Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. John Sweet on the 7th of August, 2003 at approximately 9:30 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock Texas and Mr. Sweet is in Seabrook New Hampshire. Thank you very much for consenting to do this interview. Why don’t we begin with a brief discussion of your early life, and if you would tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

John Sweet: I was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts and grew up there until I was nine and moved to Salem on the coastal area of Massachusetts and went to high school there and entered the military in 1966 from there.

SM: What was it like growing up there in that part of the country during the 1960’s, 1950’s really?

JS: Well it was great to be a kid who lived on the ocean, we could always go down and row small boats or go fishing and it being a coastal community had the ability to go out and dig for sea worms or clams. There was always a way for a kid to have a job and make a few bucks on the side- it was great.

SM: Growing up in that part of the country especially in Salem, of course you were in an area very rich in history, in American history in particular. Did that affect you?

JS: Well yes, directly actually. I was the first licensed guide in the city of Salem back in 1965. I use to take tourists around in their cars or their buses, sometimes radio-
linked buses to all the historical sites. I knew the complete history of the town and was able to give it orally.

SM: Was that something you were drawn to personally or did you receive a lot of encouragement from family maybe your parents or grandparents or something?

JS: Well my mother worked as a secretary for the Chamber of Commerce and they were working out a plan at that point when I was an early teen to try to come up with a way to have guides in the city, so I volunteered and started reading. I was always interested in history so it came pretty easy to me.

SM: Were you drawn to history as a subject in school?

JS: Yes I always like History.

SM: What other subjects did you find most enjoyable most interesting as a young person?

JS: Geography, History, Geology, Physical Sciences.

SM: Did you engage in other extracurricular activities; sports, music, things of that nature?

JS: I was on the track team for a while, for a couple of years and enjoyed that. I threw a discus actually and only being 5’7 and 135 pounds it was hard to be on the first squad but I used to be able to throw around 140 feet or so.

SM: What were some of the more important influences on you as you were growing up-people or events, places, things?

JS: Well my mother and father had separated when I was five. My father had been a Marine in WWII and had seen events and things; and his mother was an American Indian, they were from Kansas. So alcohol didn’t work well with him and in those days they didn’t help alcoholics very much. From the time he was separated from us I never saw or heard form him again until I discovered that he was buried in a military cemetery in Long Island and had died in 1975. That was pretty traumatic. The kid that I grew up with who down the street, his name was Stephen Fellows and his father had also been in the marines in WWII. His father treated me like a second son, he is still alive and I still see him on a regular basis we are still very close that way. He had been on Iwo Jima.

After I came back from Southeast Asia we never really spoke much about the war but I
told him recently that I was sure that his difficulties were much harder than anything I
had gone through.

SM: How much of that affected your decision to enter the military yourself?
JS: At the time that I was getting out of high school I had a close friend by the
name of David Chute and he had already gone done and said that he was going to sign up
for the U.S. Air Force and I hadn’t made any choices to where I was going but I was
definitely signing up because otherwise all of us we knew we would be drafted. In fact, I
got my draft notice when I was in basic training at Lackland.

SM: When you graduated from high school of course 1966; quite a bit had been
going on in the country throughout your time in high school, even in junior high perhaps.
I am not sure how much you might remember from grade school or elementary school;
but where were you on issues surrounding the Cold War, the contest with the Soviet
Union and especially how did that increasingly become a part of what you thought about
as a high school student?

JS: Initially of course, from our teachings of history in high school the Russians
had been friends with the Americans at the close of WWII. The Cuban Missile Crisis had
happened while I was 15 years old and I distantly recall that being a very, an event that I
would never forget. I really did believe that there was a distinct possibility that atomic
weapons would be used at some point during those couple of weeks. It sure seemed
evident. That pretty much sealed the conception that most of us had who were graduating
in ’66 because it had only been four years sooner. Communism was thought of as a
defined definite threat to America. The idea of course had been instilled in us as kids that
we all had to prepare for hiding under the desk and we had the drills. So, yes Russians
were thought of as enemies of freedom rather than enemies of Americans. Of course
America being the country of great personal freedom it all came to a head. They were
considered the enemy.

SM: Do you remember when Sputnik was launched?
JS: Oh yes, I remember distinctly because I was selling newspapers on the corner
and people were buying papers and they just couldn’t believe it, none of us could believe
it that their technology was superior to ours and they had the ability. It wasn’t so much
Sputnik but what the common everyday Joe was thinking was that they had the ability to
drop things on us from outer space.

SM: Do you remember how that affected your school? Was that a topic of
conversation among students?

JS: At the time it was conversation to everyone, it was headlines in the paper for
days and the U.S. was taking a beating as being shown up by the Soviets.

SM: Of course also, when you graduated from high school in ’66, by that time
there had been a lot going on in Southeast Asia, President Kennedy had increased the
American advisory effort and in terms of Kennedy what do you remember his
assassination, his death, and how did that affect your community?

JS: I remember when John Kennedy was running for President, he came to Salem
and was just about 100 yards away from where I lived on the corner of the street and the
buddy that I grew up with, that I mentioned, he and I went over just to razz things a little.
We were like street kids and we enjoyed doing that so we got his autograph and lit it up
and burned it in front of him. We really didn’t have any dislike of John Kennedy in fact
the more we heard about what he had to say, his speeches and what he was doing we
thought he was a great guy and was going to achieve wonderful things in the end. When
he was killed I heard about it when I was in high school. It was about 12:30 I guess and I
remember distantly because we were, those of us that use to smoke use to go off the
school property onto this cliff side area. You could be off school property but you
couldn’t get off that area so that they would leave us alone if we were out there smoking.
And someone had just wrecked a car by trying to drive it over the cliff and they were
hauling it back and the gas was pouring out from the car. Some of the kids were dumb
enough to be standing around smoking while a trail of gas was going down the hill but
that’s when we first heard about it that he had been shot but we didn’t know that he was
died, only that he had been shot. It was just around the time we got out of school that we
were told that he had been killed, and I remember sitting in the common in Salem and
everything was like deathly still in the city. There was no traffic, no one was out
shopping it was very strange because everything was entirely muted and this went on for
the entire period until his burial ceremony in Washington. Everybody was fixated
watching the television, it was very sad.
SM: In terms of the idea that a President for the United States could be killed, how did that affect, I guess, the sense of security you felt as a young person in the United States? What were some of the initial thoughts that you and your family and people in your community had about the stabilizing affect of this?

JS: Well no one could figure out and course they still don’t know today whether or not there was any outside plots involved. At the time, the rumor was that Oswald had acted by the Soviets; and once Jack Ruby was killed and the Warren Commission report came out, people didn’t believe whether there was just one shooter or not and so the theories have gone on for years and I don’t think anyone will sincerely know whether or not there was one shooter or more. The biggest thing was, the fear was is that what if the Communists had done it? Course the reaction otherwise was similar to what had happened with Booth and Lincoln. People were thinking that some maniac had assassinated the President. It wasn’t that it was unpresidented, it happened before and several others were shot but not killed; so the American people just had this huge confusion and were looking at the Soviets as an armed enemy who had this greater technological potential, a vaster country and there was some truth to the fact that some people concered the Communists advance since WWII as a domino type affect. But those of us that were young kids who had signed up for the military and joined because we were going to be drafted, well most of us weren’t too sure about this domino affect. It is a large ocean between the western shores of the United States and Southeast Asia.

SM: When you were nearing graduation from high school how much more were you watching and following the events in Southeast Asia?

JS: We were all following them fairly closely at that point because at that point we knew that one way or another we were gonna, probably if we couldn’t get a college deferment, we would end over in Southeast Asia or at least in the military with a great potential for ending up in Southeast Asia. As the war was portrayed on television it sure looked like to us at the time that we were helping these people in South Vietnam and decidedly we were but they kept saying that there was a great deal corruption in South Vietnam and course that didn’t sit well trying to figure out exactly where we fit into the picture.
SM: You mentioned that you had a buddy that when you graduated from high school he had already enlisted?
JS: We enlisted together. He went to Chanute Illinois and ended up, he was supposed to become an electronics technician but they found out, although he had passed his military entrance test, aced every one of them, he was partially colorblind and they ended up making him into a parachute packer. He used to have a sign up he told me that said, “Let’s chute, pack your chute.” (Laughter) Guaranteed we’ll buy your steak dinner if I don’t do my job right.
SM: I’m sure he had to make good on that bet.
JS: He became decidedly anti-war and ended up getting into trouble all the time and in fact he was given Article Fifteens and he ended up being in some kind of a forced labor detail where he had to paint the strips in the parking lot and when he was painting the stripes where the General parked his car, he made a big peace symbol and they discharged him from the military with an undesirable I think was the way they phrased it.
SM: What made you decide Air Force over the other branches?
JS: Simply because it sounded like a good idea and my buddy Dave was going into the Air Force. So I went down and took the test and I did ok you know on the test and I came back with pretty much 60’s or so on the scores. I distinctly remember the Tech Sergeant Warner was my recruiter and I was sent to Boston for a physical and I failed the physical. My albumin count was too high and now he said, “Do you really want to get into the Air Force,” this is when I told him afterwards, and I said, “Yes.” He said, “Just don’t eat anything, just drink at least a gallon and a half of water a day for three days.” And he said, “Go back and take the test over.” So I did and I got in and I almost got into trouble over that because when I was in Lowery at Tech School. Somehow they found out about my failing the first the physical and they made me go down and repass, but I passed and got to stay in. Strange how these things come back to you when you start talking.
SM: Yes. When you entered the Air Force did you want a specific job classification or how did that work out, did you have something in mind that you wanted to do?
JS: Well I was thinking when I first went in, that when I had finished high school I had taken college prep for a couple of years and I didn’t have enough funds and I wasn’t a quick learner although I could learn pretty much anything I wanted to but I wasn’t a quick learner and that was holding me back because I wouldn’t be able to get college scholarships. I did ok on the SAT’s but not high enough considering the large number of Baby Boomers, to be able to get a scholarship and I knew if I tried working and going to school that I wouldn’t be able to study enough to pass the courses, not all of them. That’s why I pretty much went into the military and I did go to college in California to American Rivers College when I was in Sacramento for one semester. But ran into an anti-war professor and I was scheduled to work in Operation High Heels, which was a mock war scenario, and he wouldn’t allow me to have a deferment from taking the mid terms to a different day and he said, “He was going to give me an incomplete, that he didn’t like the military and that was his way to respond to his feelings about the war.” So I just said, “Screw this and didn’t go back,” but I had an A average in both the courses I was taking at the time. That did weigh heavily on my influence about how the division in the country had really expounded itself into different groups socially. They would actually be willing to break the barriers of their own commitment in order to make a point.

SM: When you went and actually enlisted in the Air Force and were giving you orders, how much time from the time you graduated until the time you entered active duty Air Force?

JS: Well it was let’s see I entered the active military in the weekend before Labor Day and had passed the physical and I’d say it was only a matter of two weeks. But to answer your previous question better, I had to select from a list of items. We are all put into a room and we could pick from within that category up to the level of our testing so I had scored high enough that I could pick from the top job on the board and it was to be a Precision Photographic Processing Specialist, but I tried to tell them that although I was in that room I really wanted to be in the other room and I thought that being able to type and being business oriented for two years in high school at the end that perhaps I could work in something related to the administrative career field and basically told me to sit my ass down and pick. (Laughter)
SM: All right good enough. Now where did you go for you initial training, your
basic training as it were?
JS: I went to Lackland for basic training. I have one memory if I could stick in.
SM: Oh yeah, absolutely!
JS: The name Tech Sergeant Savicus and he came from Massachusetts and one of
the jobs I held as a teenager was working at the amusement park at the end of Salem,
called Salem Willows and when we first got there we had to put our personal sacks under
the bed and they went through everything. He came over and asked me where I was
from; I said “Salem, Sir Salem Massachusetts, Sir!” And he said, “Have you ever heard
of Salem Willows?” I said, “Sir, yes sir, I worked there for four years sir.” He looked at
me and he said, “I got beat up there when I was on leave last time.” Instead of looking
afraid, I laughed and I don’t think that endeared me to him very much. So they used to
call us Savickisus’s Sissies or Conden’s Cunts because that was the Airmen 1st Class in
charge of the group when he wasn’t there. But he got into real trouble and got way
behind in his paperwork and they came down into, these were open dormitories barracks
left over from WWII that they had reopened, 3422\textsuperscript{nd} Student Squadron I believe it was,
no Flight Squadron, I don’t know somewhere I got the picture of us they took. But they
found that I could type forty words a minute with no error, I got the job of going up into
his office and typing all his reports while the rest of them went off and went through the
obstacle course, I never had to go. But one other thing, he got ticked off at me again, it
was pouring rain and I was dorm guard and the Lieutenant came up in charge of the
section, we weren’t supposed let anybody in unless they showed us their ids. So he
pounded on the door and I whipped it open and called the barracks to attention but the
guy that had been on duty before had been yelling attention when nobody was there so
they were all ticked off at him, and they thought I was gonna do the same thing so they
were all yelling obscenities at me and I said, “Hey take a look, he is really here!” So then
he stopped half way up the stairs headed up to the TI’s office with his back to me and he
said “Why did you open the door Airman?” And I said, “Personal Recognition, Sir,” and
he said, “What’s my name?” I could remember his first name was Eugene, and his
middle initial was J, but I couldn’t remember his last name for the life of me. Couple of
minutes later I got called up to the TI’s (Training Instructor) office and he told me that no
one was going to be allowed a patio break that night because of me and I started
laughing. When he had called me into his office I pounded on the door and he said, “I
can’t hear you.” And I pounded on it again and kicked it and he said, “I can’t hear you.”
So I kicked the door and being an old place the door fell right inward towards his deck
and fell on the floor and I marched in and reported to him, standing on top of it and that is
when he told me that and I started laughing. He said, “What are you laughing for?” And
I said, “I’m out of here tonight Sir at 6, I got my orders.” (Laughter) He said, “Get the
hell out of here!”

SM: What do you remember most about basic training on Lackland Air Force
Base and what was your introduction into the active duty Air Force like that?
JS: Well actually I thought it was funny, they were trying to scare us and act
tough and people were doing just dumb shit things that didn’t make much sense because
we were a bunch of teenage kids. When were in Boston before we got on the plane all
the kids were acting tough and smoking and throwing candy wrappers and cigarettes
butts on the floor and everything, and I said to a couple of them, “You watch, we’re
going to end up picking all this shit up.” Bigger then hell they came in and make us
police it all up. When we got off the bus at Lackland, with the TI’s screaming at us,
trying to act tough, he lined us all up and said, “I am your mother, and your father to you
people. I am God to you people, do you hear me?” This kid raised his hand and the TI
yelled at him, “What is it you want boy?” And he said, “Mother can I go take a shit?”
So it was things like that it was really difficult for the TIs, I mean they were trying to
instill a camaraderie and most of us were still pretty much strung out to be a very strong
individualistic types you know? A lost of us got into trouble on a regular basis because
of that. I hope that answers that.

SM: Yes it does. What was the most challenging part of basic training for you?
JS: The first three days we weren’t allowed any sleep and that just sort of beat the
hell out of us. Didn’t break us, I think it was intending to break us, but some of us it
didn’t break and we would end up getting into trouble, having to do more push-ups than
everybody else, sometimes to the point where we couldn’t do push-ups. I think they kind
of liked it in a way, but they still wanted to mold us into a unit and did. But they would
come around and say things to people that didn’t really fit. One guy named Dary, kind of
a fat kid and he was 26 years old, I think. He had just signed up before he wouldn’t even
have to participate in a draft and he had applied for OCS (Officer Candidate School) and
they came to take him out of our basic group and put him into OCS and the TI gave him a
hard time. And told him, “You know I don’t know what they see in you,” and all this sort
of thing. And rather than instilling that unification, things like that were telling us that
people were officers that weren’t good enough and it just look really bad. So that sticks
out in my mind, I understand that he came back after he had his butter bars on and
walked around until he found this Tech Sergeant so that he could make him salute him.

SM: Any other memorable experiences from basic?
JS: There was a kid named Green…I guess that phone just died Steve.
SM: Ok.
JS: There was a kid named Green that was in my flight, in fact he was in charge
of one of the squads and he came down with a severe disease and they had to keep us
isolated to make sure that nobody else got it. I can’t remember what the name of it was;
it had to do with the spinal column, some kind of an infection. You still there?
SM: Yes sir, was it some form of Encephalitis? Or Spina Bifida, it wouldn’t be
Spina Bifida that’s a birth defect
JS: No it wasn’t encephalitis. It was spinal something or other and it was, I
believe it was a viral or bacterial infection that can kill you.
SM: Did he die?
JS: No they hauled him off, he just I mean all of a sudden froze up rigid and fell
and he was rigid, and they hauled him off and we didn’t see him again and we were told
what he had and that we were isolated from everybody else for about a week, maybe it
was ten days. He never came back to our flight but I did see him again, the day I got to
Nakhon Phanom or the day after I saw him down at the mail room and he was just getting
ready to leave, he had been there a year so that was strange, I was glad to see that he was
ok.
SM: Yes. Is there anything else from basic?
JS: I was a road guard because I was short and one of the other kids that was a
road guard was named Mott, M-O-T-T, and I believe he was from Pennsylvania, and I
ran into him years later at the same time when I was leaving NKP (Nakhon Phanom
Royal Thai AFB (Thailand)). I was on the freedom bird, the C130 that flies down to
Bangkok when I got on he was already on it. He had been up at Udorn for a year, he had
married a local and he was headed back to the states at the same time I was.

SM: As you were finishing up your basic training where were your orders for
your next assignment?

JS: My orders were to Lowry Air Force Base to attend Technical Training School
as a 234, as a Precision Photographic Processing Specialist and they all told me how
lucky I was that I had my first choice from the board and I said I wanted to be in the other
room.

SM: Now this was a photography, Precision Photography training for high-speed
film and intelligence gathering cameras is that right?

JS: No this was for satellite Reconnaissance.

SM: Satellite, oh cool!

JS: In fact my TI came over when he saw my orders and said, “I can’t believe that
you got this job. I can’t believe you got this job.” I said to him, “Sure beats being a TI
doesn’t it?” (Chuckles)

SM: All right, so you went off to Lowry Air Force Base, where is that located sir?

JS: Denver.

SM: Denver, Colorado.

JS: Not anymore but it use to be.

SM: It was then, ok. When you arrived there what were your first impressions,
how quickly did they get you into your training cycle and go ahead and describe that
experience if you would.

JS: Well Lowry was very strange, when you first got to Lowry it was a large open
base in the center, and of course all the students had to march to all the different schools.
I had three roommates and all of us were awaiting our top secret security clearances to be
finalized before we could attend Tech School and during that time, this was October of
1966, they would schedule you to work KP (Kitchen Police) for a couple of weeks.

There was an American Indian kid who used to drink vodka and he had been initially
assigned the same detail in the KP but what happened is his clearance didn’t come
through so they kept him working in the KP and he had been doing KP for more than 12
hour shifts for more than a month. He was pretty well shot from that. His temper used to
get the better of him when he’d get drinking, and there was another kid from Philadelphia
who use to sniff glue, and I don’t know, his name was Evans I think. They got rid of
him, they found out that he had a heart defect, with a hole in his heart and they got rid of
him. There was a black kid, and the black kid came from Louisiana and he lived on a
street that had no name. The only thing I can distinctly remember about him is that he
use to fight with the kid from Pennsylvaniva and the Indianan would get going with all of
them, and he had a membership to the KKK (Ku Klux Klan). He had some white guy
submit the picture and he had pealed it off and put his own on it, had a new card made.
So he was the only black member of the KKK, which we thought was pretty cool.

SM: Very funny. What was the training like? Describe the regiment when you
got to Denver.

JS: Well the regiment was we would all march over to attend the Tech Training
School which would start oh around 7:30 in the morning and we would break for lunch
and then we would go back and have more training till around 3:30 I believe it was.
Then we would all have study guides and things to study at night. Mostly it was
classrooms for the first few blocks and then it got to be hands on working in the lab, and I
excelled at the lab work and enjoyed that. Then it worked its way up to the point where
we all had to wear bunny suits with oxygen tanks, working in clean labs. But the
majority of the processing was all to be done by mathematics with machines in the end.
You would just end up monitoring the machines and calibrating it and setting up what it
was to do, based upon mathematics. Well when I got through, probably my eighth block
out of 12, I failed the test by one point and I got called in to the officer in charge of the
testing or whatever. And he wanted to know why I had the correct answer on the chart
but had failed to move it over onto the answer correctly. At that point I explained to him
that I never had calculus and I had never had some of the other advanced mathematics in
high school and he sat there with his jaw open and said, “How did you ever manage to
get this far?” And I said, “I just studied the best I could.” He said, “I don’t feel
comfortable with the fact that you’re past training in mathematics was insufficient for this
course.” He said, “How did you get this course?” I explained it to him. He said, “This
course is actually becoming an officer career field and your one of the last two flights of
enlisted men that are coming through this course so I am removing you without
prejudice, what would you like to do?” I told him I would like to work in the base photo
field because I had enjoyed it, the lab work and I excelled at that. He told me that it was
not possible to be in a related career field. So is said, “I don’t know, initially I wanted to
sign up in some form of administrative field.” So he sent me cross-trained into Admin as
a 702 and I reported to Headquarters Western GEEIA (Ground Electronics Engineering
and Installation Agency) Region in Sacramento in April, not having any Tech Schooling
in that at all, and managed to excel at that past my three and five level and in fact I got
my seven level before I left for Southeast Asia. I had a seven level as a Buck Sergeant
and aced the test for staff but couldn’t get staff because I wouldn’t had be eligible from
time in service and time in grade. I made staff at the earliest possible opportunity.
Consequently I ended up; I was at Headquarters Western GEEIA from April of ’67 until
August 24th of 1969. I know the date well that I was sent to Southeast Asia because it
was my birthday. I was originally scheduled to leave six months earlier and had orders
for Binh Tuy in South Vietnam. But I went home on leave prior to, oh I guess what had
happened? My great grandmother had died; it was like a close member of our family-
lived with, all my youth with us. A buddy of mine’s girlfriend at home who had mono,
and didn’t know it, and didn’t like GI’s came on to me, and told me that she had mono
and slammed the door after we’d had been kissing for a while. I got really sick with
mono and I had a fever of 105, and was in the hospital ultimately for 42 days and so the
doctor wouldn’t let me be sent to Binh Tuy until I had more strength and had recovered
better. So they canceled those orders and I ended up going six months later then that and
was sent to Nakhon Phanom with the 56th. So when I stepped off the plane I was a Buck
Sergeant with a seven level who had a top-secret security clearance. They said,
“Perfect!” Because it came onto the plane when I was getting off and they said, “We
need two men with [top] secret security clearances to volunteer.” Well I thought, “This
was great!” So I stood up, you know the old saying, never volunteer. I thought is was
going to get into something neat, instead I got called into the Commander’s Office along
with the other kid and we were told the following: “That they believed the enemy was
getting the frag reports for the Arch Light strikes, and somehow was making sure that
they were not at the location that the strikes took place. And so there was a decree that
had been issued that the next two individuals to arrive at each base with the proper
security clearance, no matter what their AFSC (Air Force Specialty Code) or their job
title, they would be given the job of handling those reports and that they would work
back to back shifts and that they would be the only two to have that information prior to
the pilot’s briefing.” So that is what I ended up doing. And it was not a fun job because I
worked for a Staff Sergeant named Slotta, and there were two Staff Sergeants and two
Buck Sergeants. The Staff Sergeant decided that both of them would work the day shift
and that we could alternate the nights, so we worked extra long shifts. We would come
in at two in the afternoon and work until seven the following morning and then we had to
make sometimes hand deliveries “for eyes only” reports to like Colonels or things, who
were sleeping. Most of the time was spent in the message distribution center with the
frag reports and we were also responsible for allocating where the rest of the classified
message traffic would go. So we had to read all the messages. Well some of the message
traffic was you know interesting, some of it was sad, some of it was just plain dumb. An
example of dumb because it really like ticked me off but I couldn’t tell anybody. One
message was only classified as confidential but if the word had gotten out around NKP it
would of pissed everyone off as it did me and that was that the Thais had put a tax on
eggs or milk that was going to be brought up to NKP. Here you have these guys who are
away from their families, they can’t tell them where they are or what they are doing, and
at the same time you have these pilots flying off into Laos, I knew they were and others
did but not everybody knew where they were going. These guys have their life on the
line constantly and they can’t even have fresh eggs and fresh milk because when the
Thais wanted to tax it, the Americans refused to pay the taxes so they ended up with
powered milk and eggs. And I thought that was rather harsh because some of the guys
didn’t come back and their last meal was powered eggs because of that. There were other
examples but that one stuck out in my mind.

SM: Take a step back for a minute; what was the flight like over and how did you
fly over? Was it by air force or by civilian carrier?

JS: I probably had one of the most memorable flights over I guess, it sucked. I
will never fly on Continental Airlines because it was one of their cattle call haulers to get
us over there and flew out of Travis. We got an hour out over the Pacific and developed
an engine fire and turned around and landed back at Travis and I distinctly remember
there was one idiot who went running down the center of the corridor of the plane
yelling, “Is there a Chaplin onboard?” He thought we were all going to die. We landed
there and we didn’t fly out again till after midnight. They got the fire out on the engine
and they had foam on the runway, we deplaned and they gave us a free meal. But
because we didn’t leave until after midnight we lost a days tour time in Southeast Asia.
We got back on the plane and headed out and got to Hawaii. We had, as I recall, a little
time because I called my mother from Hawaii and told her I was fine and what had
happened because word was it was going to be in the news and all that stuff. We left
Hawaii and were two hours away from getting into Clark and the Philippines when the
plane hit a severe down draft. I was near the back of the plane and there were two, a
Tech Sergeant and a Master Sergeant sitting on either side of me who had both come
from Wright Patt and they were both Medics, and the stewardesses, they had just served
us dinner. The stewardesses got thrown around the cockpit, not the cockpit but the
interior of the plane pretty badly, and one of them had landed directly next to us. In fact,
just when we hit the down draft and everything was going up into the air on the plane, I
had just taken off my seat belt because I was in the process of standing up so I could go
to the men’s room in the back of the plane. And as I went to raise out of the seat I found
myself going up by itself, you know me in it. I grabbed the arms but the center, in the
center seat the arms go up anyway so I am holding onto the arms, the arms are going up
and I am going up too and the Tech Sergeant next to me pulled me down into the seat, put
his hands on my shoulders and pushed me back down into the seat and I did the seat belt
back up. But the stewardess, nobody was able to grab her and she slammed into the top
of the cabin, slammed into the floor and she had a broken back it was believed. The
quick thinking of the Tech Sergeant, he reached across to the other seat and laid over her
before we came out on the other side of the pocket because everything would go up and
down a second time, and if she had already suffered severe injuries then it would really
do her in. So they held her down through that, then they couldn’t open the doors, two of
the doors they could open, there were three. Three crappers in the back of the plane, two
they could get open and the third one they couldn’t. The guy that was in the third one,
had to ride the rest of the way, all the way into Clark, in the bathroom. One of the other
guys that was in the crapper ended up sitting next to me and his 1505s, we all went over
in 1505s. He kept trying to apologize because he was covered with everything that came
out of the john. There was nothing he could do about it. When the plane landed on the
tarmac at the PI (Philippine Islands), they already had the ambulances there and took the
two women off. The other one had a gash right to the bone all the way across her face
and everybody felt really bad for them. We had taken up a collection, and you know
guys headed off to war and everybody wanted to get God on their side so I am sure it was
a large collection. We never found out really what happened to them, that was part of my
flight over and then unfortunately for me when I got to Bangkok, unlike most guys, I
didn’t get a chance to have an over night in Bangkok. We got off the plane and I was
already scheduled to take the Klong Hopper that was leaving, I think it was less then two
hours so I never even got to see downtown. But I do remember when we came into Dong
Maung and the door opened, the first impression of Bangkok was immediate heat,
humidity and the terrible stench. When I was back there in ‘97, it doesn’t smell like that
anymore, but back at the time of the war when you were at Dong Maung you could smell
it, you could actually smell Asia. It smells worse than a garbage dump; it had a very
strong pungent odor. You became use to it pretty quick, but that was the first impression
it was exactly that. On the C130 headed up to NKP, I remember looking out the window
and someone said, “There it is,” and we circled around over it before we landed on it and
we were high enough so all I saw it as was a brown patch like about the size of a postage
stamp in the middle of a sea of green jungle. Other than that my recollections of that first
day at NKP I really don’t remember that much except in processing and then being lucky
enough to be assigned a hooch up the front row in the main drag across from where I was
going to be working.

SM: What were your first impressions of the base camp itself at NKP?
JS: I thought it was totally different from anywhere I had ever been in the military
or otherwise. I had never seen hooch’s before and in the center courtyard there four
hooch’s that would make a square with a latrine on one end as well. They had decks that
were on the inside only and that was your access to your room from the inside deck. And
in the very center of this square there was sand bags and PSP (Perforated Steel Planking
(US DoD)) and they had built bunkers in case we needed them. I don’t ever recall us
ever using the bunkers, just once, and that was probably two months after I got there. They had a sky raider that I found out later from reading the classified message traffic exactly what had happened. At the time we thought we were under attack. I was sleeping and I had this Tech Sergeant that used to shave his head as my roommate directly across from me, there were four of us in a room. His name was Eckhart and he was going to be retiring as soon as he left NKP within three months of when I got there. He only had about a month to go when this incident happened. We were sleeping and we were woken up by being jolted off the bed. And what had happened, we thought we were under attack and went running off into the bunker and I saw him cross himself, he had said he didn’t believe in God so I started laughing at him, we were trying to have a little humor and I said, “Yeah sure you don’t, I saw you cross yourself.” He said something to the affect of you green blankety blank blank he said, “I got the day off and I just woke up and I thought I was getting ready to head into town, I got my spectacles, my testicles, my bank book and my check book.” Well I don’t know if you find that humorous but I did.

SM: Yes, very much so.

JS: The 1st Sergeant we later found out was trying to get everybody outside in the street, and it’s still dark out it is like 4 in the morning or something, and he is trying to get everybody lined up in the street to do a head count. All of the M-16’s were still under, totally under lock and key and very few people had keys. So it was like a real fiasco to think that you could defend yourself at NKP. One example of that was inside the Tactical Unit Operation Center, they were required to have it posted on the wall, where the three perimeters would be in case of attack so that each one would become the restricted area to hold and the last one of course the red zone at all cost or else you would be overrun. Well at NKP that was all drawn in the same area, the red, white, and blue- all the lines were in the same places. They fulfilled the requirements of the regulations in other words; don’t move if you get overrun; that’s it. But you had no ammunition, you had no weapons, they were locked up and they were in another area. So we later found out what had happened was the sky raider had taken off for a mission and the guy had zero oil pressure according to the tower, he reported to the tower and he tried to turn back with his full bomb load to make a emergency landing and pulled back but forgot to put the wheels down. So he landed on the auxiliary fuel tank with at 750, which ever it was
that he had underneath him, scraped down the runway and they yelled at him [from the
tower], “Get up, get up!” But of course he couldn’t get up; he didn’t have an engine so
he sparked until he blew up. By that time we had, the ammunition was cooking off and
several different bombs had already gone off and several more could, and by then we
realized that it was a plane that had blown up on the runway. And we went over to the
TUOC (Tactical Unit Operation Center) and when you came in, when you first came in
you were protected, it was a gated area with a guard. You were sort of sheltered by the
first, there were two buildings. You were sheltered by one from the flight line and the
other from the flight line, but there was an opening in-between the two about, probably
75 feet and people were on the edge of the TUOC looking out onto this area so they could
see the flight line and watch the plane, they could see it from there. This black Buck
Sergeant had claimed to be counting off all the cooked ammo and he said, “Well that’s it;
that is all of them, I am sure of it, we can go now.” He went walking out; he about half
way and I think it was a 250 that went off, scared the hell out of him, he went running
like hell and the rest of us laughed at that. One of the guys that were standing beside me
was a two stripper and he wanted to watch and he was standing out there as this 20
caliber were going off and it was cooking off in all directions and you could hear it. So I
said, “Get in here.” And he said, “Hey Sarge, I can’t see over there, I want to see.” And
I said, “Can’t you hear that stuff cooking off?” And he said, “Yeah, how close do you
think it is?” He said to me and I said, “Well it is probably within 20 feet of you or so if
you can hear it.” He goes, “Jesus Christ!” And he came running back. I don’t know
why I remember that. We all felt really down for that poor guy that was cooked off in
that plane, there was no way he was going to get out of there alive. He was probably
dead on the first explosion. I always wondered what they said to his family; I hope they
told him that he had died over the trails in Laos instead of because he forgot to put his
wheels down. I don’t think they would’ve ever told the family that, I really don’t.

SM: No probably not. Sir we have been talking now for over an hour now for the
interview, let’s go ahead and take a quick break.

JS: Sorry.

SM: No, no! We are back from break, continuing the interview, go ahead sir.
JS: One thing I forgot to tell you Steve that I distinctly recall is when I was first
called in to the Commanding Officer’s office, after getting off the plane and being told
what I was going to do and why; I said to him, “Maybe they were using little tape
recorders. They have the sounds on little poles and they stick them out in front of censors
to make people think that’s where they are.” And he laughed at me and told me, “No, no
that is not what they are doing. They are getting the information somehow.” That
thought came back to me when I was watching the documentary on PBS many years ago
about the Vietnam War, specifically about how they avoided the electronic wall and they
said that’s [one way] they did it. They made them bomb where they weren’t in that
manner; they were using little tape recorders with sounds of trucks and people, very
simple. But it was sad the number of lives that were lost especially the Navy VO67.
When I got to NKP at the chapel on the wall there was a plaque of the names of all the
men, the Navy men, who had been lost on these Neptune’s. I asked somebody about it
because it didn’t make any sense to me, you know the Navy at NKP, and that is when I
first learned of what they had to do was use sensors, Sona Buoys sensors, sub-hunting
sensors and course flying that low and slow over that trail the planes were just cut to
pieces. They later switched over to other types of dropping the sensors and creative ways
of making them. All of task force Alpha at NKP was totally underground. One of the
officers that was the currier for material between the message distribution center and
Task Force Alpha is a friend of mine named Jerry Frazier. Jerry later went on to serve
over in Laos as well, and I distinctly him coming into the TUOC on a regular basis to
pick up classified message traffic to take out to Tack Force Alpha. We were all told that
our mail was being read and censored and being kind of a wise guy and not really sure if
it was or not I decided to find out. When I was in high school, I had been bored in study
halls and my World History book had the Phoenician alphabet on the front cover so I had
spent my time coping the Phoenician and cutting them out into little squares, flipping
them over and then randomly assigning letters of the alphabet so they wouldn’t look the
same. It was a little slow to write it but I developed a couple of short cuts by making
conjunctives and some other words as one symbol and whenever I would write something
in that code I would not space out between the words nor give anything away like a date
at the top or my name at the bottom and I left this code with my wife who I had been
married to only a couple of months before I went to Southeast Asia. In one of the letters back to her I used this code for a paragraph and two days letter I was called into my Commander’s office to explain what it meant. He had the letter and I had to not only tell him but I had to write it all out and write the entire code out so that they could verify it because all the code really said was “I am just writing this to see if they are reading our mail as reported, let me know if you get this letter.” (Laughter) I was told never to do it again, so they were reading our mail. There is several other events that come to my mind that stand out in my mind during the course of the interview I would like to have a place to place them, but I would also be very interested in what you have to ask.

SM: In terms of general experiences one of the things we like to outline is just what your average day was like for instance. Now your average day there at NKP, what time did you have to get up, what was your daily routine like?

JS: I was thinking that you might ask me that and was thinking about it this morning and, hang on for one second. As I mentioned the two Staff Sergeants worked in day between 7 and 4, and the two Buck Sergeants alternated between 2 pm and 7 am, which sounds great expect for the fact that the way it really worked was you would get off in the morning at 7, you would eat chow and then try to sleep in your hooch between and 8 and oh about 3; of course it wasn’t…air-conditioning it was on the flight line so that pretty hard to do. And then I’d be up till about 11 at night, between 3 and 11. At that point I would be tired enough again so that I could sleep till about 7 and it’d be cooler and then I would have to be back in at work at 2 in the afternoon that day so the way it really worked out, you were up from 7 am until 8 am the next day and then you didn’t get much sleep in the daytime for that day until that night. It was pretty restrictive because you couldn’t get much time to get away from the base, unlike other people who would work, you know usually a 12 hour day six days a week and have a day off, because we never had a day off and we never had any R&R (Rest and Relaxation). One time we worked back-to-back shifts, double shifts, so that each one of us could have a day like that and it was a monster, I think it was 36 hours or something so we couldn’t do that. I think we did it once or twice but no more then that; we may have done it a second time. It was pretty harsh. All of your roommates worked different shifts then you did. Most had the daytime shifts, some had a nighttime shift but they were all 12 and 12 and stayed
on that same schedule. The harsh part about our shift was that you were trying to sleep in
the day time part of the time and at night for part of the time, your body couldn’t get
adjusted one way or another and although you had free time in two different periods it
was limited to four or five hours at the most. So it did make time go by quick.
SM: Now in terms of your workload, how busy was your average day?
JS: I was always busy. There was a lot of classified traffic that came through to
Nakhon Phanom. We also handled the unclassified traffic that came through so every
communication in or out of the base went through my hands when I was on shift and had
to be assigned as to where it would go, who would receive it besides whoever the listed
recipient was, if there was one. There were communications coming in all the time from
Laos, from Sullivan and various other people. Headquarters 7th Air Force and
interestingly enough NKP was pretty much under the command of the 7th 13th Air Force
which if you go to the Air Force historical sites, it is not even listed. It’s like it didn’t
exist because it was both the 7th Air Force and the 13th Air Force were trying to say that
they were in charge and in the end neither one of them were given total oversight of
Nakhon Phanom and for that reason the history of NKP and the 7th/13th Air Force just
isn’t even mentioned. Matter of fact I sent an e-mail enquiry to the Air Force Historical
Site, it listed the 5th Air Force, the 7th and etc., and I didn’t even get a response back from
them when I asked them what about the 7th/13th and sent them a copy of the patch. So I
kind of wonder, even now, how much of that history and the inter-relationship has really
been kept?
SM: I’m not sure, you said you have done searches and you haven’t been able to
find very much?
JS: No, not on the Air Force, history of the Air Force on websites and inquiry
didn’t result in any information coming back, so I wonder if they even recognize it. It
was viable organization at the time.
SM: In terms of the organizational structure of the office in which you worked, it
was just two of you there, reviewing all this traffic or was there more?
JS: In the day time there were two Staff Sergeants that handled the work load up
until two in the afternoon. And from that point forward there was just you know two
Buck Sergeants we were pretty well isolated, we didn’t know a great number of people
because we didn’t work with them. We worked by ourselves and that is how they wanted
it. All the frag traffic for the Arc Lights came in primarily at night and we worked in this
room by ourselves, separated from the comm center itself with a steel door with a sliding
window. As the traffic came in it was handed to us through the window and our little
room was totally separate from anything else and then there was another steel door with a
window outside the building and no one else worked with us. We were alone from two in
the afternoon until seven in the morning.

SM: What do you remember most about the classified traffic that was coming
through, was this mostly mission oriented information intelligence about troop
movements and maybe anti-aircraft gun location-information like that? Just describe
what you recall. If you can describe what you recall. If you’re allowed to.

JS: Well the majority of the traffic I would say…There was two types of it: one
type that had it’s origin stateside or other locations out of theater and they were providing
over guidance and information on support structure and about what was happening in
Vietnam or elsewhere. Another portion of the traffic was coming through Intel sources in
Laos and was related to their interpretations, the political situation, etc. etc. and
orientated towards the mission in Laos. The third set of information was more geared
towards the actual hands on reports from individual missions by individual pilots and
individual locations. The only exception to those three types of traffic was the actual frag
reports which were the drop locations, you know for the next few hours that had to go out
to the individual pilots flying over each section in order for them to avoid having the arch
lights or B-52’s drop the ordnance on top of them as they were flying much lower
altitudes.

SM: In the context of reading some of the message traffic, you mentioned that
some things occurred to you, for instance there were ways the enemy would be spoofing
our system of intelligence gathering, whether it be through recordings or whatever.
When you were looking over message traffic like this, especially intelligence related
message traffic, were there other things that were coming to your mind especially, you
know, there are ways that you can spoof photography in addition to the use of sound
devices to spoof any kind of sound sensors that might be in an area. There’s also ways of
spoofing cameras on aircraft, cameras on satellites, were these issues coming up at all?
SM: No they were not because I really believe sincerely that our photo interpreter
guys and the people that were flying missions of that nature were top notch and were very
good at figuring out what they were looking at. I don’t think there was much deception
that went on that they got away with in those areas, but acoustically the audio I think they
probably really did a number on us. I think some of the equipment at NKP that was use
was of course extremely different from anything else. They had airplanes that flew as
drones with no pilots sometimes and this was unheard of at the time. The QU22 is an
example; they flew with pilots unless they were flying over the Chinese Road. Most
people aren’t aware of the Chinese Road but the Communist Chinese were building a
four lane concrete super highway through part of Laos to the border of north Thailand
and the great fear was that the Chinese were doing this so they could enter the war. They
already had advisors in North Vietnam and on the trails in Laos. A lot of the equipment
that was used was of Chinese origin. In fact there was 37 millimeter in a 24 or 12-
millimeter triple A that was located outside the TUOC building so when the pilots came
in for their briefings, it would make them a little more somber and aware of exactly of
where the hell they were going. Those pieces had been brought back by being picked up
with a helicopter and a chain off the Plain of Jars. They were sort of presents from Vang
Po to the Americans. The essence of the whole thing was that, no, I felt absolutely that
the men that were doing the job at NKP were doing a wonderful job and the only
potential for the enemy, although they built triple canopy covers over the trails and tried
to disguise them and everything else, the Americans always saw through it. I mean there
would be days that were not even allowed to bomb the trails because there was a truce
and they would see hundreds and thousands on some days of trucks on those days headed
down the trails and it was just a terrible feeling seeing the enemy utilizing these so called
“peace periods” as nothing more then an excellent military opportunity. What comes to
mind to me, especially, was when Ho Chi Minh died in November after I had got there in
August. One of the guys that lived in my hooch was missing for three days and that was
because reportedly there was a fire fight going on downtown NKP and he was hiding in a
bar, inside the actual the bar. The Mamasan that owned the bar liked the guy and she had
stuffed him under the bar to hide him because 40% of the population of Nakhon Phanom
was Vietnamese and another at least 40% was ethnically Lao because NKP used to be
Laos, it didn’t use to be Thailand up until about 150 years earlier. And the Thai’s went north and conquered it, took away the emerald Buddha, brought it back down to Bangkok. The Mekong was from any land west of that was now their territory, well, there were 10 or 12 ethnic minority hill tribes people who lived there primarily. Not Thai, they didn’t speak Thai; they spoke their own languages like Pu Thai and several others. So, because of that, the Thai’s never developed their country and they were the poorest of all of Thailand and the Americans only got the opportunity to place the base at Nakhon Phanom because of those factors. There was a great deal of Thai Communists who surround Nakhon Phanom and this information is not generally known but it is all declassified and readily available, it is call the COIN Reports: Counter Insurgency Reports. There were a lot of difficulties in the villages; a lot of the villagers were communist. In fact, an article I have from the Bangkok Post from the 23rd of June of this year in 2003 is a full page article about how Ho Chi Minh’s home at Nakhon Phanom is now a tourist attraction and has been opened by the Vietnamese and they have sent experts over to ensure that everything that’s on display is related to the time frame between 1923 and 1930 when Ho Chi Minh lived in Nakhon Phanom. They plan on building two additional buildings, one to represent where he was born in the North Central Highlands of Vietnam and another to represent his house in Hanoi. But most people were never aware of the fact that he had plotted his overthrow of French Vietnam from Nakhon Phanom. The reported Ho Chi Minh clock tower in downtown Nakhon Phanom, I had it translated. It is written in four languages and I stood there with people who are experts and spoke those languages well and they all told me individually what the interpretations says on the clock tower; and it all says the same thing, four languages other than English given to the Vietnamese community of Nakhon Phanom by a former grateful resident, so I guess it really is Uncle Ho’s clock tower. It really stuck out in my mind when I found out, after the fact, what their doing to enhance the memory of Uncle Ho, and the Thais of course and allow people who live in Nakhon Phanom they are not at odds with each other today but the people of the province want closer ties with their own ethnic people on the other side of the river. And the new Governor of Nakhon Phanom asked me directly through a translator last October, if our organization, knowing that we worked in Laos now, if we would help create and work with them for better relations.
between their sister city across the river, which we were more than anxious to do. I guess at this point I could sort of mention that our organization is the TLC Brotherhood. And that stands for Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia and we are a non profit organization charity, we help many thousands of children today in Southeast Asia in memory of the men who did not come home. With the advent of computers and the internet with the use of a search engine and placing up a web site, our organization was able to grow and get a name from those men that had served in these locations in Southeast Asia outside the Republic of Vietnam. None of us had anyway of finding each other without that, and we have grown today to have general officers right on down to people who served as a TDY (Temporary Duty) for a few months at locations in Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia. Helping the children was something we had started back even during 1969. I went with a kid who was heading out to an orphanage. A priest was coming to pick him up and I had missed the bus into town and he asked me if I would like to go and so I said, “Sure some place different.” I was very impressed by the priest, he spoke I believe its seven languages that he speaks. He is now Arch Bishop of Thailand and we a few years ago exchanged pictures and we’ve done direct aid to that orphanage that still needed assistance to more than eight thousand dollars to that orphanage alone. The man’s name is Father Khai, Lawrence W. Khai. And he had gone through some traumatic periods where Christianity was being introduced. It’s still only less than one half of one percent in all of Thailand and he was based in Sakhon Nakhon, which is about an hours drive southwest of Sakhon Phanom. The orphange there needed help and this other Buck Sergent; Ted had instead used his time for R&R for teaching English at the school. I went there with him and the kids needed help and we came back to the base with this idea of putting together a way to raise some money to help the orphange. Well it snowballed and all the units at NKP started competing with each other as they like to do. When the time finally came at Christmas time, people had written home to their families and corporate donations had provided brand new items and the air force had shipped them free of charge all the way over and we had large boxes filled with combs and shampoo; all kinds of personal items, sporting good equipment for the kids. And we had Santa Clause who arrived in a Jolly Green Giant from the 21st Special Operations Squadron. In fact the pilot and I today are friends and communicate by e-mail, he is a member of our
organization and there’s picture on the website for the TLC Brotherhood of these events
and pictures taken that day way back in ’69. Father Khai, last year, sent me about 30
pictures in black and white taken by the base photo office that he had kept for many years
up in his attic on [taken] that day. So you never really know how past events are going to
effect future events. That is just an example of how we are working today helping these
many thousands of kids and there is going to be a memorial that has been worked upon
by two committees, one at Nakhon Phanom and one through the TLC Brotherhood. And
in October the head of our committee goes to Nakhon Phanom. The designs are finalized
and it has already been dedicated by General Aderholt, last October, into a park called,
Elephant Head Park in the western part of Nakhon Phanom. So when tourists go to see
Ho Chi Minh’s home they can also go and see the monument to the Americans and the
Thai’s who were killed during the war. Thailand had four or five battalions who were
volunteers fighting for the Americans as mercenaries in Laos, on the ground.

SM: What was the relationship like, that you remember, between the Air Force
community there at NKP and surrounding civilian community of Thais and did you have
permission to go across the Mekong into Laos and interact with the Laotians there?

JS: No we were forbidden to make the attempt to cross the Mekong River.
However, drunk G.I.’s, being what they are; there was an occasional G.I. who would
make a claim of having crossed the river. There were several who I knew attempted, but
the word was out that the Communists in Laos were offering a monetary sum for an
American head and i.d. card. Now whether that was scare tactics or an actual threat, none
of us ever knew and of course the Commanding Officers at the base at NKP would never
tell us because they didn’t want us to try to go over anyway. The local people who
surrounded NKP, a good number of them, worked on the base. My friend Jerry Frazier
that I mentioned who came and picked up the classified material for TFA (Task Force
Alpha), he ended up marrying a girl who worked in the Officer’s Club who had actually
been a novice in training to become a nun for Father Khai out at Sakhon Nakhon
originally, had left there and went to work at the O Club. My hooch boy whose name
was Rawin; all of us were given two pair of combat boots and anybody who broke in the
first pair would never try to break in the second, they use to really hurt your feet for the
first few days. So this kid had no shoes and he use to clean the hooch and take care of it,
make sure the laundry got done and everything sent out. Nice kid, only 15 years old, I
gave him the boots, I wasn’t going to wear them. Mine certainly weren’t going to wear
out in a one-year period or so and my act of kindness was rewarded by an invitation to go
to his village. Well I thought this was all well and great and had no way to get there of
course at first. After his insistence on finding out when I was coming, I worked it out
with another Buck Sergeant that we could borrow a jeep and go. Well to us it was two
Buck Sergeants headed out for a fun day and a fun evening. To the Thais, these actual
hill tribe former Laotians who weren’t really speaking Thai, I didn’t know that his father
was a village chief and I didn’t know they had an underline reason for inviting us; and to
them, “The Americans are coming!” They believed that America had streets paved with
gold; they really believed that, we had talked to them and they believed it. They believed
that America was the land where you could have anything you wanted and compared to
the way these people lived and these little remote villages and the technology of the
Americans, I suppose it would be easy for them to look upon us in that way. Of course I
was just a kid who grew up without a dad, who joined the military and was over there and
didn’t understand the culture, but I had a good heart and an open mind so we went.
When we got there, they had this tremendous welcoming, they took a water buffalo and
put a rope around its neck, and put it around a tree limb and pulled it off the ground and
sliced its throat. No I guess they had it around its feet, it was hanging upside down, they
sliced its neck and after beating it with these big staves; they roasted it and while they
were doing that they put on a Thai boxing exhibition and I had never seen that but I was
somewhat apprehensive. They wrap their hands in rags and they wrap their knees loosely
and then they dip their hands into wax and then into glass and they put glass and wax on
their knees. They didn’t bind the knees tight, they could still move the knees but I guess
it was a little lower than the knee cap in the front so they could still flex the knees really
well. They started fighting and one guy started losing then all of a sudden he started
coming back and he got the other guy in the corner, we were sitting in about the third row
I think it was. They were on an elevated platform in front of us about four feet high and
we’re sitting there pretending to watch and you know be feeling like we didn’t really, I
mean we had no idea they were going to put on all these types of things and we were only
a couple of kids, we didn’t feel like we were King Farouk or anything; just felt out of
place with it all until, the other guy had him in the corner in the right hand corner of this
ring and he just kept pummeling him with his knees into his lungs and the guy was glassy
eyed and everything. We figured, “Ok he is going to pull away from him now and it’s
over;” but he didn’t, he kept going and when he finally did pull away from him the guy
fell forward onto his face in a big pool of blood at least three feet wide and three feet long
came gushing out of his mouth and they picked up his feet and dragged him off, I knew
he must have been dead. I felt really bad that my charity had resulted in another man’s
death ultimately but I had no way of foreseeing it. When I realized that he was killing the
guy, by the time I realized it, he was probably dead already and I couldn’t stop it because
this was their culture and before the event had started, while we were seated, the kid next
to me asked me for a light for his cigarette; and I wanted to smoke myself I was as
nervous as he was. And I didn’t have any matches either, so I got up and there was a
Thai army soldier, Tiger Soldier, with an M-16 there and I only saw one but there must
have been several. I went over and got a light from him off his cigarette he was smoking
and he said to me and I never forget it, he said to me in broken English, “You brave G.I.,
many Communists here.” I went over and sat down; looking at the crowd as I went and
yeah there were a lot of faces that didn’t look really happy and I said to the kid sitting
beside me, “Don’t look now.” I told him what he said and I said, “Don’t look now” and
of course the first thing he did was turn around and look at everybody. (Laughter) So
after this had happened we had our dinner of this beaten water buffalo, some rice and no
matter how small of a piece you tried to eat it seemed like there was a chip, a bone in it.
We knew better then to turn our noses up at the food; we knew that they had put on their
Easter Sunday spread. So we didn’t want them upset with us but primarily we didn’t
want to offend them. After the dinner was over, in broken English, with the translation
done by Rawin his son, I found out why we had really been invited. The old man gave
me one of his daughters and she stood up and I know Thai culture is not to have women
show themselves in a sexual manner. She walked forward to me and we were eating with
all these village elders in this hut and we had been drinking homemade rice wine, in an
American whiskey bottle and there was still about two inches of rice in the bottom of the
bottle and a fly kept zipping in and out of the top of the thing. We were drinking that
when she came over to me when I figured out what was really going on and she was
given to me. She opened her sarong and held it out in such a way that only I could see
her, but she was naked underneath and I was a young kid but I knew better. I didn’t want
to ruin her life and I couldn’t keep her; I knew better than to take her out of the village
and I knew if I did they would never let her go home and I knew I couldn’t refuse to
accept the gift. Well I was fortunate, God helped me I guess, and I thanked him very
much for the gift and I understood that he wanted his daughter to go to the land of the Big
BX it’s not like nobody hates their kid. He wanted her to have a better life, he was
willing to give her up for that, he thought I was a kind guy because I had given his son a
pair of boots so I thank him profusely and told him the best I could come up with, I
figured it wouldn’t offend him. I told him how happy and thankful I was and that I
would be back for her but I had to prepare a place for her to sleep and I figured that
would endear the old man to me because he would know I wouldn’t abuse the kid and
that I cared about her at the same time it would allow me to leave her behind and get the
hell out of there without having my head taken off. So shortly after that we left, you
know smiled and thanked everybody and took the jeep and I guess we probably got a 100
yards down the road before we started to put the peddle to the metal and started yelling at
each other, we couldn’t believe what had happened. I didn’t go off the base for probably
two or three months after that because Rawin kept trying to figure out when I was going
to come and take his sister and no matter how much I tried, I couldn’t explain it to him
that I couldn’t keep her. The fact that I was married and had only been married a few
months before I got there didn’t mean anything to him. He didn’t understand why I
couldn’t have more than one and he wasn’t going to tell his father that I had refused to
take his sister. The end result of it was, eventually they showed up at the gate at NKP. I
got a phone call into the TUOC from the gate guard and he wanted to know what to do.
He said they were here to deliver her and I said, “Tell them I went home,” I didn’t know
what to say. So I didn’t go off the base for a couple months after that. You know I mean
they showed up with their, they had old flint rock rifles and they had hand made cross
bows and these were tribal people, they were not Thais by any stretch of the imagination.
So when I went back, to finish this up, this story when I went back in 2002 and they had a
big welcoming party for the returned NKP by the American G.I.’s, a man who is going to
be running for political office named Ponphan, I had got to know him, he was at the TLC
reunion in Washington D.C. the year before; and we had helped him be able to get there
and he made announcements on the radio stations, the largest in the area, not the full
story but the fact that this man had been my hooch boy and that I was trying to find him.
Nothing ever came of it except one guy called in who had the same name but had worked
in the base bowling ally two years later and another guy had called in who worked on the
base who had known Rawin but had no idea of where he was today. So I was never able
to find him and I am not certain which tribe he was from but from speaking with people
when I was back there this last time because of his name and because of the way the
village lived and it wasn’t far from NKP, it was only probably five or six miles or so,
they suspect it was one of the Pu Thai villages south of Nakhon Phanom. That’s a story
you’ll never forget.

SM: Yes, sir. Well in the interactions you had with other Thais, for instance at
NKP would you consistently go off the base and into the surrounding Thai community?
JS: No not on a regular basis except for downtown. They had a bus, they wanted
to enhance relationships between the Americans and the surrounding community and the
best way they knew how to do that was to tell us to behave ourselves and let us go
downtown and spend our money. Of course Nakhon Phanom was always a back water.
Nakhon Phanom in Thai means “city of hills” but in actuality the hills are across the
Mekong on the other side of the river and the city on the other side in Laos is called
Thakhek which means “ferry crossing” and they did, they had a scheduled ferry that
would go two or three times a week across the river, even during the war. And it was
reported that some of the Laos who came over to NKP for a little off time were
communist. You know dressed up as just locals, trying to make a quick buck and take it
easy and relax over in Thailand. No doubt some of them were intelligence collections
people and things of that nature. I ran into one incidence in town, there was as place
called Boston Tailors, and being from the area of Boston I thought, “Well this is as good
as any tailor as any to pick,” and I went in to have a couple of suits made. There were
several of us who ended up going to the OSI (Office of Special Investigations) office on
the base and reporting there was a man working there trying to ask us questions about
side facing radar. And of course when I showed up the OSI said, “Oh yeah we have
heard about this guy recently and we suspect that he is a Russian spy but he’s an ethnic
Indian from India and we want you to go back and keep track of everything he asks you
and we want you to act like nothing is going on.” I was all for that, I mean I felt like
James Bond it doesn’t cost me anything and when I went back the guy had already
figured out that people were on to him and had split when I asked for him when I was at
the tailors. So there were lots of people from lots of places that worked their way into
NKP. The local populists ran bars for the American G.I.s, one of the more famous of
which was called Marty’s Ice Cream Parlor. Interesting history, it was actually owned by
a British guy originally who had stayed behind from WWII in the Burma Theatre and he
wanted to open a bar and they wouldn’t let him so he called it an ice cream parlor. Of
course all they had was girls for rent and beer but they had an American juke box, cold
beer, and a waitress that everybody loved who spoke perfect English, she was a beautiful
girl, a real doll and she wouldn’t let anybody go near here. In fact if you did as I did,
tapped her on the shoulder to get her attention for another beer, if you had forgotten that
you weren’t allowed to touch her whatever she had in her hand when she turned around,
she would swing at you and she told me straight out in English, “Old Thai custom, no
touch.” She was a gorgeous girl and you know I was 20, 21 years old and she must have
been 19 or 20, someone who spoke perfect English and was beautiful like that, and it was
pretty hard not to want to go there. Most of the guys ended up with live in girlfriends,
they’d try to rent a place, well some guys, the majority didn’t but some guys would have
girlfriends in the local area who you know would pay for all their expenses and would
maintain an apartment or a flat. The guy would get to go to town often enough if he
worked a regular 12 hour schedule so that he could live with her. With my schedule and
hours I didn’t have that type of schedule, I don’t think I would’ve done it anyway. Even
though I had been recently married you know it is pretty hard not to sleep with
somebody, I think I slept with a couple of the girls over a course of a year. On one
occasion each after having a few beers as most guys find them harder to resist after that.

SM: In terms of the general attitude of the Thai civilians that you interacted with,
how would you describe their reaction of Americans living in their country?

JS: There was more than one class at the time of Thai. The lower class in the
society, the people who worked at service type jobs on the base, they were very much
happy with the Americans. I never saw or heard any of them say or do anything that
would lead me to believe otherwise. The Thai military on the base felt over shadowed by the
American presence and they felt that they were not respected enough by the American
military. I think most of that was probably stemmed from the fact that there was a great
deal of corruption within the Thai military, the base Commander would have his take on
most things that went on. I understood that anybody who got a job on that base, a certain
percentage of their wages or the fact they were given the job would require a payment
and he owned the restaurant, the only restaurant that was on the base, and things of that
nature, but if you showed respect to the Thai soldiers as men, as soldiers…Which I did,
two or three that I regularly played blackjack with, they appreciated that very
much and they treated you like a good person, they would be your friend and the Thais
were overall very friendly. I think the corruption and the over shadowing of the
American military power is what held back the military themselves from a greater
interaction with the Americans. Downtown it was a totally different story; they loved to
see you coming and would sell you anything they could.

SM: What was moral like on the base at NKP?
JS: Moral was good, I was extremely surprised by reports in following years that
moral was awful and I think that men only came about when servicemen were sent to
NKP knowing that the war was winding down. There was difficulties race wise,
however, at Nakhon Phanom. The vast majority of us weren’t racial but there were some
who were and they would inflict it. Quick example of that, at my own hooch, I was
walking along with a couple of guys, a black guy named Hillary who was a Staff
Sergeant who was a friend of mine, and another friend of mine who was a Buck Sergeant
named Cross. Now all I remembered is Hillary was married and had children and Cross
was a door gunner in a Jolly Green and it was a standing joke that he was “aCross” from
you. We’re walking along and this black Buck Sergeant that I had never seen before,
very tall and thin, very dark he looked at us and he said to me, “Yo’ Mama.” And I
looked at him and said “Yo’ mama.” And he wanted to fight and Hillary jumped in front
of me and said to this guy, “You want to get to him you’ve got to go through me, what
the hell do you think your doing?” And the guy said to him, “He said to me, my mama!”
And he said, “Well you said to him your mama!” And he said, “So what?” Just like he
was entitled to say that because he was black, he could make derogatory remarks about
anybody that was white and he couldn’t understand, this guy he stood there and he was
mad but he couldn’t understand why a black guy was defending a white guy or how had
he of been at fault; he couldn’t get it. That is when I first became aware of the fact there
was a race problem at NKP. But this black guy wasn’t alone, he was with a group of four
or five other black guys and they didn’t hang with any white guys. So that is what told
me yeah there was a racial problem. That was the only experience I ever had with it but I
didn’t see any racial experience coming from white guys, picking on the black guys.
White guys sometimes would make a remark, especially southern white guys but they
would only do it to other white guys, not to black guys. And so I think that is the distinct
difference is that the black guys felt they had the right to be hostile, openly and it
surprised me because I wasn’t prejudice, Hillary wasn’t prejudice, and I don’t think the
vast majority of people were. But I think that certain minority was able to blow it all out
of proportion for the number of people who felt that way. Have you had many reports of
that?

SM: It varies, it depends on unit, it depends location, and it depends on time,
when they were in country. Now would you estimate that the majority of the guys you
were serving with were draftees, volunteers, or volunteers who had volunteered to have
more control over where they went but were going to be drafted?

JS: I’d say everybody, not everybody, for the enlisted men who were young;
almost every one of us had enlisted because they knew if they didn’t they’d be drafted.
However, there were no draftees within the Air Force that I am aware of. So that was
quite a different aspect in what the Army had but course the Officer Corps were all
volunteer anyway. Some of them I imagine became officers for the very same fact that
they would’ve ended up drafted other wise. So I think the majority element was fit into
that category.

SM: In terms of the ethnic make-up, of the men that you were closest to, what was
the composition?

JS: Well as you asked the question the thought comes to mind about this poor guy
who was Chinese and you know when he was in country there in Thailand he wanted
everybody to know that he was their friend because he was afraid somebody was going to
mistake him for the enemy whether he was off base or on, and he’s the only Asian ethnic
guy that I ever saw at NKP. So I would have to say he was in a very definite minority there. I am sorry what was the rest of your question?

SM: Well just out of curiosity the ethnic make-up of the men in your unit that you had most contact with?

JS: Well almost everybody at NKP was Caucasian, there were a handful of black guys in my unit, probably no more that four or five that I am aware of and I think I knew most of the guys in the unit. I never saw a black officer while I was there. I’d say you know Caucasians for the vast majority of people.

SM: What was the relationship like between the enlisted men and the officers there at the base?

JS: They had a very good relationship, when General Aberholt was in charge he had a very personable relationship with everybody on that base as long as they weren’t screw-ups. And he would go and talk on a regular basis to the enlisted men, wherever he would find them. Slept in his fatigues, in his uniforms, very little at night probably five or six hours at night. If he wasn’t actively you know involved in leading the unit then he would go around and talk to everybody. Now he had left before I arrived, but his status and how much he was loved was still legend at NKP when I arrived and he had left a year earlier. The rapport between the officers, when I was there, and the enlisted men was also very good. Some of the rapport that I have seen and heard between officers was not as good. Some of the officers in charge of some of the squadrons were doing stupid things: uniforms, haircuts, things like that. These were officers who were flying missions over the trails in Laos that were being subjected to some of these people doing that type of chicken shit; and in their own mind I am sure they felt that they were helping the units but they weren’t. When you get an officer or two that would talk openly in front of enlisted men about how much they hated their commanding officer and why, I’d say that the moral problem was between the officers. We were aware of that more then any difficulties between the enlisted men and the officers, and I think that even goes to show that there was more respect for the enlisted men then for there own commanders. Not all commanders were bad but the few that were created more problems than having a good commander.

SM: How would you evaluate the leaders that you worked directly under?
JS: Well I was fortunate in the position in that I didn’t have anybody that I worked directly under. I mean working nights and the shifts that I worked; I never saw any of them. I never had any difficulties with the job and no one directly supervised me, I mean they weren’t there. There was one incident with my Commanding Officer that I thought was funny as hell though, and they supported the troops under them. I was walking down the street out in front of the TUOC one day and this new Lieutenant in his shiny stateside fatigues walking by me in the opposite direction had the sun in his eyes and mistook the marks on my commando hat; everybody put a black mark for each month that they were there, are you aware of that?

SM: Now say that again, a what kind of mark?

JS: A black stripe was placed upon your hat, one stripe for every month. The reason being is that anybody could tell how long you were there and knowing how long you were there would tell them immediately a great deal of information. Whether you were somebody that opinion could be asked or you could be trusted, whatever. It was also of a sign or a symbol of how close you were to getting the hell out of there so the guys loved it, everybody did it. So I had all these black marks on my hat and I am walking down the street and this new officer, he had never seen anybody with marks on their hat so when he walked by, of course your rank was black on your sleeves so he saluted me with the sun in his eyes, and I saluted him back lefty and laughed and he stopped me and he said, “Sergeant!” And I said, “Yes sir,” and he said, “The sun was in my eyes and I…” By that time I had turned around, he was turned around he said, “I thought those black marks on your hat, you were a Captain. You take those black marks off your hat.” That was the only time I directly disobeyed an officer and I just laughed and said, “No sir.” And he said, “I am giving you a direct order to take those black marks off your hat!” And at that point Colonel Kovax who commanded the unit, I think it was Kovax, was it Kovax, yeah it was Kovax but he commanded the 21st SOF- Jolly Green Search and Rescue. He walked up and looked at me and looked at him and he immediately sized up the situation, the Lieutenant in stateside starched fatigues and I am wearing my uniform with all these black marks on the hat. So he says not to the Lieutenant but to me, “What seems to be the problem here Sergeant Sweet?” At which point the Lieutenant is looking at the Colonel’s hat and he’s got black hash marks all over
it. I am watching the Lieutenant as I answer, “Oh nothing sir, the FNG just doesn’t know what is going on here.” I figured I could get away with that much, because I really wasn’t happy with the Lieutenant and the Lieutenant, he swallowed real hard as he was looking at the Colonel’s hat. And the Colonel then said to him, “You’re a Lieutenant aren’t you?” “Yes sir!” And he says, “I see that you’re a pilot aren’t you?” “Yes sir!” And he says, “You’re a sandy pilot aren’t you, a sky raider pilot?” “Yes sir!” And he says, “And you think you are pretty hot and you just arrived, do you know what Sergeant Sweet does?” And he says, “No sir!” Then he threw this in there, “Sergeant Sweet why don’t you tell him what you do?” I said, “Well I...” and he said, “I will tell him for you Sergeant Sweet.” He says, “Sergeant Sweet’s job here is to go over and pick your hot shot ass up when you’re shot down. Do you think he is going to want to come and get you if you piss him off?” (Laughter) That wasn’t my job at all but he didn’t know and he just wanted this Lieutenant to pick up pretty quick that he better start working with his people. Of course after that was over and I left, I laughed my ass off on that one.

SM: That is quite funny. Did you ever have any run-ins with that Lieutenant again?

JS: Never saw him again. There was about around 5,000 people at NKP.

SM: Big Base?

JS: Yeah.

SM: Okay. We have been talking for about another hour, I am going to go ahead and stop the recorder for a minute.
Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, continuing the interview with Mr. John Sweet on the 5th of September 2003. Approximately 1:45 Lubbock time. I am in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Sweet is in Seabrook, New Hampshire. Why don’t we pick up today’s discussion with the incident that you wanted to discuss that happened in Bangkok and I guess while you were getting ready to leave.

John Sweet: Well it is something that was stuck foremost in my mind because when I was on my way up to NKP, on my way in, unlike most guys I didn’t get to stay one night for even one day in Bangkok. So I had never been to Bangkok and coming back I saw that I was stuck in the same hotel that I was originally supposed to stay in when I first got there which was the Trocadero and it had a reputation known as “the crock” because it was a dump. I walked in, I had my duffle bad on my left shoulder and the front desk was straight ahead up a series of three or four steps and off to the left in a darkened area was the entrance to the bar. And as I approached the desk I heard this loud obnoxious voice, familiar obnoxious voice and I said, “Oh no!” And I tossed the duffle bag across to the guy at the desk and said, “Watch this, I’ll be back.” I went in to get my 1st Sergeant away from the bar girls. He had left NKP three days before me and he hated Orientals and referred to them as gooks, slopes, and he was a mean drunk. I was a Staff Sergeant and he was a Senior Master Sergeant so there wasn’t a lot I could do but since he was a chronic alcoholic it was easy enough to try to get the girls away from him. Pulled in beside him just as he was getting ready to hit the one on the right of him and I said, “Hey Sarg, buy you a beer?” And his clouded angry look sort of disappeared for a
few seconds and recognized me and I thought I had stopped the incident but the girl on
his left saw what he was going to do to the girl on his right and she hit him. So he
punched her and then as I tried to get over between him and her, the other turned around
to hit him and he put an elbow into her neck and then punched her in the face and they
both went running out. I figured, “Oh it’s over.” So by then the beers had arrived and I
figured I would drink the beer. A few minutes later behind us the Mamason that ran the
girls came in, can’t forget her, she was a heavy woman, she had a big black plastic pocket
book and she whammed it right into him from behind because the door to the bar was
behind us and he turned around and just left hooked her right in the head. I can still see
the look on her face as she stumbled back about three or four steps and landed on her rear
end. She had on a black dress with white polka dots and she was shocked more than hurt
I think. And she got up and ran out crying and then I figured I better get him out of there
because obviously somebody else would come. But he wouldn’t leave and a couple
minutes later there was a screaming voice behind us. It was a Thai but what was
attracting my attention was a .38 stuck in his belt, he had on a white shirt, black pants,
and black pointed plastic shoes and I don’t even know what the hell he said, my Thai
isn’t that good. He was screaming angry which is something Thai’s don’t normally do in
public and I slowly slid off the seat as he pulled the .38 and cocked it and he was
screaming at us and he was about ten feet away or more. I pulled off the seat and slid in
front of the 1st Sergeant so I was trying to get off the seat you know off the bar stool and
as mean as he was he would have gone after him and the guy would of killed him for
sure. And I was hoping, a lot, that if I blocked his shot he wouldn’t shoot me. I figured
as bad a character as the 1st Sergeant was he didn’t deserve to die from hitting a bargirl.
Just when I got in front of him there was another guy that came up, blonde hair, a couple
of inches taller then I am, crew cut, another American. He stood beside me and we
looked at each other and the Thai looked at us, yelled something else, turned around and
left; highly unusual because when a Thai pulls a weapon he is going to use it. So that
was probably the closest I came to dying the whole time I was over there was defending a
guy I hated for a stupid act that he shouldn’t of done, for somebody who hated all
Orientals, didn’t matter to him who they were. Kind of ironic in a way. We took him up
to my room and stuck him in there so they couldn’t find him and while we were standing
there shoulder to shoulder protecting this guy he was trying to fight his way through us to
try to get his way through us to get at him. He was that drunk and that mean.
SM: Was he armed?
JS: No, no stupidity.
SM: Going to go up against a guy with a .38?
JS: He wasn’t armed upstairs either; I think he was short a few blocks. There was
incident once on the base when a guy crashed landed on the runway, headed out for a
night mission. They thought the base was under attack; he was trying to line everybody
up in the street for a roll call. He just shouldn’t have been in the position he was in. And
when we got him into my room, he locked the door behind us and didn’t come down until
the next morning and they wouldn’t give me another room and I ended up sleeping in the
lobby. Of course the girls were thankful, they had come back. But the blond guy and I
shared a beer together, and I don’t remember his name and then he had to take off, he was
headed out that evening but it was an event. When I was back in 2002 I have a Thai
friend that took me to the Trocadero; it is still there but it has been remodeled two or
three times since that happened and I couldn’t even recognize anything anymore. But
yeah when the 1st Sergeant came down in the morning he was ticked off because we
hadn’t let him, “Get that gook,” as he put it and I had to listen to him for the next at least
12 hours while we were getting ready to ship out.
SM: Unbelievable.
JS: When I went through customs I had a Laotian crossbow all broken down in
pieces and I got it as far as San Francisco and this little customs inspector at Travis found
it and took it away from me. I got another one last year when I was back there and
they’re hard to find. I had it wrapped up in a plastic bag and the guy never found it in
customs, he was too busy trying to take all the other stuff away from me that I was
bringing back. But I think I mentioned to you before the story about how he found out
that I had been at NKP and he went over and erased everything off the computer and let
me go. That was the nicest thing that happened to me, coming back from NKP and there
it was in 2002. Some of the things that happened over at NKP were just very strange.
One night I was out and I had a frag report, and I use to handle the frag reports and brief
the pilots on where Arc Light strikes were going to be before they took off for their
missions. When the frag’s come out of the teletype in the old days, well it was a seven
band, it was a 36020 computer, IBM 36020 and it was in the other room actually, but you
could hear it even there. And it started punching the same sound over and over and over
again so it attracted everybody’s attention. The coordinates for the Arc Light strikes
were coming in all in the same location, and it was straight across the river from NKP.
And I, you know just grabbed the thing and saw that they had every B-52 they could get
from every base they could, all headed to the same place at the same time. That’s a scary
thought especially since it was then, it wasn’t later. Somebody had called it in and
immediate massive assistance and the rumor going around between some people who
knew…One guy had been sent down to Da Nang about six weeks before, he was a
scrounger and he was told to scrounge whatever he could for the perimeter defenses at
NKP. The Major he worked for told him that word was there were a lot of unfriendlies
headed that way. Well people were always telling stories about things at NKP. Nothing
else had ever happened before, I went running out across from the TUOC to the top of the
hill and back of what they called Sunnydale, which was the highest hill that overlooked
the chow hall and you could all the way to Laos from there. And at night, this was late at
night, 11 o’clock or better somebody does an Arc Light strike you know nine miles away,
you’ll see it, you’ll hear it and you could see it and you could hear it. And as far as I
could see from my far right to my far left there was a wall of fame and all I could hear
was "Woooo." And that is because they were dropping so close together and there were
so many groups. Usually they traveled in threes and I guess each plane probably held
300 bombs or more. Depends on how they would configure either 500 pounders or 750’s
and then they had some out on the wings as well. They were all dropping their ordnance
in this one area and yet the next day when you stood on that same hill and looked out,
you could see, it was all brown dirt, there was no jungle there anymore. And the guys
who were there at the time, you know it was something that was discussed but not, I
guess not everybody even knew that it had happened. I am pretty sure that it was damn
well tried to be kept quiet. Because NKP didn’t have any defenses and if those people on
the other side of the river were stopped because they were headed towards NKP, all hell
would of broke loose in Thailand because the Thai’s would have been scared out of their
minds. So I don’t know, I thought it was about Christmas time. But I guess I am wrong
on that because a friend of mine who left in February that was the Director of Operations said that it didn’t happen when he was there and he left in February; and it’s always bothered me that I couldn’t quite pin it down. When you see something like that you don’t forget it, I wouldn’t make it up. But I talked with a couple of Ravens on the back porch at Jimmy Butler’s house in Colorado Springs in 2000 about it and I guess at Maxwell Air Force Base, there must be some way to figure out what happened. But I haven’t seen any written documentations on it. I know there were Thai Communists all around NKP and I know that there was infiltration and I know that people were constantly watching out for anything happen coming across the river because Task Force Alpha, they could take that out well then they wouldn’t have to worry about all these sensors on the trails at all. I’ve never stumbled into anything and I’ve found two or three people who remember the incident who were there that night, but they don’t know anymore than I do about it. I guess that’ll have to go down into the annuals of this conversation for somebody to look up whose better at it than I am.

SM: Ok, we might be able to find something.

JS: I can’t pin it down exactly when it happened either, it’s always bothered me, and I always wondered well you would of too I guess. When they were doing that much that close they were obviously on the left hand side of the karst ranges or else I wouldn’t have been able to see the continuous line of burning fire, I wouldn’t have been able to see it, it would have been broken, the karst would have been in the way. That’s not the normal Ho Chi Minh trail; the normal trails were on the other side of the first line of karst or better. So anyway Steve, there is a little something for you to work on if you get the chance.

SM: Now this was the bombing incident that you mentioned before we started recording that you wanted to discuss?

JS: Yes, I mean I have thought about it for the last couple of weeks since we talked before and I figured at first I wasn’t going to bring it up because I don’t have anybody to directly substantiate it. I don’t know the exact time that it happened but if this is to be an archive for people that research and are interested in the history of the war then I should tell you what I do know to be a fact. I will feel better about it if I just say it.
SM: Very good. Was there any other events or activities that occurred that you would like to discuss before we talk about your trip home and some of your perspectives when you got back to the U.S.?

JS: Well I had a couple of little bugs for pets.

SM: What kind?

JS: I had a little scorpion with his stinger taken out, his name was Charlie, he got crushed.

SM: Was it one of the large black scorpions or?

JS: He was a black scorpion about three inches long I guess. He wouldn’t do anything I used to stick him up on my lapel and tie a string to him and leave him there and he would just sit there. I had a more fun, I had a, what we called rice bugs, I don’t know, they had big green eyes and if you squeezed them they would squeak, they’d go “Eeee.” And I use to tie a string around him and he would drag a bunch of pencils across the desks, strong little thing, armored you see. He looked like an El Producto cigar butt; he was about two inches long and about an inch wide, heavily armored, brown. I tied a black string around him and kept him up on my lapel for a couple of days. The word was they would only fly once a day. So I was waiting for this FNG that just started working in there and he saw him there and he goes, “Sarg, Sarg. There’s a big bug right on you!” And I looked and I went, “Ah!” Instead of brushing him off I threw him and I had him on about a six foot small string tucked up underneath and I knew he would fly if I threw him so he is going around me in this big huge circle, “Mmmmm,” and this kid is running you know like, “Ahhh!” (Laugher) And the thing is as far as I know they couldn’t hurt a fly. There was another bug the Thai’s use to eat, and the Thai’s call them Mangda in Thai, but in reality they’re a big cockroach and they live in the gutters and the klongs and they are attracted to light. So the Thai’s use to love it if you gave them a plastic bag and if they had a flashlight they could borrow they would go out and find all these things. They use to rip their heads and suck the guts out. I did it one time when I had a couple of beers.

SM: How did it taste?

JS: Don’t remember what it tasted like. (Laughter) One of the things we use to do to the new guys as a joke was out in front of the TUOC in the message distribution
center, the MDC had a steel door and it had a little probably a 40 watt light over it with
one of those 1940 metal shields around it, a circular metal shield. And it was on the door
or just above the door so we would stick him out there and tell him that he was the door
guard and they would give them an M-16 with nothing in it and tell him that he had to
guard the door. They wait till it got close to dark and they would put the light on, well
there was a klong trench right against the fence and the Mangda would come out right
towards the light. They use to walk sideways kind of like a crab, they have three legs on
either side and they were about four and a half inches long and about an inch in a half
wide and their head came to kind of a point, like a point of a boat, weird looking things!
If you put them out there and turn the light on, about ten minutes later, somebody would
bang on the door and they’d say, “Hey Sarg!” And it had a little window that would slide
open so you could talk to somebody and they would say, “Hey there is some kind of bugs
out here, big ones!” And you’d say, “Well, step on them, they’re poisonous!” And a few
minutes later you’d hear more pounding on the door and hell by then there would be 30
or 40 of them headed for the guy, used to scare the hell out of them that way. Terrible
thing but it was funny as hell if you were there.

SM: I would imagine so, well what about other wildlife issues or problems,

snakes in particular anything else?

JS: I remember a couple of times that the girls, I had a hooch boy in our hooch,
but some of them still had girls and they kind of did away with the girls for obvious
reasons, but I remember when I first got there were still girls there. You go into the
latrine and there’d be this girl cleaning the latrine while you are standing there taking a
leak, you know which wasn’t exactly normal for us western guys. And they use to get
snakes in there and the snakes would wrap themselves around the base of the toilets
because it was cool and these girls and the guys too they would kill these snakes with
simple brooms that they had to clean out the dirt from the rooms, you know the red dust.
It’s amazing, these snakes…One day the air conditioning unit quit for the 36020
computer that ran all the message traffic so they went out and opened the door to see
what was going on and there was a King Cobra with his tail wedged in, he had wedged
himself into the unit, right on the belt drive. So they opened the door and they had like
this 12, 15 foot Cobra madder than hell in there, shut that door damn quick. I remember
this old guy came, he was a old Thai guy and he had two sticks and the sticks were about
an inch in a half around and about 15 feet long with a little crook in the top but it went
straight afterwards again for about six inches. He would poke the snake and then he
would snap the two sticks together when the Cobra flared his head out and catch the
snake. Hold the two sticks together and pull it down and grab a hold of the snake and
then I don’t know what he did with them after that but that is how he caught them. I
guess that’s pretty much all the wildlife stories that you must of heard from other people
about the lizards we had, right?

SM: Are those the ones with the special expression, named after the special
effect?

JS: Yes you would see them once in a while on the inside walls of the hooch’s but
I don’t recall any other wildlife that sticks out prominently other except for the monkey
they had over at ASTN (Astern), did anybody tell you about the monkey?

SM: No, what about him?

JS: Well they had a pet monkey, I don’t know what his name was, you could ask
Jim Treat, he is a member of TLC Brotherhood and he was one of the day managers for
one of the AFTN (Air Force Television Network), Armed Forces television and radio
network that was at NKP while I was there and they had this little monkey. I don’t know
which kind it is, it’s a small one that has silver on the sides of its cheeks, you’ve probably
seen them before. And the claim to fame for the monkey was they had him on TV once
in awhile, and he had this pained look on his face so they zoomed in and got a close up of
his pained expression and pulled back from the table and he had been constipated, so that
became kind of a famous joke for a few months. That is it on the wildlife.

SM: Is there any other issues or stories or anything that you would like to discuss?

JS: Nothing else actually comes to mind Steve other then you know what we are
doing over there in Southeast Asia today.

SM: Well before we talk about your post war activities and TLCB and what is
going on in Thailand now; just out of curiosity when you were getting ready to leave
what did you think about the war and how, based on your experiences how did you think
the war had been going and did you think the U.S. and our allies were doing anything
productive and were going to win this thing?
JS: By the time I was leaving I didn’t think we would win. But it wasn’t because of the U.S. Military; it was because of what the military wasn’t allowed to do. Every single mission the guys went on they went on they had this big list of places they couldn’t bomb, they had a big list of elevations they couldn’t fly at and their hands were tied. Even the people at NKP that were supposed to defend the base, nobody could fire a shot, word was said unless they had permission from the American Ambassador in Bangkok. There were too many politicians involved in the conducting the military operations, they were preventing the ability of the military to carry out any kind of an effective job and without being able to take the war to the enemy it was just watching people killed who were doing not only their jobs but doing them damn well and doing their best. But they were permitted from obtaining any advantage. If your job is to stop people from traveling down the Ho Chi Minh Trails and they call a Christmas Truce, for three days around Christmas, and then the pilots come back from reconnaissance and report nothing but headlights as far as they can see headed down the trails, all you have done is give your enemy the chance to accomplish what he couldn’t otherwise. And then if you can’t take the bombing campaign to North Vietnam, during the time I was there it couldn’t be done, you can’t stop the enemy from sending more materials than you can possibly take out. Yes you will get a lot of trucks and they were good at truck hunting but they just couldn’t stop the supply. Most of us knew that there was a lot of corruption in the South Vietnamese government and the soldiers fighting in South Vietnam for the Vietnamese, some of them were only out for whatever they could get because they knew they couldn’t win, they knew their own political climate wouldn’t allow it. The American people were just totally against the war by the time I went there, it was a horrible situation for the military to be in. One which thankfully they haven’t been put in again. But it caused a lot of problems. The morale was high when I got there and the morale was still high when I left, but although the morale was high we all said the same thing. No one was being allowed to do it.

SM: What kind of information news were you getting about what was going on in the United States, were you getting pretty consistent reporting, pretty good news?

JS: I would say it was pretty good, I am sure what we got wasn’t totally in the clear as far as they wouldn’t tell us everything that was happening with these student
protestors and all of that. They didn’t want it discovered to the men trying to conduct the
war. There was enough of it said that people could see what was happening when they
just mentioned the size of the rallies that were going on and what the politicians were
saying, a lot of the politicians were turning against the war between ’69 and ’70 and
using it as a political thing.

SM: What was it like leaving, what was the trip like going back to the U.S. and
what was the reception like when you did get back?

JS: The actual flight out of Bangkok back to Travis was, I don’t know, it just felt
so damn good to be headed back to America and getting down off the tarmac and getting
into Travis, and then it was changed. There were some people just outside the gate of
Travis who waited for the people to come home, I guess they could tell who we were, I’m
not sure how maybe we all had that look. But they were protesting outside the gates at
Travis and they were yelling obstinacies at us as we came out of the bay. And it was just
kind of a numbing experience because we knew we couldn’t say anything to them. We
couldn’t go over and hit anybody so the only thing you could do was try to ignore it. But
you had this really mixed feeling because you were glad you were back and you know
you had made it, your tour was done. Most people went one tour and came back and if
you decided to go again that was your own choice, but you had this feeling that you were
back, but you had a feeling that you had lost friends and you knew the war wasn’t being
allowed to be fought and you knew these protestors were wrong, but coming home that
way was sad. I remember I just stayed in a hotel the first night and didn’t even go down
to get something to eat, just stayed in the room, didn’t want to see anybody and I went to
a drug store, I don’t know why, but I did. It was across from the hotel, I wanted to buy
some cigarettes and I remember I didn’t even know what to say to the guy. I held up a
pack of Marlboros and I said to him, “You have same same?” I don’t know why I said
that I just…

SM: That’s weird, what was his response?

JS: He just got the cigarettes and I got back to my mother’s house. I wanted to
surprise her and nobody was home and while I was waiting for her to come home the
phone rang and I picked up the phone and said, “Working,” because that is something we
all said over there and then I said, “Don’t hang up!” I couldn’t remember to say hello, I
don’t know why not but I guess it took me two or three days to not have some kind of strange little things like that happen. But that’s all that happened to me. I didn’t have nightmares or anything; I didn’t have any reason to have any. I just felt bad for the guys that were still there, knowing when I came back that it wasn’t going to work out, America wasn’t going to be allowed to win it and the politicians by then were clambering for the votes of the anti-war protestors and turning it all around to make it look like it had been a big mistake to go there in the first place. I don’t think it was a mistake to go there, I still don’t. I think Thailand would of become a communist country if it hadn’t of been for the American presence in Southeast Asia, especially the presence in Thailand. I think part of the American desire to stop communism and change the fate of the people in Europe came from the fact that the Americans did go to Vietnam. If they hadn’t gone, all of Southeast Asia would’ve become communist. Communism would have had more support in Africa and who knows? Perhaps the Russians would tried another show down in Cuba or even Western Europe. Because although the military was decimated from the war in Vietnam they still had the will to fight. I think the Soviets respected that because they already had previous skirmishes of a similar nature in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. But if we hadn’t of done it, if we had taken our signed allegiance, right or wrong, that was signed by Eisenhower and abandoned it, I think it would have given a great deal of influence into the political outcome in Europe and perhaps elsewhere.

SM: What did you think about Nixon and his policies that you witnessed of course while you were back in the United States, his progress in trying to secure a peace, a peaceful solution and of course the various, I guess you, yes you were back before the Cambodian incursion so you got the Cambodian Incursion in 1970, Lam Son 719 in ’71 and so on and so forth.

JS: Well I was there when I believe when the Cambodian Incursion happened. “And I thought Nixon did the right thing with the Christmas Bombing, but the problem was it was still a political issue, it was, “I’ll let you fight for now.” But when he finally did allow the planes to go to North Vietnam and conduct the war, they were winning. But then America by then had no desire to be in Southeast Asia and that was being used as a political ploy to bring the Vietnamese back to the conference table to negotiate the peace. Now, yes that worked, but it was stopped and Nixon couldn’t negotiate for the
American POWs (Prisoners of War) who had been taken in Laos. They wouldn’t admit
to the correct number of POWs that they really had from documentation that has been
around since the war that I wasn’t aware of at the time. Some of those people ended up
in China, Russia and other places from the information that I read, whether that is true or
not I don’t have anyway of knowing myself; but it would make a lot of sense. So in the
end even though Nixon could force them to negotiate, his idea of withdrawing with honor
and peace in our time, military guys I don’t believe saw it that way, none I knew did.

SM: How much longer did you have in the Air Force before you got out?

JS: I got out in ’73, in July.

SM: Just before the war ended, as the United States was ending its involvement
completely. When you got out of the Air Force and went out to civilian life, did you have
a specific plan, were you going to go back to school and continue education?

JS: I didn’t have a real plan. I took a job working in a warehouse driving a
forklift for six months; no I guess it was more like a year on the West Coast. I moved
back to the East Coast, I wanted to come back home after that. The economic times were
hard then and I thought about going to school but I landed a job working in a large
museum setting up a colored dark lab and doing a lot of photography work and that was
ok. I did that for about at year and a half, but the budget in the museum was so poor with
the constraints in the economic situation, that the gate receipts were I think less than half
of just the electric bill for that month. It was the oldest museum in the country and
millionaires and boards of directors with pet projects made the determination where their
funds went and of course the photography department, although it had made a profit
wasn’t one of their little pets so the number of people in that department could be cut you
see? So, I ended up working for a microfilm company traveling anywhere east of the
Mississippi setting up remote locations and microfilming documents for setting up
administrative systems and filming on site for various companies since I still had top
secret security clearance from the military, it was easily activated again. I did all of the
government contracts and I did that for two and a half years until I met my wife Nancy.
Nancy is deaf and in those days there was no way to make phone calls to deaf people so I
wanted to stay in one place. So I hunted around and found a job at a engineering firm
where they wanted to set up a system using microfilm based aperture cards and have a
new type of administrative oversight for their engineering and I worked there for 23 and a
half years. I retired from there a year ago.

SM: At what point did you become involved with other Vietnam veterans, in
particular of course the TLC: the Thailand, Laos, and Cambodian Brotherhood?

JS: Well actually I got involved, before the TLCB existed, one of the groups that
came to the engineering firm I worked with was a group of people from China who were
to finalize negotiations for the purchase of plastics machinery. It was a delegation with
the Deputy Secretary of the party with them who was a woman. My company had hotel
rooms but they had no transportation, our company said they would give them the
company van to use for weekends, well none of them knew how to drive. And they had
no driver’s license in America and no foreign licenses in China either for that matter. I
felt bad for them because I had talked with them on several occasions and they had
impressed me a great deal. One of them, his name was Yang Yong Ching, had learned
English by listening to the radio. And I figured “Boy that’s something that I couldn’t
have done.” And he was married and he and his wife had a little girl who was eight years
old. They would never get to see America and we had lunch together and I knew that this
would be the only time that he would get here and if it were me, I would want somebody
to help me see it. So my wife and I took our cars on weekends and filled up with this
group of people and took them around all over the north shore of Massachusetts and up
through southern New Hampshire, up as far as Portsmouth. We had some good times
together. Even Mrs. Jan told me that she hated Communism and that Communism would
soon be gone from China. One day while we were having lunch I showed her a Batwa
which I had, which is a Chinese symbolism from old China.” And she looked at it and
she said through the translator, she spoke no English, she said, “Oh, you have the right
one.” Because they’re not even allowed to know there real past history. They have no
religion they’re allowed to have and they want things. I don’t think they want
Democracy as much as they want things. She kept it and I just intended to show it to her
but she thought it was a gift so she handed me her card back across the table and said
through the translator, that I was welcome to come to China. I thought well that is nice
for her to say that and a month after they got home, I got a fax that came to the company
asking me when I would like to come and where would I like to go. With permission to
go anywhere I wanted, that they would provide a guide and a translator and a car. I thought, “This is too good to pass up.” So my wife and I, and I took her sister and my brother-in-law and we went to China. On the way I discovered that if I went by the way of Hong Kong I could fly for 100 bucks to Bangkok, and if I flew to Bangkok I found the Thai’s were using the runway at Nankon Phanom as a commercial service three days a week. I could fly up and land at NKP and I thought, “I’ve got to do that!” So I put a posting on to the PACAF (Pacific Air Forces) 50th anniversary website that I was going. I heard from this woman named Sudada Brown and she teaches Thai at Princeton, and her sister is a schoolteacher at Nankon Phanom and she is married to an Air Force guy named David Brown. She said if there was anything she could do for me to let her know and I said well if she hadn’t of offered that I don’t think a large part of the TLBC would even exist. Because I told her sister that I had a dream, or told her that I’d had a dream, that I found this priest that had run the orphanage. And I visited him and said to him, “Remember when we helped you?” And then I woke up in the middle of the night thinking like, “What if I was surrounded by all these kids that needed help and I am going to tell him about remember when we were here 34 years ago?” Her sister found him and he sent me a fax, and I sent him a picture of him and I from 1969. And so I met up with him. The interim in between I had raised 1,000 dollars and donated it to the orphanage in memory of the guys that didn’t come home. Before I left a couple of guys who had seen the posting who also had been at NKP, got in touch with me: Paul Lee and Dick Anderson. And they had read a book by Colonel Jimmy Butler that I hadn’t read called, *A Certain Brotherhood* and it was a story about a FAC (Forward Air Controller) out of NKP. And they had got together and had made plans to go to the Wall in Washington in June and they asked me if I would like to go. I said I would love to go, but my time was already committed to go to China and Thailand. And they made contributions towards that 1,000 dollars and the rest of it I raised amongst my family and at work I ran a 50/50 raffle. The guys were always greedy for money so that worked good at work. And otherwise I would have been with them at the Wall and held the first little meeting. After I came back we started contacting each other by e-mail of course and pretty soon we started adding so many e-mail addresses to the list that it was getting unwieldy and people were changing e-mail addresses and it was a mess. I hunted around and my local
provider down the street, I talked him into donating a server to us, and he said he’d never
done anything like that because servers were for college institutions and businesses and
he had never heard of a private server. And this guy had never been in the war and he
had a pony tail four feet long, but he helped us out. I guess it cost us something like 20-
25 dollars a month, 15, he gave it to us for his cost. And once we had that another guy
got a hold of me named Joe Wilson who had an organization and a website for the Army
Transportation Company that he had been in at Thailand. He asked me why I didn’t have
a website for the group for us guys and I said I didn’t know how and he said, “I will put
one up for you.” So I gave him the space that I had on my server and he created a
website for us, and at that point we really started collecting a lot of people for our
organization because there was no way for people to find each other after the war that had
served in these locations. Since none of our families could be told where we were, none
of us knew where any of the others were unless we knew them personally one or two here
or there. But once we had a website and listed it on Google and some of the others, just
the name of the place. Nakhon Phanom was the name listed, and any of these other guys
our age would sit down at a computer and pull it up and bang they’d find it! So it started
to grow. Then I was told by Gene Rossel, the Air Commando Association that I damn
well had better start finding a way to turn it into a non-profit charity because if I was
going to be sending money over to Thailand and collecting donations that the IRS
(Internal Revenue Service) would be looking at us awful hard unless we did it. That was
1998, we had our first reunion. It was at Dayton, Ohio where the Air Force museum is.
Got together with some of the people there and declared ourselves as, voted to officially
become an organization. And at that point Bill Tilton took the leadership, myself and a
couple of other guys talked it over and I said, “Bill sounds like the perfect guy to run
this,” intelligent, and very even keeled. You know he would treat everybody equally
whether they were an officer or an enlisted man. Everybody respected Bill so we asked
him if we would take the job as President and he said yes and it’s been the best thing that
ever happened to the group. We are now a non-profit charity that has raised, just
amongst our own members, 62,000 dollars in the last four years or so. And we’ve helped
thousands of kids all over northeast Thailand, all over Isan. The last trip over there we
worked with General Aderholt who had been the former Commander of the Air
Commandos out of Nakhon Phanom, who has a non-profit called The McCoskrie Threshold Foundation that he had set up since the Contra days. And he wanted to work in Thailand again and offered to help us get a container full of materials that he could raise for the hospitals and the schools. We voted to do that and it cost us three grand to get the container over there. And unfortunately with the Thai bureaucracy and corruption that General Aderholt wasn’t familiar with in the present day. When he was in charge of MAC Thai he could get things done. But we encountered a lot of difficulty and finally did manage to get the container delivered but it cost us an extra 25 hundred dollars just to be able to help the people in Isan. However that worked out because we developed better relations between our organization and the Thai Red Cross, and the governor. And matter of fact they asked us if we would help them enhance relationships with Thakhek, across the river in Laos which is their sister city and the cultural history of the Mekong River Valley; there is extended family members on both sides of the river there and culturally they are more Lao than Thai. So they had known that we worked in Laos a year before and we haven’t done much since then but we delivered six tons of rice and mosquito nets and cooking implements 24 hours after some floods up at Kassy, which use to be the old LS-53 for the operations conducted in Laos. And they were amazed that the Americans had come back, and of course they were also concerned that that had been conducted under USAID (United States Agency for International Development) back in the old days in the early 60’s so if it looked like it was USAID involved it could be forerunner of another problem for them. We were welcomed by the people in Laos; the equivalent of their Vice President gave us a certificate of recognition for enhancing Lao-American relations after we made that delivery. And they had dinner together with our representative there, Jim Michener, who went up to Kassy and made sure everything was delivered. And we’re hoping that although the U.S. government didn’t prevent us from doing it, they were aware of it, they have concerns, justifiable concerns to ensure that everything possible is done to bring home the remains of our fallen brothers in Laos. And their method is they’re willing to allow a certain amount of humanitarian assistance based upon the amount of cooperation and the number of remains removed. We are definitely all for getting home all the remains but we also feel that if we go to these people at Thakhek and we assist them, which we have already done; a bicycle for a
teacher, and some sporting equipment. They have no reason to want to help us find the
bodies because we were their enemies and yet if we come forth and we just help them
and ask for nothing and they know who we are; then perhaps some day one of the people
will come forward who knows where some remains is and just tell us, because we’ve
helped them and asked for nothing. And this is culturally this is their way. No, we
haven’t asked for anything and it would be tremendous if just the remains of one man
came home because of our extended good deed done in the memory of our lost brothers.
The European diplomats’ wives were totally against working with us once they found out
who we were. We had funded one project for them and they had been selling cookies and
cakes and had a little organization and we told them we had funds and wanted to work in
Laos and they were happy to take our money. I personally handed their treasurer of their
organization a check for 2,000 dollars when I was there in the year 2000. But once it
became known that we were former American soldiers who had served there during the
war, I don’t know if they themselves did it or if there European diplomat husbands told
them, but they were horrified and returned the funds to us and told us if we wanted to
work in Laos to approach the Laotians directly, and that there was a lot of things that
happened in Laos that we, you know should be careful of. I guess they were afraid. The
end result of course was that we did approach them and went through the director of their
disaster management office when we set up this assistance at Kassy and he in turn was
the son of the former commanding General of the Lao Army. And he had had his
training in Michigan to learn disaster management. When Jim Michener was having
dinner with all of these officials, under candlelight, because the power had been washed
out along with the flooding and they were five hours north of Vientiane. They held toasts
and everything and they admitted about how some of the, you know which different
members of their extended family had either been to the states or were now in the states.
So I think the problems of Laos someday will be behind them and I think that the
younger generation will someday let go of the yolk of Communism, and I don’t think it
will be very long following China. But I think China will probably, just my personal
opinion, from what I have seen traveling in central China, I think China will be free of
Communism before Laos and I would be very surprised if it wasn’t gone within ten years
or less, because the younger generation from people from 50 down, they don’t look on
Communism in the same way as we do. They are not necessarily into democracies either, they’ll have something set up, I don’t know what it’ll be, some probably a form of a socialist thing to begin with. But the Army and the police actually fight in China; I have seen examples of it while I was there. They block intersections and the Army guys walk away, leave the trucks blocking the street and the police come out and they fight. It’s terrible, but they all want things, they don’t know their history, they have no religion, no culture, no history that makes them a very dangerous people to me.

SM: Yes, yes.

JS: But I know we are way off the subject. Asia in general and American involvement I was very surprised, perhaps you know this Steve but I was never aware of it even though I was interested in the history of China and I knew about Peking and The Boxer Rebellion, The American Relief Column and all of this. But I never knew that there were European governments that had forced their way in along the Yangtze River, even 800 miles or more up into central China and built cities and had taken over part of the country. I thought they were only regulated to the coast and that the problems had all stemmed from there. But it was amazing to me when I was in central China exactly how much control the western European powers had in China at the turn of the century and I can see why it scares them.

SM: And you throw in the mix of course, the Opium Wars and some of the less glamorous aspects of European interventions in Asia and yes…

JS: Well not only European but there’s homes here 12 miles from where I live that are mansions that were built from people making money in the opium trade. It was people from New England as well, were involved.

SM: Yes it is a difficult prospect. It seems to me that you would be, based on what you have discussed so far as Thailand and Laos in particular, that you have been supportive probably of the normalization of the relationship between the United States and a Socialist Republic of Vietnam, is that the case? Have you supported the normalization of our relationship with them?

JS: That’s a tough nut to crack. I have mixed feelings on it. I probably would but then again I would like to go and see how it is there for myself before I made a decision.
I know Ambassador Petterson, when he was there he may still be there for all I know I
don’t think so though, is he?

SM: No, no Ambassador Petterson is not there anymore and the current
Ambassador’s name is escapes me right now.

JS: But he was all for the normalization of relations and having had been a
prisoner in the Hanoi Hilton, it added a great deal of weight to my thinking that perhaps
you know we should. The shoes that I wear that I bought in a store, they were made in
Vietnam and they were the best made shoes I could find and I felt bad when I bought
them that I was supporting this Communist regime that we had all been sent to defeat, but
I did buy them. I didn’t feel like a hypocrite because I said to myself, “The war was a
long time ago, most of the people that fought in that war they did it because they were
told to, the same as we did. They have a right to have lives and it was a long time ago.”
So I’m much more in favor of it than not but I would still like to see a better accounting
of the MIA/POW(Missing in Action/Prisoner of War) but I know that they lost many
thousands of people that they will never ever be able to account for just from the Arc
Light strikes. Compared to the losses in Vietnam the American losses were small. One
has to have, as part of your make-up forgiveness has to be part of it.

SM: Yes sir.

JS: Because if you can’t forgive then you can never let go. On the other hand,
there should be some recognition for the part that the Americans have played in Southeast
Asia and those that have been lost. To that end, one of the things that TLC Brotherhood
is done over the last year is work on the finalization of a design and the ground breaking
already took place at Nakhon Phanom for a monument to be built to the Americans and
Thais who were killed in the war and who fought in the war. There was a lot of Thai
artillery mostly that fought across the river in Laos, as paid mercenaries by the
Americans and a lot of them didn’t come home either. I think I mentioned the clock
tower downtown at Nakhon Phanom, was no doubt given by Ho Chi Minh as it says on
the base of it; and his home is there and now opened as a tourist attraction. There will be
this monument finally for the Americans and the Thai’s at Nakhon Phanom. And it is the
best place to put a monument in Southeast Asia because it is the closest theatre into the
war where an American monument could ever be put. You’d never certainly be allowed
to place one into Vietnam. And a lot of people that flew out of NKP that didn’t come
back and we all know that there was a large, well it was the Special Forces backdoor
entry into Laos as well and all of the operations on the trail were conducted in Nakhom
Pakanom for Task Force Alpha. So it is fitting that a monument be there and it is fitting
that General Aderholt dedicated it, which he did last year. There’s pictures on the TLC
Brotherhood website and we’re really pleased to have an organization for these men that
had served there. There has been a lot of healing, there has been a lot of camaraderie,
and it is a wide-open organization that even allows our former enemies to become
members because we all had the same experience from different sides. There are some
members of course who will go to their graves holding a grudge, not totally unjustified
from the atrocities conducted during the war. However, I am sure there were atrocities
on both sides and if we can learn anything from the experience not only how we were not
militarily allowed to conduct the war, but we should look on it as a deeper level of people
to people. I am sure we have much more in common with the people in Vietnam than we
probably ever will with the people of Iraq; unless a lot of things change from centuries of
different ways of looking at things.

SM: I think you’re right. You mentioned that you think that what you thought
was one of the more important lessons what do you think was the most important thing
you took away from your experiences in Southeast Asia personally?

JS: My personal experience in Southeast Asia taught me that there’s an awful lot
of people that have a lot less then Americans do. The poorest American, living in the
inner city slums however are deprived even more than the poor people living out in the
countries in the jungles in Southeast Asia because they’ve been deprived of even a
natural environment. The poor kid who lives in the jungle in a village: he’s happy. He
may not have everything that everybody else has but he has sunshine, fresh air, and in the
inner cities of America people are killed everyday. Normally, in these villages in Laos
and Thailand for somebody to be killed outside of war was almost unheard of and people
were not allowed to suffer in the fashions that Americans are. In America, if you don’t
qualify for welfare well….they don’t have street people in Laos; they don’t have these
types of problems. So I learned that you can have less and not be an American. You can
still have more than some Americans actually have, and that although our system of
government is the best out there, not everything in America is perfect to the extent that
we actually deprive part of our population in ways that they wouldn’t be deprived in
these remote locations. We don’t do it forcefully we don’t do it purposively but it is a
fact. So I came away form Southeast Asia with an understanding of the…in the end what
really matters in life is life itself. That you have one and given a life with an opportunity
is the greatest thing you can ask for. Being an inner city person with no opportunity
deprees you in that fashion, it takes away hope. It changes you into something a human
being shouldn’t be. Whereas the little kid in the jungle; he’s still got hope, he’s got a lot
going for him that he doesn’t even know compared to some of the things that exist in the
world. It’s not really the concept of tropical paradise by any means, and the people over
there need help in ways that they can’t get here, if you’re a street person here and you
want help you can get it, but what happens here is that is taken away from you; the desire
that you are worthy or that you are anything. They stumble their way down into their
own half made hell. But people aren’t allowed to reach those positions within
communities in these little villages in the jungle. People are bonding closer, they’re not
isolated even though they are amongst many thousands of others in cities, the inner city
people are more isolated then these people in the jungle. I came away from it with an
understanding of looking at people from a humanitarian point of view. As individuals
that what we really seek in life are not things like new cars, televisions, and huge houses
but that’s what we are taught when we watch TV. And that is a great part of American
society and culture. What do you do? Who are you? What do you have? What do you
want? When the true values within all of us as human beings need to come from a deeper
source, learning who we are and that’s from what we do and what we do has to be
something to help and so it wasn’t based on a personal experience holding a rifle. It’s
just war has always had great amounts of inhumanity towards men, but the true essence
of our true essence of our individual characters and the development of who we are that
has nothing to do with a new car or a new house. And I think that in some way these
primitive societies still have lessons that we can get from them at the same time they have
many things they can learn from us. Bringing doctors and aid to these children and
working with these groups of people over there gives me a little bit of insight into how
they are. They are different, they don’t have the technical knowledge and they don’t
have the vast desire for the accumulation of things because they know they will never have it. So they see life in a different light than we do, in a more humane one I believe. And people who say that the yellow races of Asia have no value in human life, I don’t agree with that at all. I don’t think they are any better than we are, I just think that we’ve been given different perspectives, different values that our cultures need to learn from each other and we need to learn some of their values as well.

SM: Do you think that’s one of the more important lessons we as a nation can take away from experiences at Southeast Asia?

JS: Absolutely, because America needs to learn that just technological advancement without humanitarian or human inner development. There was a period in history in what the 1600’s where humanitarianism or the concept of man’s place within society was all talked about and discussed but we haven’t really achieved that. We’re struggling trying to use technology and social development has been stagnated and America has lost a lot of its values that it had for family 200 years ago. So we need to learn that back, people used to live with housing with three or four generations in one house. They did it only because they could only afford one house that’s true, but the interaction between the generations gave a lot of knowledge was past down on a human level that isn’t being done anymore. Now today divorce is common, and children growing up not knowing their parents is becoming more common, and each generation since WWII that has invested more of itself into productivity and technology has…each generation seems to leave another piece of itself, from a human point of view, behind. Most people today don’t even know who there great grandparents were. When you lived in a house with your grandmother, it was easy; all you had to do was ask her about her family. Hardly anybody knows anymore. So America is losing touch with who we are from what we’ve become; but we can still get it back. All we have to do is learn what we are missing and I think exposure in Southeast Asia for a lot of men gave them insight into that type of social value and the type of perception. Sorry if it sounded long winded.

SM: Not at all, not at all. Is there anything you would like to discuss about any aspect of either your service in Southeast Asia, your reflections on our policies there, our policies now, anything else?
JS: Well I think we have just about covered everything that I have ever thought
about Steve. I appreciate your, taking the time and giving me the chance to reflect on it.
SM: My pleasure, why don’t we go ahead and put an official ending on this? This
will end the interview with Mr. John Sweet. Thank you sir.
JS: Thank you Steve.