But, anyway it was fun.
You know you get good gifts if you don’t go.

SM: Well, a few high profile political events that occurred before Sam went to
Vietnam and while you were probably in Europe. What do you recall about hearing,
learning about Kennedy’s assassination? What did you think about that? How did you
feel about that?

SJ: Doing what?

SM: Kennedy’s assassination, do you recall where you were?

SJ: Yes, I do. I remember these things because of what was going on with us.

We were in Las Vegas at that time. Our son had been playing tag with the neighborhood
kids and they went through a pyracantha bush at our house. A limb popped back into his
face and punctured his lens in one eye. He and I were in the hospital when Kennedy was
shot. We spent that whole week in the hospital with the TV. That’s all that was on. So, I
was not in Dallas. I was heart sick that that happened in Dallas, because I love the town.
I know there’s probably an element in Dallas that would fall in that category. I don’t
know where those people came from. It just was very sad. I wasn’t particularly.

SM: Were you a supporter of President Kennedy? Were you active politically at
all? Well, you must have voted or maybe not.
SJ: I don’t think I voted for him. Did Goldwater run before Kennedy? I can’t remember.

SM: I think Goldwater’s first campaign was ’64, but I’m not sure. He ran against Johnson in ’64 as a hawk.

SJ: Ok, it was after then.

SM: Nixon of course ran against Kennedy.

SJ: I don’t know. I have no idea.

SM: Were you raised in a particular political party.

SJ: Well, Democrat in Texas.

SM: I was going to say must have been Democrat. Of course, that’s what Kennedy’s party was. The Democratic Party. But, being in the military did that change at all?

SJ: Well, the military is apolitical. You probably didn’t even hardly discuss much other than how the military was treated or what they were being asked to do or something like that. You didn’t have any rallies or anything like that. Town hall meetings or something. I don’t know whether I voted from him or not.

SM: Well, how did you feel about his Presidency, especially he ran on his particularly idealistic platform and of course his Inaugural Address. “Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.” Service oriented message. How did his assassination affect you, if at all personally or in your family or the people that you knew?

SJ: I don’t think it did.

SM: When Johnson became President and of course, again high profile political and now international events occurred, in 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin incidents. The war in Vietnam starts to pick up. At what point did that become more important to you? Did you start following it at any particular point?

SJ: Well, I think when Sam was shot down. When they came to tell me that he’d been shot down, there’s 13 hours difference, something. It’s total confusion in my mind trying to figure out what time of day it is. When they finished telling me you know they said they thought they’d seen parachutes so they knew that somebody got out of the plane. I don’t recall them saying two parachutes. But because the second one came out
so quickly before the plane hit, which was not him. He was the first cute out. Again, I assumed it was him and that he was alright and that he was on the ground. Of course, he was terribly injured. There were montagnards that had tried to help him escape. They were not successful obviously. But when they came to tell me they said please do not talk about this with anybody. I’m thinking in my mind, you’ve got to be crazy. Because there is no way I wouldn’t be able to not talk about this. We were living in Plano. It was about 10,000 people here. You know, I knew a lot of them. I’d known them before we came out here, we bought a house. Of course, after he was shot down well, everybody knew who I was. I walked into the school with Beverly. This was on Sunday. I guess it was probably Tuesday, maybe even Monday morning, I don’t remember. I’m not sure why I went inside with her, but I did. The principal came out and he said, how are ya? And I just burst into tears you know. I just couldn’t keep it to myself. I wasn’t necessarily telling everything that they told me, but you know there were too many people asking you know, how’s Sam? You know, well he’s fine. Well, he wasn’t fine. There wasn’t anything fine about it. I was never very quiet. I wasn’t necessarily in the newspapers or anything like that. Because the first few years as you could see there was no information. There was no letter from him. They carried him as missing. We found out when we first went up to Washington that they actually had known he was a prisoner and they did not tell me because their idea was if they knew something they should tell how they knew it and where it came from. They didn’t want the information out about how they found out about it. So, they didn’t ever change his status. I guess I would have accepted the fact that they knew he was there without insisting that they tell me how. But, I know for a fact that there were many wives who would not do that. They wanted to know every detail and how they knew. So, consequently they didn’t tell anybody. Which I think is a shame.

SM: Now he was shot down in April 1966.
SM: How were you initially notified?
SJ: Well, the officer’s came to the door. There was a doctor and a minister and a notifying officer from personnel. And another fellow that I can’t remember what his job was. They came you know they’d come in and they sat there and told us about it. I think
I can’t remember whether the kids were there or not. I know they were there, but we’d been to church.

SM: This was a Sunday?

SJ: Yeah, it was a Sunday. Bob was 14 and Jenny 12 and Beverly was 9. I suspect you know it was early afternoon. I’m sure they had already found something to do by that time. They stayed with me until I got hold of my mother and brother. I also called a couple behind me. There was a doctor and his wife that lived behind me. I don’t know why I really called him because I didn’t feel like I was going to do anything or anything like that, but I guess I just wanted the company. My family came out. Sam’s family was in Tampa, Florida. They had already been to tell them. They told me to call them because they knew about it, but they would not be calling me, because they had told them not to call me until I called them. I talked to them and they were very, very pessimistic. I know it was because they didn’t have any contact with the military and didn’t know what they were capable of doing. Anyway, we waited and waited and I was getting letters and phone calls from people. Everybody I’d ever known called. They would call and tell me that he’ll be alright. He’s so honorable they won’t know what to do with him and they’ll send him home quick. He’s laughed about that. He said they’d come near killing him, then sending him home with that statement. One letter said it couldn’t happen to a better family. I guess that we were more capable and able to handle it. At least, that’s the way I took it.

SM: Hopefully, that’s the way it was intended. I’m sure it was.

SJ: I think it was. I’m sure that’s what she meant that we could handle this. I wasn’t so sure about that. When that happened all of his paycheck continued to come to me. So, we had no physical change actually in our life over here. We spent the next three years just waiting and wondering. I think in that time, we had a prayer service in our church, which was in Plano at the time. A Methodist church in Plano, 24 hour prayer vigil. You know there was just so much interest in what was going on and what was happening with us. You know had we heard? Did we know anything? My little brother became my strong right arm and you know he really was great. I guess we continued like that until after Nixon was elected. When he was elected they did just a total about face on what would happen with the prisoners. Because when Johnson was President, their
idea was if we don’t say anything they will get better treatment than if we broadcast that they are indeed prisoners. You know make it public, which was not true at all. Because during the three and a half years that Johnson was President was when Sam was in irons and in leg stalks for almost that whole time. You know, he had the worst treatment during that period of time.

SM: During LBJ tenure probably. It improved dramatically after Nixon went in.
SJ: It improved for two reasons Nixon was elected President and sometime shortly after that Ho Chi Minh died. That made a big improvement because they didn’t have that strong leadership that they’d had in him. About the time, let’s see. After November Nixon was elected then and I can’t remember whether he’d been in office a year or whether he was just elected that November. I don’t have a date.
SM: November ’68 would have been the election.
SJ: Ok, so ’69 November, December ’69.
SM: A year later.
SJ: Is when Sybil Stockdale, who was a Navy wife, Jim Stockdale was her husband. She and the Navy wives were different from the Air Force wives because they had houses around a naval port that their husbands went out of. They were all there together, so they were in groups. We were scattered all over the United States and because if you were on the base when your husband was shot down, it was probably just a matter of days or a few weeks before you were moved off the base. You know wherever you wanted to go, but they moved you right off. So, anyway that didn’t happen to us, but I know that it did to some of them. Anyway the Navy wives were a little bit more organized because they were together and they could get organized. Sybil Stockdale was in San Diego and they decided that we should meet in Washington. She asked the personnel officers for a list of all the wives because she was going to send a letter to them. They wouldn’t give them to her so, they said if you’ll send the letter to us, we will be happy to send it out. Which, they did. I got the letter, which is long gone. But immediately called Sybil and told her that I was interested and you know I would be happy to do anything from the Dallas area or wherever that she wanted me to. They did this meeting at the DAR building in Washington. Senator Dole was the only Senator or the only Representative that showed up at it. I just remember being in there with all those
people. There were so many you know because there were fathers and mothers and wives and everybody that had anybody over there. I don’t remember, by that time there probably was at least well 350 to 400 men being held captive. Of course, these were all MIA wives. It was everybody that had somebody missing. They had some speakers and shortly after that they decided to form the League of Families of form a league. I think I don’t know how my name came up to be on the ad hoc committee to form that, but it was. I had a phone call from one of the Dallas wives who asked me if I would do that. I suspect that it was I guess it was Sybil that requested that I be on that. I don’t really know because I didn’t volunteer. So, anyway they set a meeting date. We met in Washington for about four or five days in the attorney’s office to discuss forming a league. We picked the name during that time. It’s League of Families of American Prisoner and Missing in Southeast Asia. Prisoners of War and Missing in Action in Southeast Asia I guess. That first board, I can’t honestly remember whether I was elected to it or volunteered or appointed, but I was on it. There must have been an election, but I don’t know. We started meeting and going to Washington about once a month for the meeting up there. Before the League was started Ross Perot started trying to get letters over to the men. He started the United We Stand. People were sending letters in and they were sending them out, packaging them and sending them to North Vietnam, the North Vietnamese in Paris and in Hanoi. I went down one day. I thought well, I was in Plano and it was a little bit away for what was going on down there and I thought well, I’ll go down and volunteer. Do whatever was there to do. I spent the morning down there. I think it was mid afternoon Tom Muir and a couple other guys came walking around who worked for Ross. They were introducing themselves to everybody and they stopped by me and asked who I was and I told them. I said my husband is a prisoner in Vietnam. They scooped me up and said you’ve got to go meet Ross. They took me up to his office and I met him. We’re still good friends with all of those guys and all the ones that worked with him in the United We Stand, which Murphy is one of those.

SM: That’s how United We Stand started it was to get correspondence over to prisoners.

SJ: United We Stand did.

SM: In Hanoi.
SJ: They started forming, putting together trips. They made a couple trips over to Paris, which I did not go because by that time I had had a letter from Sam. So, those were mostly MIA wives that did that. Anyway, I never did go on one of them.

SM: Take a step back real quick. What did you think when Sam came home that day and said hey, I’ve got orders I’m going to Vietnam? Did it register that this was going to be a really hazardous assignment for him or potentially hazardous assignment?

SJ: No, because I think he sheltered me from that. Because I think I was afraid of it, but I sort of kept it to myself and don’t get too emotional about it with him. He said I’m going to be ok and don’t worry about me. He went over there initially into Saigon to MACV headquarters in the staff over there. Of course, didn’t like it at all because he wasn’t flying.

SM: You mean you were worried.

SJ: Oh, yeah I was worried. You know it was lonesome and he’s good about writing and letters and after he was shot down I got like a crate sort of with all of his stuff in it. It came back.

SM: How did that make you feel?

SJ: They sent it back. There was a tape that he had made in there. That was the saddest thing I even listened to in my life. He talked about I am so tired, I don’t know what I am doing. He had flown. Every mission had been flown at night. He said he’d sleep all day and fly at night. Just dazed, topsy turvey. I think I still have that tape. I haven’t listened to it in ages. He had been down to Bangkok and all R&R, rest and relaxation they call it. He was talking about that, was telling me what he’d done. The first letter we got. When we went to Washington that first time, excuse me I have a good friend whose husband was sot down and didn’t come home. Joann and I went to visit General Chapey James, whose son is now head of the reserves and a fine young man. He was in the Pentagon and we went in for an appointment with him. He told me he said of course, Joann was not getting any mail because her husband was killed. He told me to start writing on the forms that this committee of liaison would send. I said well, I don’t want to use those. You know they’re a Communist group. I objected to them and he says no, you need to use them because they seem to be the only mail that’s getting through and it’s important that your letters get through. So, I switched and we actually began to sort
of exchange letters by that time. Although, I think I got about 30 letters during the three
and a half years or three years that he wrote. They’re supposed to be able to write two
letters and two or three postcards a month. Obviously 30 was not anything like that. He
got 12 from me. I was writing every month.

SM: This committee of liaisons.
SJ: Yeah. There’s some papers about them in here.
SM: This was a group that you had to write through to get to him.
SJ: No, you mailed them, but they got the letters back. The letters were never set
to me. They were sent to them and then they would forward them to me.
SM: Who ran that?
SJ: Bella Absoug was on it. Cora Weese was the head of it. Murphy’s got tapes
and real correspondence with them, not form letters like I had. I’m not sure how they got
involved. I mean they just inserted themselves. They were not anything that anyone
appointed unless the Vietnamese government did. I have no idea how they were formed.
SM: But they were Communists?
SJ: Yeah. David Dellums is another one. You have the list on their letter forms.
It’s on there. I sort of erased them from my mind. David Dellums called me one time to
tell me that they had a letter and it would be delivered. I’d have it in a day or two or
something like that. He didn’t know anything. I don’t even think he. I don’t know
whether they’ve ever looked at the letters or not. I have no idea if they opened them.
They were sealed. They were just a fold over with six lines on them. When you wrote
you could write small enough that you could probably write like a 3X5 piece of paper or
something like that. Like a small sheet of stationary. It was difficult to write the letters
because I was writing about our children and what we were doing and what they were
doing. Bob went through college. By the time Sam came home Bob got his Master’s
degree that year. Jenny graduated from college from Texas Tech and the next year
Beverly graduated from high school. So, he had missed their whole teenage years.
There’s always something coming up that he doesn’t know about. In fact, one of the first
things that happened when he go home was tell me what happened to the post office. I’m
thinking the post office is still on the corner. I don’t know where you were. Where did it
go? They’d privatized it or something. I don’t know. It was not totally under the
government anymore like it used to be. There were a lot of things like that.

SM: Tell me about the post office (laughs).

SJ: Yeah.

SM: How did you handle telling the children after you were of course informed
by the group of men who came, the minister and the physician, the casualty assistance
officer?

SJ: I think I just told them. I think I told them that you know he’d probably be ok.
In fact, a good time after he got home Beverly our youngest daughter moved back in with
us and lived with us for a few years. She told me that she was so happy that she had done
this because she said I honestly thought that he was some sort of a God because you just
kept him up on such a pedestal and he was so perfect and everything. She said I didn’t
know what kind of a father we had. When I got to know him she said he’s normal just
like everybody else and I like him. I like him better like this. When we were selling the
POW bracelets, that was an organization that did those and they came to the wives, to
The League and asked if we would be interested in them. Which we said yes. They
printed them with every name that they had. Every MIA and POW and the date that they
were shot down. We sold them because we were doing a lot of traveling. Like I said we
were going to Washington every month and the Air Force was wonderful about letting us
ride on Air Force planes. We could go out to or call Andrews or see if somebody was
going to Dallas. Yes, they were do you have room for one person? They’d usually let us
go on. So, that was good.

SM: Is that how you did most of your travelings to the Washington meetings that
you mentioned earlier.

SJ: They can’t do that much anymore because it’s a perk. But it was a life saver
for us. I’m not sure. I don’t think I ever went up there on a commercial airplane.

SM: Well, another step back a little further. If I could ask you. We were talking
about politics before with Kennedy. I forgot to ask you about the ’64 election. Were you
a Johnson supporter?

SJ: No. Was it with Goldwater?

SM: Against Goldwater.
SM: You voted for Barry Goldwater. Ok. When the Air Force personnel came and told you about Sam being shot down and obviously they provided you with whatever information they could about the incident all they could anyway. How he was shot down and what have you. Whatever they could tell you. What do you remember in terms of did they provide any information about assistance that the Air Force would continue to provide you or could provide you? Counseling, things like that or was that even. Was that topic even brushed?

SJ: It probably was, but I don’t remember it particularly. I’m sure they told me that the personnel office. Because there was a personnel officer there and I’m sure he told me that they would be in touch. The personnel officer, local one that they used was up at Sherman at the Air Force Base up there, which has since closed. San Antonio is where the personnel big office is. Major Gratch was the personnel officer. He is a wonderful person, patience. You could call him if you know a problem or whatever anytime. He was always very nice to talk with you and he never rushed you, never hurried me. Never said I don’t have time to talk with you today. I don’t know what happened to the rest of the world while you were talking to him but they just went away. But he really was and he stayed in that office the entire time. He was down there the whole seven years that Sam was in Vietnam and a number of years after that. I guess the Air Force figured out they had a real jewel and they kept him.

SM: He corresponded with you, quite a bit?

SJ: Yes, yes.

SM: Ok. What was your initial impression, say for the first three years until you went ultimately to Washington for that first meeting? From 1966 until 1969 how would you describe your impressions of how responsive the government was to your needs as an Air Force wife whose husband is missing?

SJ: I think they were responsive to me. I know there were wives who didn’t think that, but I felt like they were. I feel like I understand that they had a plan and they can just do so much. When you get out of that, well they might want to help you but they can’t or they may not be able to. I think it’s not so much that they don’t want to, it’s
more of a regulation thing. I don’t recall them ever saying sorry, we can’t do that. But I

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1 don’t think I ever asked for anything that was terribly out of line.

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SM: Well, when you received the initial letter in 1966, April of ’66 following it

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March of ’67. The letters indicate he could be captive, but nothing certain. April ’67

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same thing uncertain. February ’68 still, it’s maybe. The April ’68 is I think the date on

the letter that I saw where it’s finally a confirmation, yes. Sam is, we’ve got

confirmation he’s being held prisoner. Two years for them to confirm that definitely he

is a prisoner of war. He survived the crash or he survived his injuries in landing. You

indicated that they knew earlier based on some research that you and Sam have done. I

think they knew through letters that they’d gotten.

SM: Letters from other prisoners?

SJ: yeah.

SM: Do you have any idea how early that was? How early did they know

through those letters.

SJ: I think probably fairly early. He thinks from the time he got to Hanoi.

SM: Which would have been?

SJ: A month.

SM: With in at least a month, month and a half maybe. So, by May/June ’66

they had received confirmation more than likely that he was being held captive.

SJ: Yeah.

SM: And yet for another in essence, two years they didn’t tell you. How did you

feel when you discovered that? They knew for two years and they didn’t tell you.

SJ: Well, I mean I couldn’t change it so it was not. I didn’t have anybody to fuss

at.

SM: You couldn’t fuss at Sam. It wasn’t his fault.

SJ: I didn’t even know who did it so, I mean you now what can you do?

SM: I find that so wrong. They knew for that time.

SJ: Well, it was disappointing you know.

SM: Do you have any idea what they were trying to protect?

SJ: Well, they way they were getting information out I’m sure is what they were

protecting. Don’t know what it was.
SM: Oh, I see. So, if they had someone who was basically encoding messages and letters coming out and encoding them within information the names of people that were recent arrivals. That could compromise that source. It may make the Vietnamese scrutinize materials coming out of the prisons. That makes sense.

SJ: It made sense to me.

SM: The two years of emotional turmoil you went through. Well, one of the recurring themes in all those letters is where he mentioned don’t talk to the media. If you do talk to the media, name, rank, service number, date of birth basically the same as they point out in the letters. This is the same information that Sam will give out under the Geneva Conventions under the Code of Conduct. This is what he can say and this is what you should say and nothing more. Were you approached by the media?

SJ: Not until after the League started.

SM: In ’69?

SJ: Yeah. Maybe in Plano I can’t remember. But I don’t really think so.

SM: Were you approached by anybody else that you didn’t know as a member of your community, a member of your family or Sam’s family trying to get information in some bizarre way.

SJ: No, no. They had to find Plano for starters and then they had to find me. I think we were pretty protected out here. The Chief of Police drove by our house everyday to check us to make sure we were ok. He didn’t come in, you know just drove around maybe once or twice a day. You know the town wasn’t that big and it was easy to do. You know I just don’t think I was very accessible to anyone, which was fine.

SM: The first time you got that letter about meeting, going to Washington and meeting, did you have any idea what the agenda for that meeting would be?

SJ: Not really.

SM: or what would eventually come about from it?

SJ: No. I visited with Murphy Martin. They did send a tentative by-laws of a group. I took them over to Murphy’s and he and I went over them. He made a couple suggestions of changes. You know and I saw some that I thought could be changed. I saw some of the men that were involved, some of the attorneys that were involved in that some years later. They thanked me for the suggestions I’d brought. I don’t know
whether they thanked everybody or not. Anyway, they did. I’m sure they were not major
eye were just word changes, sentence structures, things like that.

SM: Now, of course we’ve already talked about the creation of United We Stand
and Ross Perot, did he become involved with the League of Families early on as well or
at all?

SJ: No.

SM: What was he like by the way, when you met him?

SJ: He’s very, very nice. He’s always interesting what he does. He’s very, very
patriotic. He’s very interested in what happens to our country. He was a wonderful
spokesman back then. Because they flew an airplane of packages, Christmas packages
that they tried to get to Hanoi. They wouldn’t let him land when they got over there.
They went on and ended up in Russia, I think and delivered them. I don’t think they ever
got anywhere. He’s an ideal person. He’s one that says you know, I ‘m going to do this
and this and this and you do it. I mean somebody else is taking care of it. He may tell
you how to do it, but he definitely is the man with the ideas and he had lots.

SM: Did you have subsequent meetings at all with him say from 1969 to 1973?

SJ: I saw him quite a bit. Not you know in his office like that, but I met with him
and I would see him and I would see the different men that were working with him.
When Sam came home, Murphy Martin was with Channel 8 and they came out and we
drove to Wichita Falls together. He was up there and interviewed him and interviewed us
before we left. It was a big, busy ordeal. I bet it was pretty exciting.

SM: Mr. Perot of course has remained very active with the POWs. I mean he’s
hosted them quite a few times.

SJ: He has. He just had them all out to their ranch. In fact, one of the fellows as
talking about the Veteran’s Day in Dallas and said that he had given them 10, 000 dollars
eyery year towards that. He’s very generous. They have a Perot Foundation that does a
lot of things that people don’t know about. I guess they tell you if you ask them, but you
don’t know to ask, so. They’re a wonderful family.

SM: Another question about that meeting, that initial meeting in Washington you
said they had some speakers and I guess they gave presentations to the people who had
come to that first meeting. Do you remember what those were about? What were they discussing?

SJ: No. Well, Bob Dole spoke and I think Sybil talked and it was just sort of a we’re here and we’ve got a bunch of people and we have a bunch of men that we don’t know where they are or what’s going on with them. It became evident that somebody needed to speak up for them and try to get better treatment and get them recognized under the Geneva Convention because Hanoi was saying that it was not a declared war and that is not what the Geneva Convention says. It says any armed conflict. It doesn’t say anything about war. That was the main thing was to try to get better treatment and recognition and names released and lists of names and make people here aware of them. You know we had bumper stickers and everything you do for a political campaign. When we went to Washington, we’d visit with Senators and Congressmen up there. We were lobbyists is what we were doing. I went into John Tower’s office one time in Washington and he threw his hands up and he said Shirley I have done everything I know to do. I do not know anything else to do. You know, just total frustration. I think they were really trying to help, but nobody really knew quite what to do. When they did the Son Tay Raid over there that brought the Alcatraz guys back into the main prison. After they started bombing up there well after they got food again it got better. They were moved together. So, everything we did that was sort of proactive, helped them and that was the object of it.

SM: It seems like it was political activism in conscious instruction. With regard to that first meeting, it seems like the tenor of the meeting as it evolved was where you really as the wives of missing in action and the men listed as prisoners, you’re not happy with the situation and you don’t think the government is doing all it can do.

SJ: Well, we didn’t know what they were doing. It wasn’t a matter of being unhappy so much. It was unhappy because we didn’t know and wanting to know and if they were doing anything.

SM: Because they wouldn’t tell you.

SJ: You know there was just a change after Nixon was elected and the people that were up there, they just did an about face on how they should handle it. I know at Tech the other day, when Mr. Reckner was saying that we were fighting the military and the
government, and I guess we were, but we never thought about it as that at all. I think if somebody had said stop, we would have. I don’t know.

SM: Fortunately no one did.

SJ: No one said stop. We used to have, you know to get petitions and things like that at the Dallas Fair. We’d have a booth out there. We’d get people to sign petitions to sent them to Paris.

SM: What would the petitions say?

SJ: Well, we just ask that you give recognition and treat them according to the Geneva Convention and to provide food and decent clothing and letters correspondence home and medical treatment if necessary. We’d get a lot of signatures during the fair. The ones that always came up and fussed at us, I think were men that probably had been in World War I or II that didn’t think we should be doing that. Never did figure out why. But they would what are ya’ll doing out here? You know you shouldn’t be doing this.

They were older men.

SM: They would chastise you?

SJ: Yeah, they were chastising us a little bit.

SM: For being vocal?

SJ: Uh-huh.

SM: Did they ever give reasons?

SJ: No they didn’t and I never figured out why other than that they just thought obviously that we shouldn’t be doing that. I couldn’t even figure out why. Maybe they thought they shouldn’t be sent to North Vietnam. I don’t know. You can lull over that for a little bit. I don’t know. I don’t think anybody ever asked them because we really didn’t want to talk to them you know. If we don’t pay any attention to you, you’ll go away.

SM: Now, the critical comments that you received were they universally from men or were there also women that would question why you were doing what you’re doing.

SJ: No, not too many women.

SM: It was mostly men?

SJ: Mostly men.
SM: Older gentlemen hat probably served in World War II.
SJ: Yeah, I think so.
SM: Did any of them identify themselves as World War II Veteran’s to you?
SJ: No, I just assumed.
SM: Was this part of the Dallas Cares?
SJ: It was part of the Dallas Cares group.
SM: Did that eventually just kind of filter into the larger League of Families, Dallas Cares? Or did they remain a discrete entity itself?
SJ: No, it remained separate. Mostly, because it was our speakers group. They had people that would go out and speak to different groups the PTA or Meades or whatever book clubs.
SM: This is where you would go on speaking engagements?
SJ: Yeah.
SM: So, you would talk to PTA groups? What would you tell them? What would you talk about?
SJ: Well, tell them about the treatment they were getting and what they should be having under the Geneva Convention. What they could do. By the time we started talking they had begun to release some people. There was one Hegdahl is his last name. He was a Navy Seaman that the boat did a zig and he went off of it and fell in the water and they rescued him. He was not a pilot and didn’t have any information at all. The finally after about a couple of ears I think they sent him home. But before he was sent home they had filled him with names and as much information as they could. We had that and we had that information from him and a couple other guys about how they were being treated although Sam was being treated much worse than what they were coming out with. But, it was bad enough from them. You know we could tell about that. We could show them the forms of the letters we had to write on. You know it was just a program for them was all it was. I think we got enough interest in it that people were aware of it. They got very interested they would come and go give speeches.
SM: How would they typically respond?
SJ: They were good.
MS: Positive?
SJ: Mmhmm. I think they were very empathetic and you know sort of horrified at the whole thing. Because I think when we went into the Universities that’s where we would run into static there from the kids. I don’t think we talked at schools very much. I remember going to UT Arlington one time and to a class out there. You know, why were they over there bombing women and children, stuff like that? Which is not what they were doing. I mean it’s sort of like fighting the terrorists right now. They would send their children out with bombs and stuff. War is not fun, nor is it pretty.

SM: Was that the only major University you spoke at? Do you recall? Was UT Arlington?

SJ: I spoke in church a number of times. I spoke in a church up at Sherman at the Air Force Base up there. One month I gave about 20 speeches. That’s when we got Dallas Cares going big time because it was just getting ridiculous. You know we were creating an interest in everything.

SM: Now, at this point people were contacting you asking you to come talk.

SJ: Yeah. At Richardson I particularly remember, they have on the 4th of July fireworks at the football stadium. Dan Reeves and his family and Charlie Waters I think and his family used to go and I’d go. My children were older and maybe one of them would be with me and we’d sit out there. They would have introduced us. We’d been part of the pre-program and everything. Sit out and watch the fireworks with them. We had a prayer vigil one time at the Highland Park Methodist Church with all the Dallas Cowboys. A number of them came and read the names of the men that were missing.

SM: You were just talking about the Dallas Cowboys prayer vigil.

SJ: Yeah, they came and they read the names of all the men, a candle was lit for each of them.

SM: Very nice.

SJ: We did that two years I guess. They all had bracelets.

SM: The Dallas Cowboys wore bracelets as well. How important was that activity for you, from a spiritual standpoint?

SJ: I think it was helpful because well, we prayed so much. It was also helpful to have that meeting and relationship. Everything you did, you know when Roger Staubach’s out there doing something people were looking and listening and he did. You
know he came and of course he’s a Navy person. So, it was something that he would like
to do. Anything that we could do that would get them out. Of course during this time all
the anti-war stuff was beginning to come up. In fact, we heard the other day that in this
new textbook that they’re writing for Texas that the Vietnam War is only going to be
about the protests and the United States all the people were against it. And they’re
fighting it. I mean that was not true. We probably ran into as much of it as anybody and
we didn’t run into that much at all.

SM: Well, it certainly flies in the face of historical fact.
SJ: I know, I know.
SM: Well, that’s unbelievable. That’s the first I heard that.
SJ: We talked to one of the school board members the other day and she was
asking Sam if there was something he could do about it. Which, I don’t know whether
there is or not.
SM: Wow.
SJ: Take you kid out of school.
SM: Well, that’s not good at all. Well, Dallas itself has a political base. It was
conservative. I mean Democratic, yes with the predominant Democratic Party. But,
politically, philosophically, religiously this is a very conservative part of the country.
SJ: It’s very conservative.
SM: Certainly, like you pointed out the only place you ran into any kind of
negative input was principally UT Arlington and the occasionally apparently World War
II veteran that you might.
SJ: Which I don’t know where they were from. They may not even have been
from Dallas. It could have been anywhere.
SM: But UT Arlington, just a small student population that may have been
opposed.
SJ: Probably three people in the class that were voicing those opinions. You
know we could speak against it. I mean it wasn’t a problem talking to them.
SM: You had to be effective.
SJ: Because we didn’t feel like it was the wrong thing to do. I think it was being
handled wrong. But I don’t think the fact that the men were over there was wrong. I
don’t know. I never did keep track with the number of bracelets that we sold. But, I reached a point that I could get in an elevator and probably sell three of four bracelets in the elevators.

SM: That’s great.

SJ: You know it was like on fire or something. I don’t think I could do that anymore.

SM: Now, was that something that most of the women participated in? Most of the wives was the bracelet selling?

SJ: Yeah, I think they did. A lot of them did. There were a few wives that didn’t participate in anything. You know I don’t know why. Some of them that really lived off by themselves said it was really inconvenient for them to get somewhere. I do know some of those and I can certainly understand that. There were some of the wives that were as anti-war as the UT Arlington kids were.

SM: Was that before as well as after the husbands were shot down?

SJ: No, it was after.

SM: They just became anti-war after their husbands were captured.

SJ: I think so.

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing with the interview with Mrs. Shirley Johnson on the 13th of August 2002. We are at Mrs. Johnson’s home in Plano, Texas. This is a continuation of the Vietnam Oral History for the Vietnam Oral History Project.

Thank you again mam. I’d like to pick up today’s discussion with regard to the media and how the media attention changed in 1969-1970, and how the media responded to the League of families and the plight of American POWs and what you recall.

SJ: I think for the most part they responded well and they were very helpful. In Dallas, we had one reporter from the Dallas Morning News who met with us on a regular basis and tried to create stories for the paper with a new angle to them. You know to make news and put them in the paper. That worked very well. He was quite helpful. The television people I remember having one crew out to my house one time. I can’t quite recall the reason that they were there, but I mean it was something to do with either Dallas Cares or the League, an interview with them. As they walked around the house getting ready, they happened to go by Sam’s airplane. His Thunderbird airplane, his
model. They looked at it, one of them made the comment that he must have really been a pretty good pilot. Maybe they came thinking that they were not good pilots because they had gotten shot down. But, it changed his mind when he saw that plane. He knew who they were, who the Thunderbirds were. You know knew their flying skills. There were people at Channel 8 in particular in Dallas that were extremely helpful. When they returned home, I can tell you about that later or do you want to know that now?

SM: Well, while you’re talking about it, that’s fine.

SJ: Ok, when they returned home.

SM: This is when the POWs came back in 1973?

SJ: Yeah. They had called us and asked us if we would come down to the station as soon as we heard from Sam. We were to go down for the 10:00 news. We kept waiting, and waiting, and waiting to hear from him. Finally, he called about 9:00 at night because our friend who had gone over to be his escort officer and they were in the Philippines by this time. He said there’s no reason to rush to the phone and stand in line to call. So, let’s just wait until everybody else has called, then we’ll go down and you can talk longer. So, he in fact, they did that. We got down to the news station and right at the end of it. They introduced us and asked a little bit about what he had said. Our daughters went with me. Jenny was down there. They ended the news asking her, what will you do when you see your Daddy? She said just love him. Vern Linquist and Murphy Martin were sitting there with tears in their eyes. Streaming down their faces. It was just a moving thing that happened at that time. I think for the most part, the media, I would say understood what we were doing. They were relatively, at least in the Dallas area. Occasionally you would hear some of them saying they were just over there bombing women and children, which was not true at all. In fact, they’d go out of their way to not bomb areas that have civilians in them. It’s just not a true statement.

SM: During this process from the time that Sam was shot down in 1966 until he came home, did you find yourself becoming more immersed in some of the technical jargon and some of the technical issues facing pilots that were flying missions in Southeast Asia? Whether it be the surface to air missile or the SAM threats and the anti-aircraft artillery, were you educating the media about the reality of some of those threats that existed to American pilots?
SJ: I’m not sure that we were doing that. We purposely stayed away from the war itself. We were just interested in the Geneva Convention and how they were being treated. You knew about it, but it was not something that you talked about. That brought on an argument; you know when you make the statements like that.

SM: So, you were in part educating them about the Geneva Convention. Something that is educating the media about the Geneva Conventions, the way the North Vietnamese are supposed to treat American prisoners of war and things of that nature. Did you find that many in the media were unaware that they were ignorant of those issues?

SJ: Their main thrust was it was in time of war and that there had been no war proclaimed. Which was true, I believe in Korea as well. There is not a war. There hasn’t been one actually, what’s the word I’m looking for? Not proclaimed.

SM: Declared.

SJ: Declared, thank you. But that’s not what the Geneva Convention says. It’s time of war, or armed conflict. You know, they didn’t want to hear that. Ready to ignore the things that don’t support your argument.

SM: You mentioned newspaper and TV, how about radio? Were you interviewed much on radio or were wives to your knowledge?

SJ: I’m sure they were. I don’t recall a lot of radio. I’ve known Ron Chapman for a good, many years and I must have talked to him at some point. I have had calls from the radio about different events with him. That’s sort of a spot news, quickie thing. I don’t think there are any. I just don’t recall any of those.

SM: Now, through this, how was the Department of Defense, the Air Force how were they responding to this increased media attention? Because of course, a lot of the correspondence you receive says, very explicitly please don’t talk about, it doesn’t even say please (laughs).

SJ: Do not.

SM: Do not talk about this.

SJ: I don’t recall when that stopped. But did it stop in ’69 or ’70 or do you remember?
SM: I don’t recall seeing whether or not the Air Force correspondence that you received stops mentioning talking with the media. But all of the correspondence I read up to that time was very expressly was don’t talk to the media. If you do just say those things that Sam can say, name, rank, serial number, date of birth and that’s it. I can’t imagine that their policy would have changed.

SJ: I don’t recall any pressure. I really think the Nixon administration relaxed that. Like I told you, we met with Chappy James, four-star general in the Pentagon and he’s saying use the committee of liaison. He was very supportive of the League. Of course, they were doing press releases. We were all sort of learning what to do. Nobody had a clue about how to do this. It was just a straight up learning curve.

SM: While you were engaged in the speaking engagement in particular and also some of the Dallas Cares activities. When you were out and engaging the public and trying to educate them on these issues, you mentioned some of the negative responses, which are very few. Most of it was supportive.

SJ: They were.

SM: Did you ever meet someone whose husband was also a prisoner, but was not yet aware of the League or of Dallas Cares and were able to make contact with a new, fellow wife?

SJ: I think early on you know that happened. Because we were always looking for people. I remember one wife that joined us who was a Navy wife. She was isolated from the Navy, being in Dallas and not knowing any Air Force wives, she was really pretty isolated. I don’t remember how she got into the group, but she was a member and she did participate. She had personal problems. Everybody had, beside you know working on the League stuff, they had problems that were with the, not necessarily because of the military, but the military was having to deal with them. She was one that, she had been married probably just a year or two before her husband was shot down. His will, they make you update your will before you go overseas, the men. He either had not done it or he had made his mother the beneficiary of everything. So, his mother was getting all of his money and everything. His wife was, she was just really out there alone. They finally you know got that straightened out. But I think even then they ended up dividing it rather than giving it to the wife, which you know is not the right thing to do.
The military was caught because of the fact that he had left his will undone. I don’t know. Some of the wives that you know the military could call and tell them something that had happened. They insisted on having every ounce of information that they had. You know they just couldn’t give it to them because of other people.

SM: Well in terms of the wives that were new to the organization or actually more importantly, as you’re engaged in this outreach activity, did you encounter wives or mothers of men who had been shot down in previous wars that told you their stories or that were missing and still listed missing? Because of course, a lot of people don’t realize that the roles of missing in war and World War II and Korea are very high as well and those have never been accounted for. They’re still trying to do that.

SJ: I don’t think that we ever ran into them. Basically because when we were starting out and when Sybil sent that first letter out, they only went to the ones that were current.

SM: Right.

SJ: I don’t recall meeting anyone like that, but somebody may have.

SM: I was just curious maybe some of the outreach activity.

SJ: That’s really become more prominent I think since Vietnam because Sam is serving right now on the committee, I can’t remember the name of it. But it’s to look out for prisoners and missing or missing from World War II and Korea and Vietnam. It’s a Congressional Committee.

SM: A Congressional Committee.

SJ: It’s just a small group. There’s like two Congressmen and two Senators is what it’s supposed to be and their lacking. The two Congressmen will be selected by the one by the Speaker and one by the Minority Leader. So, you have a Democrat and a Republican. Then you have a Democrat and Republican for the Senate.

SM: Is that a sub-committee of the Armed Services Committee, do you know?

SJ: No, I think it’s just a Presidential Committee. I’ll get you the name of it. I may think of it in a minute.

SM: They must have a liaison with the Army’s central lab in Hawaii.

SJ: They do, they do. They have a Department of Missing Persons, DITMO.

Whatever that stands for. There are people there. They have quite a few working on it
still. They continue to get leads on people and they have actually identified some and
had some remains returned from Korea. Sam is chairman of the Korean part of that. We
actually had a trip to East Asia a couple of years ago. We met with a man who was
aware of pilots that were brought into Russia, through China. I think Vladavastok is
where the train rails switch sizes. So, they had to change trains there. When they got
into Russia, they think that they gave them Russian names and no longer used their
American names. They’re mostly Navy pilots that had been around nuclear submarines
or something. They had some nuclear information and took them up and they were
supposedly in this reactor or a lab that they worked in. This man claims to have seen
them. You know, it’s things like that, that you run into that they have been able to look at
the records of people coming and going into the country. The border guards keep
records. They have record of everyone going into Russia. The Kremlin has records.
You know everybody in the world over there has different records. Stalin had records.
They’ve gotten unto most of them, but periodically they get mad and tell them to go
home, they won’t let them look. But in the military records they have very large books.
Like a 12x14 page that would open out. They’ll have records of every bullet fired. They
have the pilots picture and the guns used and the type of aircraft he flew. You know, all
the information about him and then if they had an American plane shot down, they’ll
have a picture of that. You know all the information that they have about that. Then on
the next page they have the anti-aircraft crew that also claims to have shot that airplane
down. So, he said it was a very, very interesting thing to look at. That’s for a few years I
guess he was making four of five trips over to Moscow and looking at that. So, we’re off
the subject.

SM: Not really, because this is all kind of interrelated. I mean the American
attention toward the plight of POWs and missing. If it hadn’t been for the response for
women like you and the other members of the League of Families, I don’t think
American awareness and American attention would have been as a lasting as it has been
toward that issue.

SJ: It may not have been.

SM: Because you really provided a focus.

SJ: Didn’t think about that. I think that was a surprise when Mr. Reckner.
SM: Dr. Reckner, yeah.
SJ: Or Dr. Reckner ok.
SM: I call him Dr. because I’m one of his students.
SJ: Well, he had mentioned that the other day that we were the first ones to form
a women’s group, basically a women’s group and Louise Mulligan was talking with me
about that. There’s a man whose done a video that he’s interviewed some of the wives.
That was his exact remark that it was the first time that there had been a group of women
band together to do something political, which we didn’t even think about that. It was
just not even in our brain that we were doing that. He said we were fighting the
government. I thought I never though about me fighting the government.
SM: Well, it’s funny because you mentioned yesterday your perspective was that
more than likely if someone high enough had said please stop this, the group may have
stopped.
SJ: I don’t know whether they would have or not.
SM: Great irony there.
SJ: They’d have thought about it anyway, but no one did.
SM: Do you have any idea who has conducted the video interviews?
SJ: No, but I could find out from Louise.
SM: I might want to contact that person sometime in the future.
SJ: I’m hopeful she will contact you all.
SM: Yes, me too.
SJ: I think they’re planning on putting that down at the POW museum that’s in
Alabama.
SM: Ok. To your knowledge, have any of those American who were shipped
from Korea through China to the Soviet Union have any of them been recovered, live or
their remains?
SJ: Not the ones I was talking about. But there about 20 years after the war, there
were men released from Korea, from North Korea and can’t give you their names. One
of them had been one of Sam’s a squadron commander Alsace or something in his
squadron. They were sent back.
SM: Unbelievable. Ok, so the Department of Defense and the Air Force never approached you and asked you to slow down any of the activities that you were engaged in. That’s good.

SJ: In fact, I had the Air Force call, the personnel call one time and ask me if I would fly to Washington and have a meeting with Henry Kissinger, which I couldn’t do. That was just a grave mistake. I should have just dropped everything and gone, but I think something was going on with my children, I felt that I couldn’t leave. You know that took first place because we really all got a little bit afraid of me flying because I kept thinking you know what are we going to do if I’m not here to take care of everybody. They had this same feeling. For what it’s worth, that’s why I didn’t go meet with Henry Kissinger. I did ask him if I could get a representative from around here and they said no. Don’t shake your head at me.

SM: Oh, no. Just amazed, wow.

SJ: Me turning down the Secretary of State. Sorry, I don’t care to go see him. He probably thought I was crazy too.

SM: Did someone go in your stead do you know?

SJ: No, no. I’m sure somebody. I don’t know whether they just didn’t go.

SM: Sybil Stockdale.

SJ: I know Sybil Stockdale went and I really don’t know who else.

SM: Did you ever talk with her about that meeting and what transpired?

SJ: No, I think that everybody was so busy doing whatever they were doing that if something else happened you just figured they were going to take care of whatever they were doing. Other than maybe through a newsletter. I don’t think I ever saw anything. I’m sure he was probably talking to them about the Peace Talks. Maybe just giving them an update, I don’t know. I really don’t.

SM: Well, over the years from 1969 until 1973, what do you remember about the League of Families and how it evolved and how it grew? Were you surprised, it appears to me based on the documents that I’ve looked at so far that it expanded and grew very rapidly.

SJ: It did.

SM: Kind of had a momentum if it’s own.
SJ: It was like sending out 300 or 400 letters. Possibly as many as 1,500 because I don’t really know how many men were missing. So, it went to all of their families. You had a huge organization just to start out with. After we had that first meeting in Washington there was just a lot of interest. Because everybody had been sitting at home, not knowing really what was going on and not having any word. We had been two years not knowing whether he was dead or alive. Then we had another two years, basically before we had a letter from him. When we got that letter it was a month old. So, we really never had a good confirmation that today he’s ok. Your faith on the Lord just made you think that, very strongly.

SM: Did you receive that first letter personally? Was it sent directly to you or did it go through military channels and virtually filter down?

SJ: No, it did not go through military channels. It had my address on the front and I don’t remember. It was one that I got the call from David Dillums from the committee of liaison saying that a letter was coming and how delighted they were that I was getting a letter. I thought I am to. I assumed it just came through the mail. I think they brought back packets of letters and then mailed them out. I don’t know whether that continued the whole time or not, but I don’t know.

SM: Do you remember what that first letter said? It must have been short because they didn’t have very much space to write.

SJ: They had six lines, drawn lines on a paper. You had to write on the lines, you couldn’t write between the lines. I had one that is in the archives. That’s what it looked like. It folded in half and it had an address on the front. When I looked at the letter I can’t tall you what it said. I don’t know whether he’d written letters before that I don’t think he had. He’d written one letter when he was captured in the South part for North Vietnam, near Whey. He said he was visited by a person who said he was in the Vietnamese Red Cross and he let him write a letter, which I never got. I mean it may or may not even been mailed. When the letter came I can’t even remember whether he said I ’m alright. You know how is your mother. They couldn’t write a normal letter. The Vietnamese wouldn’t let then really write a letter. They couldn’t say they’re treating me terrible or something like that. But you now I’m ok and hope you all are too. Just sort of a general something. When I got it the handwriting is just unbelievably shaky. I decided
that he had no writing flat surface to write on. It was either writing on concrete or a
rough table and that was why it was just like this. They had asked us to send the letters
into Washington and let them analyze them and look at them. They returned it to me
with a letter, which I can’t find. They said that he seemed to be alright and in good
spirits form this letter. That obviously he had been injured and was perhaps writing with
his left hand. I thought he is not left-handed. That’s the most ridiculous thing I ever
heard. It’s just wiggly. I wouldn’t even except what they told me, which was absolutely
true. Other than that letter even when they said that it’s probably temporary if that’s the
case. You know he’s right handed and he’s still writing with his left hand and I still can’t
read it and he can’t either. So, it’s a dilemma sometimes. I actually did not know how
injured he was until he called me. I had no clue of that. I had imagined them doing
things to them that were different then what they actually did. The worst thing I could
imagine was pulling fingernails out, when they never did do that to them. That was going
to the horror movies I think or something. I don’t even know where I go that idea.

SM: When did he call you? You said until he called you?
SJ: When he got back to the Philippines.

SM: He called you from the Philippines. We’ve already talked about the
importance of the shift between LBJ and Nixon and that is obviously Nixon’s
administration looked at the issue completely different and anted it publicized and wanted
attention drawn to it to hopefully improve the condition.

SJ: Well, they actually were talking about them. As it turned out they probably
became the biggest thing in the Peace Talks. Now, people claim that was the Peace
Talks, that they got he POWs back.

SM: Yeah, when you look at what the actual settlement states. I mean that
American POWs are very prominent.

SJ: I know it, I know it. They were the most important thing.

SM: In terms of that transition, what did you think when you heard in March of
1968, that Johnson had made the decision not to seek re-election? Do you remember?

SJ: I watched him make that announcement on the television. I felt personally
very sorry for him. But I was glad that he was not going to because I didn’t think things
were running right. We were in a major war and they had not enlisted the American
people in to it at all, like World War II, they had gas rationing and sugar rationing and you know like we said rolling the tin foil balls until they were maybe a foot across. I have no idea. They must have used them someplace because everybody was doing it. It was like if you went out to talk, you almost had to have a history lesson of where Vietnam is and there’s a North and a South and what’s happening over there. People just didn’t know. They weren’t interested unless they had somebody over there. Then when they did come home. They were not paying much attention to the men who had fought over there. The POWs got home and they got a heroes welcome. You know that’s backward. They should have certainly been welcomed home, but the other men should have also.

SM: Well, you were happy or glad that LBJ didn’t seek re-election. Did it indicate anything else to you? Or did it concern you that a President, a sitting President who was eligible to run again for re-election was apparently giving up?

SJ: I don’t know that it did. I wasn’t thinking that deeply about it. It was just an event. I don’t remember whether Nixon had already announced that he was running or whether he had already gotten into the race. I can’t remember exactly when those dates were. I know McGovern was the one who ran then instead of Johnson. We were very afraid if McGovern were elected the men would have been left behind.

SM: So, you were Nixon supporters then for the election of ’68? Ok. What did you think about his ultimate plan, well to use his expression to bring “peace with honor” in Vietnam? That was the Vietnamization of the war, the progressive withdrawl of American ground forces. Turning the war over to the Vietnamese forces, did you have any thoughts at the time about that?

SJ: No, I think my only thoughts were my husband coming home. That didn’t register.

SM: Your principle focus must have been on the Peace Negotiations and how were the issues about the treatment of prisoners being addressed.

SJ: Yeah, how they were going.

SM: The League of Families then, has it played a role in increasing public awareness. It changed or there were some developments, I guess later in the war. As the war was coming closer to an end in 1971, 1972.
SJ: Johnson had stopped the bombing of North Vietnam at some point. There
was a period in there.

SM: The bombing hault after Tet of ‘68. It was at the same time. He announced
the bombing hault, the same time he announced his bid not to run for re-election in ‘68
June or March. How did that make you all feel?

SJ: Well, I felt like it was sort of an abandonment of the POWs because I don’t
think in a war what both sides understand is force and strength. He’d had a bombing
hault before Sam was shot down and every time they started flying after that, that’s when
they’d lose airplanes. They had put such restrictions on them, like that had to fly a
certain corridor to get up to the north. They knew where they were coming and thing like
that. It was a wonder they didn’t lose more than they did. I hate to talk bad about them,
but they weren’t being very smart.

SM: Well, that’s a common criticism.

SJ: Well, it is.

SM: The limitations, the rules of engagement, all those things.

SJ: You know they make them. The other side never had any, but we do. Some
of them are fine, but there are some of them that are really harmful. Like the B-52s when
they bombed around Christmas before they were released. They came up the same
corridor every time. The SAMs could get right on them.

SM: What did you think when Nixon expanded the war into Cambodia? Nixon
became progressively more proactive and more aggressive, how did the families feel
about that?

SJ: Well, there was a division in the families about any expansion sand the
bombing in the North. Their thought was it was going to kill the POWs if they were
going to drop a bomb on them. These were the majority of the women that were making
those protests were either very young and had not been around the military very long or
they were just wives whose husbands were not necessarily flying. There was flight
surgeon and this sort of thing. I just don’t think they had any knowledge of the capability
of the abilities of the American pilots. They bombed very, very close to that prison
camp, but they never hit it at all. Not one person was injured from those bombings. We
had one League meeting and there were a couple of those gals sitting in front of me at the
meeting out in the audience. We began the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance and
singing the Star Spangled Banner and they sat during that entire thing. I just thought if
their husbands could see them, they would have just had a fit. It was just really rude and
not nice for them to do. An insult I think to their husbands. Their husbands came back
and they were very much on the other side. They were happy to see the bombs because it
gave them some hope that they might get out.

SM: The materials that you donated I think it was the minutes of one of the
meetings. They called that group the militants I think. It seems rather ironic to call them
that because they seemed the opposite. If they’re militant, they’re militantly opposed.

SJ: Peace beads had not come into being, I guess I don’t know (laughs). They
weren’t really for peace; they just didn’t want their husbands hurt, which nobody did. I
don’t know. I’m surprised we got through that many years without any fights, being a

group of ladies.

SM: About what size of a group was this within the Association r the League?

SJ: There weren’t that many.

SM: Very small.

SJ: Probably 10 or 20, if there were even that many.

SM: Not several hundred?

SJ: No.

SM: No, I mean of the whole group is several hundred. How large was the
League itself? How many wives? How many would show up for the meetings?

SJ: I don’t know how many they had in there, but I suspect it was all the MIAs,
all the POWS and possibly even some KIAs that were still involved. It was the wives
and the parents. Sam’s parents belonged and my brother and my mother. So, there was a
huge number really.

SM: Closer to thousands then?

SJ: Yeah, I would say a couple thousand maybe. A thousand or possibly more. I
just don’t know. There’s like 1,500 or…

SM: 2,000

SJ: That were missing.

SM: Over 2,000. 2,500 I believe was the last count.
SJ: You know we had Army families, Navy, Marines, Air Corps, Air Force, everybody. That was not my job on the board. So, I don’t have a clue what it was. I don’t even think I had a job on the Board, I was just a member of it.

SM: Of the total membership though, since the number missing was in the thousands and obviously the number in the League itself must also have been in the thousands.

SJ: And there were a lot of them that just wanted the newsletter. They didn’t participate in any way. There were no dues to pay. The bracelets were how the money was raised to finance a lot of things.

SM: Was that the only mechanism that you used to raise funds was selling the bracelets?

SJ: Well, sometimes you’d get in kind donations for things. Bumper stickers or whatever. The bracelets, I don’t have any idea of how many we sold, but when he came home, we got two bushel baskets returned to us of bracelets and we continue to have bracelets returned. We had probably 400 of those made into paperweights when he was in the Texas house with the seal on the top. Then into Congress we had them put in that. I’ll show you one of those.

SM: I’d like to see one.

SJ: They’re pretty. We can send you one of those too if you want one of those. Yeah, that’s be great. We were financing some of it with our own money, but I don’t think a whole lot. Like I said the Air Force gave us permission to fly on the planes. We did that. I think LTV and some defense companies in the Dallas are regularly flew people to Washington and we could fly on those planes. We’d just sort of call Love Field or called LTV to see is anybody going to Washington next Thursday and can I go? They were very gracious to let us go. I don’t know whether they removed somebody from the plane to put us on or not. I have no idea what happened, but we had a seat. Most of the time you’d go and they were very interested to come back and talk to you and find out what was going on. They were small business jets and they wanted to hear what we were doing and how they could help. Most of those are military men that have a real interest in flying. That was good.
SM: So, in terms of membership that would attend the meetings what would you guess? The number of people that would actually attend the meetings?
SJ: Maybe as many as 400 or 500.
SM: Good sized meeting.
SJ: They were good and they were large. We would go up there. The first year we went we stayed in a hotel and then after that as we began to meet people that we actually knew but we were reforming acquaintances we’d stay in somebody’s home. Maybe there’d be six or eight women in the house and you’d be in beds and on the couches and maybe a comfortable chair. I don’t think anybody ever ended up on the floor, but it wasn’t our fault. We’d go and they’d be the same ones at the same house. It was sort of like a little sorority meeting or something. One of them that we stayed at a lot was Joann Vincent, who was after a year or so, I guess after the first year she was president that first year, don’t remember. I have to look at the records to see when she was. Her husband was missing and was alter declared dead. They were people that we had known at Nellus. The majority of the Air Force wives I had known someplace. A number of them had worked for Sam at different times. Like I said, it’s a great big family. You may not see them and you may not talk to them a lot but you could call them and ask them for help anytime.
SM: How important did that become? Being able to meet with other women who were sharing that same experience?
SJ: I think it was important because you found out that maybe some of the things you were doing were working or that they weren’t working. Maybe they were having some of the same problems. Most of the ladies around here had young children. Mine were the oldest. They all had three and four and five year olds. To get with some other ladies who had teenagers was helpful to know that everybody’s having the same kid problem. Not that they were major. It just was a time that you had. Somebody who was in exactly the same situation you were in to just talk. You know it was just a good time. Not a hysterical fun time, but a satisfying time.
SM: Right. Emotionally supportive and satisfying I imagine.
SJ: It really was. They had good speakers up there. Nixon would come quite often to the meetings and speak. Henry Kissinger, they had a couple of men that were
with the DOD. Department of Defense and they would come. They’d have
psychologists, I don’t think they ever made psychiatrists because they didn’t think we
were crazy, but they did feel like that they could be supportive with suggestions from the
psychologists. One I remember in particular him saying that our husbands were more
fortunate than we were because they knew where we were and they knew where we were
living, what we were doing and we didn’t have a clue what was happening to them. You
could say this has happened to one person, but you didn’t know whether it was
everybody. You just didn’t know.

SM: What else did the psychologist discuss? Do you recall other topics that they
tried to address? Did they try to offer you advice as wives?

SJ: They were offering advice about your children and I never did feel like that
our family had any big problems. But I think through the years I can see the effects of
this on all three of our children. You know they’re not major, they’re not goofy or
anything like that, but they’re I just think that there have been some side effects. I know
when Sam got home Bob had, when he was in junior high school, I guess I had gotten
him a telescope and he just got so interested in that that when he went off to school, I told
you he was very bright in math. He majored in math and physics in college and has
gotten his Ph.D. He was just about ready to get his masters degree when his dad came
home. He told me, he said I did this for you, because I wanted you to be proud of me.
Thank goodness he loves it himself. I’m sure there were things done for him that
satisfied them I guess. I don’t know he might have been a truck driver if he hadn’t been a
physicist. I have no idea.

SM: I’m sure that’s not the case. Any kind of advice given to the wives and how
to better cope with the stresses and strains of the situation?

SJ: I’m sure they did, but like I said I thought we were doing fine, so I didn’t
listen very good.

SM: Certainly coming together in Washington and sharing your experiences must
have been very cathartic, very helpful.

SJ: I think it was. You know you could share what you were doing with others
and their wives who would come who didn’t live close to anyone. It was particularly
helpful for them to find out that there were other people in the same boat they were in.

From that point of view it was very helpful.

SM: Do you recall what President Nixon discussed at the meetings very much?
SJ: I’m sure it was a pep talk.
SM: Yeah, keep your spirits up.

J: You know after they were home, he came to a couple of their reunions and talked to them. He’s brilliant on foreign affairs. He would just talk and talk and talk off the cuff either about what they had done and what was going on or even bringing up to current times for whenever it was he was speaking. They all felt as though they would not have been home had it not been for him and for that. I don’t know whether that’s correct or not. You know you don’t know. You have no idea.

SM: Well, if your concerns were accurate that if McGovern had won the election that it was less likely that they would have come home than certainly that probably is the case.

SJ: You know they could have just withdrawn and not even worried about the fact they were there. In fact, when they did find out that they had signed the Peace Treaty the camp commander who spoke almost perfect English gathered them all together in the yard and through an interpreter they read the entire peace agreement, which is pages long I think. Then he got to the end of it and he said they may have signed this, but you will probably not go home because the Americans will aggregate the treaty. That was the first time I think that they had all been together out in the yard when he read that. You know right up to the end. Even when he was in the third bus to come out the first day, the first airplanes and they were still telling them we’ll probably have to turn around and go back, you won’t get out. Their plane was late getting in and so they were sitting there waiting and they’re telling them all this. Sam said there were men on the bus that were getting frightened and scared. He was up there telling him that’s not right. The Air Force will be in here. It was a mind game as well as physical.

SM: What about Kissinger? Do you remember much about his speeches to the League of Families at meetings?
SJ: No, again he was trying to reassure them that they were doing what they could. You had to listen to him to understand all he was saying. They were always very
gracious. They always stopped to speak to people and talk to them. They didn’t come in
with a big entourage. Of course, I’m sure they felt like they were with a very friendly
group. I’m sure they had secret servicemen with them, but you were just not aware of
them while they were there.

SM: Now do you remember when the Christmas bombing broke out? The Peace
negotiations aren’t going as they need to be and announced the bombing. What did you
think about that decision to increase, to step up the bombing, so close to the prison,
because this is Hanoi.

SJ: I thought it was good. They knew they were going to bomb close to them and
like I said I had confidence in the pilots that they weren’t going to miss their targets. I
think Sam said they were like 50 yards or feet or something from the camp. They were
right there. They were close enough that when a bomb hit the floor was shaking. They
knew they were there. In fact, they saw some of the B-52s shot down. They had some B-
52 guys in the camp with them. I think it was exhilarating for them. They were cheering
it on. He said that they had bomb shelters all over, and the Vietnamese were in the bomb
shelters and they’re all yelling out the windows to keep coming.

SM: What did you think when you heard that they finally had agreed to the Paris
Peace, that they had signed the agreement?

SJ: Oh, I was ecstatic. I really was because we didn’t know who was coming out.
I thought they’d all come out together and they didn’t. They released lists of the men that
they would release. He was in that first group. They went by when they were shot down.
I think he was the 69th pilot to be shot down. They also inserted some of the men who
were turncoats and had helped them. They put them in. They also put the wounded in
there. There was one B-52 he was a sergeant, who was a gunnery or I’m not sure what
his role was on the airplane but his leg had been injured and it had shrapnel in it. They
put a cast on it and he was in really bad shape. They had to amputate his leg after he got
home, but he was on that plane, on the first one. We watched I don’t think. I guess we
watched him coming out. I don’t remember that we did either. Watched them landing in
the Philippines was the first we saw of them. I’ve since seen movies of them leaving and
the line that they’re in and things like that which we have copies of and pictures. But
when they landed in the Philippines we saw him get off the plane and salute. Somebody
in the room said look at his hand, it’s injured. I didn’t see it when I was looking at him because he thought while he was over there that he probably got down to about 120 pounds. He’s 6’2” and right now at not fat at all is 210 or something like that. When they found out they were going to be released they started giving them more food or sweets actually. Give them a plate of sugar for a meal with a small loaf of French bread. Their equivalent of C-rations. They put a little bit of weight on them. He was probably up to about 140. By the time he came that’s what he weighed maybe when we saw him. They had jackets on and blue slack that they had given them. You know it hid the thinness. In the Philippines they kept them there for about five days. They were doing dental work and trying to get them in shape to come home and they were feeding them. They had an ice cream bar at the head of the food line. He was having a chocolate sundae or a banana split or something and then ordering a dozen eggs scrambled or a steak or Mexican food. They were saying you’re going to be sick. They said we have eaten garbage over there. They literally ate grass that they pulled out of the river to cook. They said they didn’t care if they got sick, they wanted to eat good food. So, they opened up the mess hall to them and they had the chefs back there just fixing anything they wanted. So, he put on a few more pounds there. I think by the time he got home he was probably at about 170. The only place he’s not gained any weight back is through his shoulders because he said when you lose the weight there, it’s a youthful weight gain. Past 35 or 40 or something in that neighborhood, that’s not where you’ll gain weight. That’s never come back, which is strange. We didn’t know that. I guess it’s true, because he’s gotten all of his weight back and they’re still very thin.

SM: So, he called you?
SJ: Yes. Each of them they gave them three or five minutes that they could have to call home.

SM: From the Philippines?
SJ: Yeah.

SM: That’s all they got from three to five minutes?
SJ: Well, they had 300 men or how many you could get on an airplane.

SM: They had to ration it.
They had the planes were six across. I have no idea maybe 50 or 75 on a plane. I don’t know how many were in that first release. They could call after that, but that was just the initial call. They didn’t want to tie up all the lines. He and Jim Howerton was a friend of ours. They had escort officer for every POW, every returned POW. He had been a good friend. He was stationed in Hawaii at that time. He had volunteered to do that. Jim was one who kept up with everybody and probably knew where everybody Sam had ever known where they were in the Air Force and what was going on with us. That was just his interest were people. Anyway, he met him and he was the one that suggested they wait. Sure enough when he called we had been at our house with about five or six real close friends of ours that were some of our high school friends and then some neighbors who had sat at our house all day long waiting for this phone call to come, or all afternoon I guess if it hadn’t been all day. When it finally came the first things out of his mouth was they hurt me. He was so intent on telling me of his injuries to his hand and his arm, his right hand and his left arm that like you know I was going to leave him because he couldn’t write with his right hand, which was ridiculous. I’m sure that was on his mind. I don’t know what we said after that, but that’s what I remember him saying. He had broken his arm when he bailed out and then after they captured him they put it in a cast and then they proceeded to break it again a couple times, by twisting it around his body. It’s a miracle that it’s still on his body I think. He had found out that he’d spent almost three years in solitary confinement and 72 days in stocks and additional time in solitary he had been in leg irons, which would scrape the hair off the bottom of his legs, which he still doesn’t have any. You know just through the years you just hear stories. He’s never really sat down, some of it he’s described because it’s hard for him to relate it to me, because he knows how it bothers me. So, it’s hard for him to tell me about it. We have reunions with the Alcatraz, which is the 11 men that were put together accused of trying to overthrow the North Vietnamese government, which was a compliment I think. They were put in it was the middle of the North Vietnamese Army headquarters and there was a small camp with 13 cells in it and they were put in there. They get together probably every two years and they’ll tell some stories. They laugh about them now and they become funny stories. But, I know they were not at the time. They were very serious. When they brought them back together
and out of Alcatraz and they put everybody two to a cell except for him, he was still by himself. They were worried about him because he was alone. He was getting very frustrated still being by himself. They asked about it and they said no, Song, is what they named him. S-O-N-G. They gave everybody a Vietnamese name. He was Song. They said Song is a bad cousin. So, they wouldn’t put him with anybody. They finally had a hunger strike, which is just mind-boggling. They had no food, but they were having hunger strikes. They were being fed twice a day; maybe a bowl of rice and sewer greens as they called them. Just really nothing. After a day or to they responded to that very fast. They didn’t have to go on a hunger strike, but just a few days to have them do something, which so strange I think. They would let him go in part of the day to be with Jerry Denton and Jim Mulligan. When he went in with them that first day, they had not, I don’t know whether they had seen each other by that time or not. Because they’d been together almost four years and they hadn’t laid eyes on each other. They were so intent. You know they’d blindfold them when they took them places and things like that. They were intent on them not being able to see the person. He probably had seen them when they brought them back. Anyway, he went in and saluted and Lieutenant Colonel Sam Johnson reporting for duty. That was a moving time for the other two. He was, he was on duty the whole time he was over there. He was their communications officer for where they were or their room or whatever. At one time they had a code that they communicated with. They had secret or they had the code secret, top secret and ultra top secret. It changed on a daily basis. I don’t how they knew what they were doing, but they did.

SM: This is the tap code that you’re referring to?

SJ: Yeah. Well, they did a cough, hack, spit code. I’m sure he did that for you, but that worked great because there were so many with colds and upper respiratory problems that everybody was doing it. So, they talked like that for three years without them ever knowing or four. It scared everybody to death when they got back in with the rest of the group because they had surmised that they were not going to punish them like they had been because of the death of Ho Chi Minh and what had taken place. So, they were very open with their talking to each other and what they were doing. Nobody
SM: So, after a certain day they just started open communication just talking openly?

SJ: Pretty open other than the fact that they weren’t that close to each other. I don’t know how many of them learned their cough, hack, spit code whether it just remained within the Alcatraz group or whether others did or not, but they used it openly.

SM: Well, what was the actual reunion like, the first reunion?

SJ: Well, we went to Shepard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls to meet him. He was the ranking Texan to get off the plane so he was the one that came out and made a short statement to the people and then we could go over to meet him. The kids got there first because they could out run me. I couldn’t run fast enough and they wouldn’t stop. His mother and father and our children and my brother were there. I think we stayed up all night talking. Jim Howerton came over because he was still with him. He was with him all the way to our house, which was a couple weeks after that actually that he actually came to the house. We sat in our room in the BOQ and just talked and talked and talked and talked and talked. I can remember Sam falling asleep and I don’t know how Jim and I got on the floor, but we were sitting in the floor talking. We were still talking. I explained when I saw him get off the plane that if when we meet the Lord if it’s anymore exciting I don’t know that I can stand it. I thought I was just going to burst from happiness. He was all in one piece and I still recognized him. He didn’t look strange and he looked happy. I’m sure he was.

SM: Psychologically, emotionally.

SJ: They had a psychologists that talked with them. They had debriefing officers that talked with them immediately when they got back. Trying to get every bit of information that they had.

SM: Did that happen in the Philippines, the debriefing?

SJ: I think so. It happened with everybody that was up there. Because he had been in communications. I think he probably had a little bit longer debriefing than ordinary guys would because he’d been more or less with the leadership of the camp at all times. There was something else. I don’t remember. I’ll think of it in a minute.

Another comment there.
SM: Did the military send anybody to you before you met him in Wichita Falls to brief you on how best to approach him and some of the things that you might have to watch for or cope with in the coming days, weeks or months?

SJ: I don’t remember if they did. We had military personnel that would periodically come to the house. There was a man form Shepard who was in personnel, not from Shepard from Sherman, who would come down. Mostly he had picture of prisoners that the Vietnamese had released or that news people had brought out and they would come. The man would call and he would say I have to come and visit you. That would just scare me to death. I thought what is he going to come and say? I finally told him. He said I can’t tell you why over the phone what I’m talking about. I said just say we’ve got pictures or it’s nothing. I want to come talk. You know you don’t have to say.

SM: Put you at ease.

SJ: But, don’t scare me to death. Of course, I looked and looked and looked at those pictures, but I don’t think they ever took any pictures of him at all. Oh, I know what I was going to tell you. We were at the reunion they just had a River Rat reunion in Ft. Worth. Those are all the people that flew north of the river and up into the Hanoi area, their families or their wives. One of them came up to me and they said Robby Risner and Sam Johnson stood up to the North Vietnamese better than anybody over there and more consistently. He said we all know it, which I never heard anybody say that before. It was a nice compliment.

SM: Yes, absolutely. You mentioned that you wanted to talk about the Plano Star Courier.

SJ: Yes, anytime I called them with any idea or something to put in the paper, they were more than willing to put whatever we wanted in there. Every holiday I think we had a picture of us, as you saw that one a while ago asking people to pray for the men and to send letters to Paris to the Vietnamese delegation over there. They just were so helpful. More so I think than any other paper. I suspect each of the small town papers that anybody was associated with were probably like that. I don’t know and I never did ask anybody. I remember the one that we had the candle lighting ceremony with the Dallas Cowboys. There’s a picture. I’m not sure where it is.

SM: That was in the Star Courier?
SJ: Yeah, in the Star Courier of us with a candle and the four of us around it. Inviting people to come to it. They never questioned us about anything. They just were very, very gracious.

SM: And not intrusive into your privacy?

SJ: No. Oh, no. I don’t think they ever called and said what’s going on and come and talk to us. It was totally from me instigating things and not them.

SM: That is very nice.

SJ: Which is, I guess is a typical small town paper.

SM: Now, after the war ended and the bulk of the POWs were returned what happened with the League? What happened with regard to your participation in the League of Families?

SJ: Well, my participation pretty well stopped after that. The League is still in being. In fact, we went to a meeting of the League about a month ago in Washington. They meet in Washington. I don’t know that they have any other meeting during the year, but they have a dinner. You now like a three-day meeting in Washington and the majority of the members are now children. There’s one POW family that still participates in it. Mary Ann McMennins is on the board and she’s been on the board since the beginning. They live in Virginia and when he got back they were stationed up there. So, she’s just been there to do that. They’re still trying to get people identified and remains returned. It’s still basically the same thing that we were doing. You know it’s sad that it’s still going on. It’s 30 you know 40 years that people have been 30 years I guess that they’ve been doing this. There’s cousins and children I think now more than, there’s very few wives because most of the men there has been a declaration on most all the men. The majority of them that were missing were declared dead. Those wives a lot of them have remarried and have new families. That life is behind them. They are still lobbying Congress. They come to see Sam every time they go up there. They’re very active.

SM: Well, when you say they lobby, this is concerning is it principally identification?

SJ: Yes.

SM: And the recovery of remains?
SJ: If that’s possible.
SM: The identification of remains?
SJ: Yes.
SM: Do you know what their current position is on the likelihood of living POWs?
SJ: Well, I think for a while they felt like there were some over there. In fact, I believe there is only one man that came out of Cambodia. He had been moved out of Cambodia I believe before the end of the war. So, he was in a spot that he was releasable. They knew that there were people shot down there. They also are aware of people that were shot down either in China or in the Chinese border and flew into China before they landed. You know some of the men were at an age that they didn’t have to be terribly old now, but they could have been old enough that they could not be alive just because of their age. If they were relatively senior officers at the time they were shot down. Which the one I’m thinking about in China was. Although he would have just maybe been 75 now, something like that. That’s mostly what they’re interested in is identification and recovery. They think that Hanoi had a large massing of in the beginning bodies that are now packages of bones in a building in North Vietnam stored somewhere. They have a great many dog tags and they through the years they periodically that’s what most of these releases of bodies that we’ve seen, that’s where they’ve come from. A few are on sight, but not too many. They keep trying to get a full accounting and they feel like the government had an accounting of all the men they captured anyway and possibly all the ones that were shot down. Just like the books in Russia, they have the same thing in Vietnam, but I don’t believe they’ve ever been able to get hold of them or have access to them at all. I’m sure there’s better accounting there, than what we’ve been able to get.
SM: What was you opinion at the end of the war especially after what we thought was the appropriate number of POWs? The Department of Defense had a number that was very close to the number of actual returnees, say in the middle of 1973 after all the POWs we thought were held were released. Did you think anymore were still being held? Did you have any feelings or any thoughts on that? Has that changed over time?
SJ: I’ve become more aware of it over time. I don’t think at that point most of
the ones that I knew and the wives that I knew there was some declaration on their
husbands. Although, some of them it was another year after that before they came to a
conclusion. I don’t think they don’t just make those just because they don’t have the
person in hand. They have normally they’re flying with another airplane who has some
information. Thos pilots do and perhaps one of the pilots got out of the plane and the
other one didn’t. Unless they are very, very sure. During the war they didn’t declare
anybody dead. Initially, they did if they had not heard about them in a year they would
automatically declare them dead. That was a policy. They declared two Navy pilots
dead. A few months after that their wives remarried and some time after that they started
writing home. I’m here and I’m ok. Which was a terrible dilemma. I don’t know the
outcome of all of that at all. They decided that this was a different sort of battle that they
were fighting and that they were not going to have the information that they’d had
perhaps in Germany or even Japan during World War II. So, that stopped for good
reason. Those are the only two I ever heard about. Everybody else didn’t leap in and get
married again. Not that they leaped into it.

SM: But still. What do you do?

SJ: I don’t know. I don’t know what you do. That was early so, if you made any
decision at all, then you hah another four or five years before he came home. I don’t
know. Interesting there were a great many of the POWs that divorced after they were
home some years. The Alcatraz group, as a group are the only one that are all still
together.

SM: With their wives? If they had one. They were not all married. Two of them
were not married. They were young and they married after they got home, but they’re
with their wives too.

SM: But that means the other nine who were married are still with their wives.

SJ: Yeah. Well, one was killed over there in camp. Ron Storz, they either I don’t
know whether they starved him or what they moved them out of the prison and they did
not move him. He was certainly a die hard prisoner. He just didn’t want to give them
anything. He really stuck to name, rank and serial number. They had said give them that
and then at the point where they’re really ready to hurt you maybe give them enough to
satisfy them, but don’t tell everything you know. Even make something up, but there’s no reason to commit suicide.

SM: Especially since so much of it is time sensitive.

SJ: Yeah.

SM: So, much of the intelligence that would be of course time sensitive.

SJ: Well, after a month or two they probably didn’t know anything. They never realized that Sam had been in a fire weapon school at Nellis, where they teach all of the Air Force fighter pilots their tactics and weapons and everything else. He had a great deal of knowledge that they never did uncover that. Which was great, that they didn’t do it.

SM: That’s remarkable. You started to talk about the alcoholism and divorce rates amongst POWs.

SJ: Did I say alcoholism? I didn’t say that.

SM: Oh, you didn’t talk about it?

SJ: No, I didn’t say alcoholism.

SM: I guess you just said divorce.

SJ: I just said divorce rates.

SM: I’m thinking alcoholism.

SJ: That’s you.

SM: That’s me. How did the rest of the POW community compare to that? Also not just divorce rate, but was alcoholism a problem from any POWs that you know of?

SJ: I don’t know. I don’t know.

SM: How about the divorce rate?

SJ: I think it’s fairly high, because when you go back to some of these reunions it’s a new wife that you didn’t know. I don’t know what happened in the beginning. I was not privy to the reasons. Some of them the wives met them at the plane and would say I’m leaving when they got home. There were a couple that did that.

SM: Welcome home, see you later.

SJ: yeah.

SM: Wow.
SJ: one of those they had been planning to get a divorce before he left. So, it was not a total shock to him I’m sure. The whole time he was over there, he was there about as long as Sam, never got any mail. Sam would share pictures of our children with him. He cherished just having somebody to look at.

SM: In terms of political activities after the war, of course immediately following the end of the war in 1975, when Saigon fell and North Vietnam took over South Vietnam, very shortly thereafter North Vietnam made overtures to the United States to try and normalize relationship between the two countries. Of course, that was not possible. It wasn’t possible under Carter. What did you think and how do you feel how that has evolved over time and over the United States is finally normalized it’s political relationship?

SJ: I feel they’re still a Communists country and I feel as though like I said a while ago. They have information about men who are lost over there. If they want to have a relationship with the United States I feel like they should release any information that they have. I know most of the men in the Congress who are Veteran’s of Vietnam, which there are not very many left anymore were almost all opposed to that relationship going on. I don’t know. You know I’m not privy to State Department and what they’re doing. I think the businesses that have gone over there, they’re not really able to bring their profits out or anything else. I’m sure that’s the reason for wanting to go. Until the Communist régime is no longer there I see no reason for it.

SM: Was there anything else that you wanted to talk about with regard to your experiences and the homecoming and everything else?

SJ: Well, when he got home, like I said we met him at Wichita Falls at Shepard Air Force Base. Our family came back home and he and I stayed up there for about three weeks while they operated. They did two surgeries on his hand. They looked at his shoulder and kept trying to get it to go out of joint and they couldn’t. So, they didn’t ever do anything to it. But, it’s his left shoulder and his right hand they did tendon transplants to make it work. We did that. Then we came back to Plano, I can’t remember we must have gotten back the night before. I don’t remember, but that day it’ll be in the paper somewhere I don’t remember the date. They had a huge parade out here for him. Plano was probably maybe up to 12,000 by that time, it wasn’t a huge town. We drove from
over where concrete mall is right now, which is on the west side of US 75 and Central
Expressway. We drove from there in an open car on 15th street down into town into
there’s a little plaza on the west side of downtown Plano. They let the schools out to
come. Every school child in town was there. In fact, we had a young man in our house
yesterday to move a piece of furniture and as he started to leave he said I know
everything about your husband that’s public. He said my father has told me everything
about what a heroic and wonderful man he is. Today I don’t even know his name except
his first name. They released everybody in school ad they drove us down and we got out
of the car and the mayor made a speech and Sam made a speech. It was just a huge day.
Then they drove us home and all the way home there were signs along the road and flags.
When we got to our house, which was on Green Briar on the east side of town and our
house was filled with flowers. One of the florists in town had sent a bouquet from the
florist with five dozen red roses in it. It was huge. We had shapes of Texas. We had
people coming by to see him and finally one of our neighbors across the street all the kids
were at her house, all the neighborhood children and they all wanted to meet Sam. So,
she got them all in a line and they knocked on the front door and they all trooped through
the house to shake his hand and say hello and out the back door. And about 30 minutes
later I think another group had formed so they came through. But, they did that about
three times. They had a big paper sign on the front of our house Welcome Home Sam
Johnson. It was just a big holiday for Plano. You know it really was exciting. People
were calling. It was really a homecoming for him that day I think.

SM: How important was that for you as far as you understand for him? In terms
of putting the sacrifice in perspective?

SJ: Well, I guess one of my pet peeves is not being repaid for something but for
somebody just to say thank you. It’s very important to me that people say thank you.
That was a big thank you for what we had done and a thank you to him. He didn’t hardly
know anybody in Plano, because he had not been here but about a month when he left.
Of course, I knew everybody I was having to introduce him to all these people because he
didn’t know them at all. I couldn’t write about them because in those short letters you
couldn’t say I met so-and-so and he works here and he lives here or whatever because
you’d take up your whole letter. So, I don’t know what he thought about it. I never
asked him, but I know he thought it was an exciting day.

SM: It must have been meaningful for him.

SJ: I’m sure it did. I have some pictures of that too, I’ll show you.

SM: Excellent. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?

SJ: I can’t think of anything. Not unless you want to talk about letters. I don’t
know. You know I’m not going to give you any. Just the situation of them. I don’t
know that that says anything or does anything.

SM: Let’s go ahead and talk about then the packages and some of the letters that
were exchanged. The letters first. When you did receive you first letter, what happened
after that when you sent that in?

SJ: They had asked us if we received a letter if we would sent it in to the
Department of Defense. I did that. They looked at it and they commented on his
handwriting and the fact that it sounded fairly up beat and his handwriting they thought
he was writing with his left hand. Which, I thought it was just wiggly because he was
writing on concrete. Of course I was wrong and he was writing with his left hand. I
believe I got another letter or two when the Department of Defense called and asked if I
would meet with an Air Force officer about the letters. I told them that I would. He
came and asked me if I would participate in encoding my letters because Sam’s letters
were coded. I agreed to do it. I would write a letter, send it to them, they would rewrite
it, which would be basically the same thing I had written and ask me to send it. Copy it
and send that to him, which I did. We continued and I guess all the rest of our letters
were coded. I never knew a code, so I can’t tell you what was in the letters and I don’t
know it all yet. But I think a lot of it were names. There was an escape plan in some of
the letters. We were sending packages to them. At the first package I was putting the
first number of packages evidently. I can’t remember whether we sent those monthly or
every other month. I was putting everything in a cigar box. This is the size package I
was sending. I felt like I had to send him a toothbrush. He was a toothbrush/brush your
teeth addict and handkerchiefs because he doesn’t like Kleenex. I thought well he needs
handkerchiefs. We had a young man who supplied vitamins. You know that was his
business to go to the drug stores and sell vitamins to them. But he provided vitamins for
us to send to him. They were pre-natal vitamins because they were stronger and they
thought they would be good for him. So, I sent those, maybe shaving things and chewing
gum and just little things that could go in. Suddenly, the Air Force sent me a big box of
jawbreakers, like a coffee can size and would I please send these to him. You know I
thought you know I don’t even know how to package them much less send them. But,
anyway I got them off, they were within the size limit. They had an exact size that you
could use. I guess they weren’t coffee can size, but they were huge to me anyway. They
were not going to fit into my cigar box and I sent them. When he got them they chopped
them up. They took a hammer and just beat them up. He said they gave it back to them
and he was eating them and got microfilm in his mouth and it was the front page of the
New York Times I think. It was baseball scores. Whoever had won the pennant. So,
that was sent to him. Through those packages, they got a lot of things that were more
useable than that microfilm. They couldn’t read it because their eyes had gotten bad
enough, but some of the younger guys that were late shoot downs could read it. They
read it and tore it up and threw it away, little bitty you know like that.

SM: How on the world did they read it?
SJ: I don’t have any idea how they read it. He said they could hold it up in the
light and they could see it. It’s all those sewer greens they were eating, made their
eyesight good.

SM: Did they ever ask you to send anything else beside the jawbreakers?
SJ: I sent a pair of shorts that they were hemmed in code. I have those. I’m not
sure he ever found the code in them. You know you just had to really felt it. They were
tapping the code, but I don’t know whether they could feel like it wasn’t a Morse code.
They were horrible looking fabric. It was green print. He who one who only wears
white. So, I knew he would notice them.

SM: He was able to keep them?
SJ: Yeah, he brought them home.

SM: And they still have the code in them?
SJ: Uh-huh.
SM: That’s remarkable. He was trying to unhem them. He thought maybe as he pulled the hem out, maybe he could feel something. Like I say, he never figured out how to read it at all. Of course, now they’re somewhere.

SM: That’s remarkable. We have those.

SM: Anything else that they asked you to send?

SJ: I can’t remember anything.

SM: But they were going to get messages through somehow.

SJ: And they did. Like I said I had asked him not too long ago if he’d read a particular thing I’d written to him. He told me he did not, that he’d never read my letters because he was transcribing that code or decoding them and he only had about ten minutes to do it. He didn’t have time to read the letter too.

SM: That’s why the date was so important because that would trigger him to be able to code it very quickly or decode it very quickly. Of all the packages you sent, do you have any idea how many actually go through to him of the material you sent?

SJ: Well, he did get some of them. The strange thing was that they gave him all of them right before he was released. I’d send a sweater, you know just different things. He didn’t bring any of it back. The one thing he brought home with him was his cup and a tube of toothpaste, Vietnamese toothpaste. That was a lifesaver because when he got really hungry he would eat toothpaste. You know that minty taste or whatever. I never tasted it. I don’t even know what it tastes like, but it would calm his stomach a little bit when he was so hungry. His cup is all rusted because he put it on the wall to tap on or listen. The way the prison was built the walls were very, very, very thick concrete blocks, maybe two blocks. You could hear like a whole block down the street, somebody tapping.

SM: Is there anything else?

SJ: I can’t think of anything we haven’t touched on.

SM: It’s been pretty thorough.

SJ: I’m sorry my memory isn’t better than it is. I would remember names and dates a little bit better, but I haven’t thought about them that much. When he got home we really though we would put all of this behind us. You know that would be the end of it, but that’s not been the case at all. You know it’s become a testimony, which he gives
his testimony very often. In fact, he’s speaking at church Saturday night and Sunday
morning this week. Saturday night at a service and Sunday morning at a men’s breakfast.
You know and I have also. While he was gone, it was not unusual to be the sermon at
church, which is short of mind-boggling, because I’m not trained to be a minister or a
preacher. But it was a number of them, even up to Sherman not just here. One of the
other wives in the area, she and I flew out to Lubbock or Amarillo someplace I can’t
remember where it was at and spoke at something out there. We really were going all
around Texas. That was part of probably Dallas Cares rather than the League.

SM: What would you say were the most challenging adjustments to the return?
SJ: Well, when he got back we, like I said Bob was doing his master’s and almost
finished with it and Jenny almost through college and Beverly was a junior in college
when he returned. When Bob started to leave for school, he said I think we should open a
checking account for him. I said well, he’s had a checking account for about five years
or four years. It was just like all these things that he’d miss, he would bring them up.
We need to do this and we had already done it. I mean there wasn’t anything to do, but
do it because you couldn’t wait until he got back to do those things. I think that was hard
on him. I think that really brought home how much he had missed. You know he came
home to grown girls, young women and he’d left little girls. He left a little boy and come
home with a son who was about 2” taller than he was or is. The girls are probably the
height they are right now, I’m sure they were. When he got back he was assigned to go
to the National War College in Washington and it was Beverly’s senior year in high
school that we were going. We contacted Joe Bell and Sandra Griffin, you saw her
picture a while ago and asked them if Beverly could stay with them. They had two sons
who were eleven and seven and she was sixteen. They said yes, so we went off and left
her here.

SM: So, she could finish out her senior year?
SJ: She could finish school. That was a good experience for them too. She and
Sandra are very, very good friends. Sandra said she finally had a daughter that she didn’t
have. She had all those boys she was living with. But I think, I don’t know the kids were
every bit as excited as I was when he came back. We’ve always had a close family and
we were missing somebody and he got back into it. When we look back, I think we can
see that it was a little bit of a struggle to get back together, but at the time we didn’t
recognize it at all. One thing happened when he was in the hospital every place we’d
ever been stationed before that, we were in Europe I had to get a French driver’s license,
because they wouldn’t recognize my Texas license. I had to get one from England and I
had to get one from Las Vegas every time. Every time we’d go back, I’d have to get
another one because we would have been gone long enough that it would have expired. I
didn’t keep it up. The Department of Transportation came to the hospital and handed him
a driver’s license. I just couldn’t believe it. I told him I said I cannot believe that you’re
doing this because he’s not even been in a car for seven years and here you are handing
him a driver’s license.

SM: Any other adjustments? He seemed to jump right back into his career.
SJ: Oh, he did. We never got out of the Air Force, but he went back in and
stayed in for seven more years. That was fun. He was a Colonel when he got back.
They were putting him in command positions, which he enjoyed. We decided to get out,
we did. One of the instances that happened with the League of Families that I just
thought of Joann Vincent’s husband and a couple other wives, whose husbands had been
Majors and on the Lieutenant Colonel list when they were shot down it became apparent
that they were not being promoted. I can’t remember whether Joann called or whether
she wrote all of us a letter. She said let’s write the military and ask them about this. So, I
wrote a letter to the personnel. This is I think the only bad taste I have in my mouth
about the personnel in the Air Force. I wrote this letter that was miles long. I don’t even
know how many pages I wrote. They maybe didn’t ever read it, I don’t know about this
career and how his promotions had always been early. They’d always been below the
zone and they were promoting people that were maybe in his class, but they were way
behind him in promotions. That was basically what the letter was. Just because he was
in Vietnam I saw no reason for him not to get a promotion. I wouldn’t have ever talked
to anybody about him getting a promotion before that without Joann’s and Mrs.
Crumper’s. You know we’re all boosting each other up. So, I got a letter back from the
military which could be in that file, I don’t know saying how did I expect him to be
promoted, because after all, he was not working. I was just furious. I don’t think
anything has ever made me so angry, because I knew how he was working. When they
got back, they did get their promotions. They were backdated to when they should have
gotten them. Plus with back pay and everything. You know you just get somebody down
in the ranks of the bureaucracy of the government of the military that would answer a
letter. I don’t know who I addressed it to. It’s probably Washington and not to personnel
in San Antonio, I don’t recall. Although I think this guy worked for Major Gratch, but
anyway.

SM: I’m surprised you didn’t contact Chappy James.
SJ: I don’t know why I didn’t.
SM: Seems he would have been the ideal person.
SJ: Well, I think at the time they really weren’t promoting anybody. I don’t think
it was just them. They just were not giving them promotions over there. Because they’d
fill up slots. If they could promote 50 to Colonel, they want to put somebody in.
SM: Bureaucracy.
SJ: Anyway, it’s frustrating sometimes. And there’s a rule someplace I’m sure
he was going by. I don’t know what it was and I don’t think he quoted it. But to say he
isn’t working. He could have said anything but that.
SM: Yeah, he could have put it a little more tactfully. And not only tactfully, but
truthfully and if it was the Bureaucratic nature of the organization they couldn’t afford to
because they needed…
SJ: That would have made more sense.
SM: Active people in those slots and the Air Force will take care of them when
they get back.
SJ: I’m sure that’s basically what he meant, but he didn’t say it.
SM: Unbelievable.
SJ: It is unbelievable. I fired off a letter during the Olympics when the Israelis
were attacked and shot. I wrote a letter to Ruine Arlage, who was head of the channel,
was he with ABC or NBC? I don’t remember and got a very nice letter from him. Just
thanking him for the coverage of that. I don’t know. I sat in front of the television set
one night with one of the late night talk shows. They had somebody on there just blasting
Ross Perot and I was writing as fast as they were talking. I sent that letter off. I never
had an answer for that one. I know they were just venting my frustration. There were
great, written on long, like yellow pads only they were white. I may write four or five
pages. If anybody ever read them, well I’d be surprised.

SM: Well, you vented quite a bit.

SJ: I did, I did. Which is I mean you ought to throw those away instead of
mailing them, but I didn’t do it. I had a bravery that I’m not sure I’d have now. I really
did.

SM: Is that one of the thing that you think you’ve taken away from the
experience personally, in terms of your own development that this has made you a
stronger person?

SJ: Oh, yeah. I think so. I’ve sort of gone back into the background now with
him on a political basis, but I’m around and I’m out. I’m not as vocal as I used to be.
Because more of what I say now really effects him. So, I try to keep my opinions sort of
coinciding with his.

SM: Do you find that challenging?

SJ: Sometimes. Not so much whether I agree with him or not. I find it
challenging to remember what I ought to be agreeing with, or if I should repeat it.

SM: Has the experience affected the children in the same way, do you think? Do
you think it’s made them stronger?

SJ: I think it probably did. The girls you know their choice to be in any public
eye is their own, because they’re not Johnson’s. And Bob and our granddaughter, our
granddaughter particularly because she’s a Democrat. I mean our daughter in law. So,
she’s the only Johnson that is bothered with that. You know what? You asked for my
email and I didn’t ever give it to you, I don’t think.

SM: If you want to give it to me that’s fine.

SJ: I will if you want it.

SM: Yes, that’d be great.

SJ: I won’t promise I’ll read it.

SM: You were talking about your daughter in law being the only Democrat.

SJ: They are now divorced. So, I’ll just sort of leave it at that, because she won’t
want that broadcasted.

SM: The adjustment, was it more difficult for the children at all?
SJ: I don’t know. I find that hard to answer because I think I see things, that maybe they don’t even think about. Bob has had the opportunity to get very close to Sam, because he’s now living in Washington. He has offices there and offices in Dallas, so he’s back and forth. We see him in Washington more than we do here. They have breakfast together quite often, just the two of them. They’ll invite me. Sam you know he’s got security clearance that Bob can talk to him, because his work as the chief scientist for Raytheon, he has a lot of information that he doesn’t care to share with me. And I don’t care to have it.

SM: Absolutely.

SJ: I think that’s been a nice association. Because when he got back, we went to Washington and went off in the Air Force and our children were all still in Texas. So, he’d see them Christmas. He was at home for a few months before we started traveling. He’s had to catch that when he came in.

SM: Sounds like it’s worked out well, then.

SJ: Uh-huh. Our youngest daughter Beverly and her husband and their two little ones that you’ve seen live in our house. The upstairs is theirs. Actually the whole house is theirs because they take care of it, because we are not here that much. When we are here, we may or may not even have a meal over the weekend with them. So, it works out good. We’re very fortunate to have that.

SM: When you come back here, you’ve got an awful lot of meetings to go to and you’re very active.

SJ: He’s very busy. I’m not so much, but he is. He has insisted that they only schedule five things a day for him.

SM: Only five things.

SJ: Only five, which I mean that’s what he’s got right now. You know it maybe be a meeting with somebody, one on one or it maybe a luncheon. It could be anything, but he’s tried to limit them to that.

SM: It still keeps him very busy, I’m sure.

SJ: They would schedule 20 a day. There are a lot of people that would like to have him come and talk.
SM: how is that adjustment been for you? The going form the Air Force wife to being Congressmen’s wife?

SJ: I don’t think it’s very different because the Air Force can get very political. Actually, I think I was a lot busier in the Air Force than I am. I felt as though it was more of an obligation to be a member of the Officer’s Wives Club and participate in them. You know I held offices in them. When he was a Commander down at Homestead, it made me the honorary chairman of all these clubs, the Red Cross and the Thrift Shop and the Officer’s Wives and the Enlisted Wives and the NCO Wives. That was a really busy time for me, because they expected me to be at their meetings or their board meeting anyway, every time. Which I tried to go. There and at Alamogordo when he was out there. It was the same at both places. So, I had about four years, really busy. Like I say, I was always active in the Wives Clubs because that gave me the opportunity to meet the other wives. They had activities that you could participate in. They had a lot of volunteer work done. At Nellus one year, Mona Howerton, who is Jim Howerton’s wife, she and I ran the thrift shop for a couple of years, which was a humongous job, running the thrift shop. Because it’s on the base and everybody that had something to sell could bring it in and it was a consignment type thing. That was for the Wives Club that we did that. It was a lot of work.

SM: So, that would be busier probably then.

SJ: I probably had been in Dallas, I probably would have maybe joined the Junior League or something like that. It was similar to that. It was fun, but the Wing Commander’s wife was the head of it as far as the board was concerned. They would get everything in line, or try to. They were very nice. I always felt like maybe there was a little bit of a threat in there if you were not doing what you should do. But I don’t know if there really was. I doubt the men cared what the wives did. I don’t think they really did. Sam always assured me that he was not concerned with anything I did. Anyway, we’ve had a good life, an exciting life. Some of it sad. A lot of it happy, probably more of it happy than sad. When we got home and both of our daughters attended Texas Tech, have their degrees from there. Jenny went back and got her master’s out there. Beverly went on to get a master’s in accounting, but not at Tech. She did that in Dallas. It was a good place to go.
SM: Well, that’s a good place to end the interview. Thank you very much.

SJ: Well, thank you.

SM: It’s been a wonderful interview. This will end the interview with Mrs. Shirley Johnson.