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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Joseph Calamia
Conducted by Kelly Crager, Ph.D.
July 10, 11, 2008
Transcribed by David Knott**

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Joseph Calamia. Today is 10 July, 2008. I am in the Special Collections Library of Texas
3 Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Mr. Calamia is kind enough to join us from El Paso,
4 Texas. Good afternoon, Mr. Calamia.

5 Joseph Calamia: Good afternoon, Dr. Crager.

6 KC: I really appreciate your taking time out of your very busy work day to chat
7 with us here for a little while this afternoon. First off, let's get some biographical
8 information on you. When were you born and where?

9 JC: I was born April the 19th, 1947, El Paso, Texas.

10 KC: What were your parent's names?

11 JC: My father is Joseph A., for Albert Calamia. My mother was Geraldine,
12 maiden name Campbell.

13 KC: What did your parents do for a living?

14 JC: My father was a criminal defense attorney here in El Paso for many years.
15 My mother did everything from being a housewife to becoming a professional teacher,
16 special ed is when she retired, she was teaching special education here in El Paso.

17 KC: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

18 JC: I have a half-brother and a half-sister from my father's second marriage and I
19 have a half-brother from my mother's second marriage. I was the only child from the
20 original marriage.

21 KC: Oh, okay. How would you describe your childhood there in El Paso?

1 JC: Up until the time of my parental divorce, the parental divorce I think I was
2 seven at the time they divorced. My mother gained custody of me and we moved to Los
3 Alamos, New Mexico, where I resided with my cousins and aunt for a year or so. My
4 mother remarried and we came back to El Paso and I lived at home with my mother and
5 one of those storybook type step-fathers.

6 KC: Would you explain that to me, what you mean by that?

7 JC: Yeah, somewhat abusive.

8 KC: Okay. Now what did you do as a young boy there in both El Paso and at
9 Los Alamos? What did you do to pass your time, typical pursuits?

10 JC: Probably got in a lot of trouble, doing things I shouldn't have done.
11 Actually, I was not a very good student. I quit high school. I should've graduated in '65
12 and I ended up quitting high school in 1966. I got a GED (general equivalency diploma)
13 at which time I then joined the U.S. Navy.

14 KC: Now you joined the Navy. Why the Navy?

15 JC: My father had been in the Navy during World War II, the Aleutian
16 campaigns. For some reason I always thought that was a neat thing to do.

17 KC: Now, how old were you when you joined the Navy?

18 JC: I believe I was, I joined in 1966. I believe I was, what, nineteen years old at
19 the time I joined. I was on what they called at that time, I think it was called the 120-day
20 delay program at which time they gave you something like three months or 120 days to
21 get your things in order before you ship off to boot camp. That's what I did.

22 KC: What sort of things did you do in that 120 days?

23 JC: I'm sorry, sir?

24 KC: What sort of things did you do in that 120 days?

25 JC: The normal teenage things, see your girlfriend, tell them goodbye, you're
26 going off to war. You're gonna be a hero and et cetera, et cetera, and hope for the best.

27 KC: Sure. Now, you were nineteen years old and this is 1966, as you say. Were
28 you aware of U.S. activity in Southeast Asia and Vietnam in particular?

29 JC: Oh, I think everybody my age was quite aware of it. Now, as far as political
30 awareness, no, not really other than communism was filtering into the South and we had

1 to stop communism wherever it rose. Now, anything past that especially at that time, I
2 would tell you, I was quite ignorant.

3 KC: Was this something growing up, like you say, you quit high school and you
4 were of draft age, did that have any bearing on your interest in joining the Navy rather
5 than be drafted by the Army?

6 JC: Yes, it did, actually, the two reasons. One, was because my father was in the
7 Navy and that was, but that was a legitimate psychological need, if you will, because for
8 some reason I always wanted to be on ships. That was a mistake to begin with, I guess.
9 The second was I knew that those on a ship probably stood a better chance of survival
10 than those walking a rice paddy.

11 KC: So did you think that you would probably be sent to Vietnam?

12 JC: You know, I thought I might, but you always maintain that hope that you
13 won't. I was not a gung-ho war hero type individual. I was just like most kids, if I go, I
14 go, but I hope I don't.

15 KC: Sure. Now where did you go for your basic training?

16 JC: San Diego, California.

17 KC: San Diego. Now, when did you arrive in San Diego? Do you remember?

18 JC: I want to say I left here in September of 1966 because Christmas of '66 was
19 spent in boot camp. So September, October, November, maybe October of '66. In any
20 event, it was near the end of 1966.

21 KC: What was boot camp like for you?

22 JC: Boot camp was a real awakening to me. I think I lead a rather protected life
23 here in El Paso. I didn't really have an inkling of what was really out there once you got
24 away from home, your friends, and social support. It was a real awakening. I still think
25 about it sometimes even at my age at sixty-one. I used to draw cartoons for some of the
26 naval officers and once started to try and think about drawing a cartoon skit with a
27 cartoon character similar to Beetle Bailey, but it would've been based on naval boot
28 camp. It was a real traumatic experience.

29 KC: Is there anything in particular that made it so traumatic for you?

30 JC: Learning to follow orders, I think. I had a lot of, a lot of it reminded me of
31 my stepfather, you either do or you pay for it type thing, but I think once the first three

1 months was over, I'm sorry, the first six weeks was over, you started to acclimate. During
2 that acclimation period the fear began to leave you and there was a sense of, or for me
3 anyway, I speak for myself only I guess, there was a sense of pride that started to callous
4 over the other part of you.

5 KC: What sort of training did you undergo here?

6 JC: It was just the very basic naval training. We had all types of classes. You
7 know, nomenclature, naval nomenclature, Navy ranks, signs, things of that nature,
8 shipboard activities. There was a ship stuck in the cement out there. I think they called it
9 the USS *Dry Dock* at the time. Battle station practice, swimming, you know just the very
10 basic.

11 KC: Sure. Did you experience any difficulties with the physical parts of the
12 training?

13 JC: Well, yeah, it was all difficult, but luckily I was physically, I was not ill and I
14 didn't have any real major, serious physical problems prior to entering boot camp. So
15 thank God I was able to go through it.

16 KC: Now, while you're going through all of this, probably seemed like torture to
17 you at the time at age nineteen. Was it, around in your mind, was this something you
18 were thinking about, about a potential service in Vietnam and what they're preparing you
19 for?

20 JC: Yes, I think that was always a potential reality, like I said before. We'd go
21 through it and we'd laugh about the training, but in the back of your mind, you always
22 thought, "What if?" because at that point in time, you really didn't, I had no idea of what
23 the Navy was doing in Vietnam. I'd never even heard of the riverine force, which I
24 ended up on. My idea of the Navy in Vietnam were destroyers and battlewagons hanging
25 off the coastline firing shells for fire support and either that or maybe clandestine
26 submarine activity, but other than that, that was about it.

27 KC: Well, when did you finish basic training there?

28 JC: I finished in early part of '67. I can't exactly give you the date, I'm sorry.

29 KC: Sure, no, no, that's fine.

30 JC: After that, I was given an A school, shipfitter A school which was welder,
31 which was basically a pipefitter and welder.

1 KC: Is this something that you sought out, something that you wanted to do or
2 did the Navy decide that for you?

3 JC: Well, as you know as I told you, I quit high school and got a GED before I
4 went into the military. I really had very little to offer the military, the government, or
5 anybody else as a potential employer. We took ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational
6 Aptitude Battery) tests, a numerous battery of tests then, of course, my scores, especially
7 at that time would've been quite low, I would assume. I ended up having three choices of
8 what type of work I could do. I wanted to go to sub school, but the only way I could go to
9 sub school at that time they told me I could be a cook on a submarine and that just didn't
10 sound macho enough for me. I turned that down. I forgot what the second choice was
11 and then there was another choice of a welder or shipfitter. I chose that because I thought
12 that might be more macho oriented, orientated, if you will.

13 KC: Well, you go to A school. Now, where was A school?

14 JC: It was also in San Diego.

15 KC: Also in San Diego, okay.

16 JC: Yes, sir.

17 KC: What sort of things would you do in A school? Like what sort of training
18 were you going though?

19 JC: It was basically plate welding, arc welding, gas welding, pipefitting. I really
20 didn't like it, I guess I should've been a—I would've scored probably higher as a—I
21 think maybe the other was a clerk or yeoman and I think I would've done better at that
22 now that I look back, but in any event I really didn't like that type of work. I struggled at
23 it. If I'm not mistaken, quite truthfully, I think I was the anchorman in the class.

24 KC: I guess you would've undergone some sort of weapons training, probably in
25 basic training. Was there any of this in A school as well?

26 JC: No, not in A school. Basic training, I think we had the pleasure of one day
27 on the firing range and that was it.

28 KC: They figured that was all you needed, huh?

29 JC: I guess.

30 KC: All right. Well, you finish A school, I guess sometime, what, probably in the
31 middle of 1967, would that be fair to say probably?

1 JC: Yes, sir. Finished A school and then they gave I think a week or two of leave
2 to come back home. From here I was given orders, after that I was given orders to
3 Vietnam.

4 KC: After you got back from your month or so of leave?

5 JC: Well, I had the orders from Vietnam before I left. Actually to facilitate this, I
6 brought some paperwork. I'm looking at an original order that Fairfield, California, to
7 USS *Garrett County* LST-786 (landing ship, tank) and it's dated July 7th, 1967.

8 KC: Okay. So you knew before you left that you were going to be assigned to
9 the *Garrett County*.

10 JC: Yes, sir. Upon graduation from shipfitter on the A school, your orders were
11 given to you. I was the only one that got Vietnam orders from that class at that time.

12 KC: Luck of the draw, I guess.

13 JC: Well, when you're the anchorman, you're a little more expendable.

14 KC: Sure, sure.

15 JC: To be truthful, that's realism.

16 KC: Yes. Well, now, we've talked about this before and you said that the specter
17 of Vietnam was in the back of your mind as a nineteen-year old, high school dropout, as a
18 nineteen-year old. Throughout basic training you knew it could possibly happen. Well,
19 here you go. You've finished A school and now it's gonna become a reality. What's
20 going through your mind here?

21 JC: You know, thank God I've never been diagnosed with cancer. However, I
22 think it might be somewhat akin to the doctors saying, "You know what? We found that
23 you have cancer. We can work with it," but it's just hearing that. When I heard that it
24 was quite shocking. I tried to muster up the courage and pretend it was no big deal, but
25 inside I was quite fearful, to be truthful with you.

26 KC: Sure. Now what was it that you knew about Vietnam by the middle of 1967
27 that led to this kind of thing?

28 JC: That it was heating up and that we were taking a lot more casualties and that
29 was about it again. I really didn't know much about, I knew nothing about this riverine
30 force and I didn't even know what an LST was.

31 KC: What did you do in your last month of leave before you went over?

1 JC: Well, I think it was only a week or two. I came home and saw friends and
2 everybody wished me well and that was about it.

3 KC: All right. So, when you left California for Vietnam, I should ask you this,
4 how did you get over there?

5 JC: Well, you're right. I flew from here to I think it was San Francisco, Clark
6 Air Force Base, if I'm not mistaken. From Clark Air Force Base, I flew off to Vietnam in
7 a regular commercial jet, which I assumed had been rented out or what have you by the
8 government. There was a lot of people traveling. We stopped in Hawaii for a few
9 minutes and from Hawaii we landed in what is now what is it, Ho Chi Minh City but
10 previously Saigon.

11 KC: Saigon. So you didn't stop off in Japan or at Okinawa?

12 JC: No, no, sir.

13 KC: Just straight into Saigon which would've been Tan Son Nhut, I assume,
14 airbase there. Well, Mr. Calamia, you were nineteen years old, maybe twenty years old
15 by this time. You've been through training. You were trying to get used to the idea of
16 being in the Navy in Vietnam. Whatever that might've meant at the time to you, of
17 course, and you are at Tan Son Nhut airport or airbase in Saigon. The doors open on the
18 plane and you get out. What is the first thing that crosses your mind?

19 JC: Okay. If I can answer that by reading something that I've already put down in
20 my book I think it might be better, if you don't mind.

21 KC: Please do. Please do.

22 JC: Okay, it says, "Arrival. I arrived at that Saigon Airport on or about July 15,
23 1967, aboard a commercial airliner along with countless other sailors, soldiers, and
24 Marines. The government obviously found it cheaper to subcontract commercial fliers
25 rather than utilize total military transport for its troops. The plane touched down at about
26 two or three AM to the best of my recollection. As I heard the wheels hit the runway and
27 felt the jerk of the touchdown, I thought, quote, 'Oh, shit, it's real now,' close quote. We
28 all stood up slowly, too slow and then grabbed our luggage and proceeded up the aisle to
29 the front hatch of the aircraft. As I stepped out of the airliner the first thing that shocked
30 me was the heat and the humidity. It almost took my breath away. I froze momentarily
31 on the portable platform leading to the tarmac and watched military flares floating down

1 on parachutes. These flares lit up darkness all around the airport and I was scared.
2 Somehow we were herded into a military bus and transported to our respective service
3 embarkation points. The Navy personnel were dropped off in the front of an old building
4 surrounded by barbed wire and Army MPs (military police) encased in sandbag
5 fortresses. The building was named the Annapolis Hotel. We even went through the
6 motion of checking in with the desk clerk before we were assigned our beds. I recall that
7 the clerk was a very pretty girl who spoke good English. She told me her father had been
8 French and her mother Vietnamese. Afterwards, we found our way to our bunks. The
9 flares, distant drumming of artillery, and pure fear kept me awake the first night in-
10 country.” I think that pretty well, I wrote that a long time ago when I was putting this
11 book together and I think that pretty well remains the same feeling that I had.

12 KC: Yes, that sums it up well. Sums it up not just for you, but for many, many
13 other people who went through that same thing, I think. When you were on the flight
14 over and this is a question I should’ve asked previously.

15 JC: I’m sorry, sir?

16 KC: When you were on the flight over, and this is a question I should’ve asked
17 previously. You’re on this plane with many, many other sailors and Marines and
18 soldiers. What are y’all talking about?

19 JC: You know what? To my recollection I think it was pretty quiet. I think we
20 were all lost in our own thoughts. I’m sure I spoke with a few people and in those days
21 you could smoke cigarettes and I think we smoked insistently, most of us smoked at that
22 time, but overall I remember it as being very quiet. Unlike when we were going to boot
23 camp, I left from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to San Diego to boot camp and on the train
24 there was a sense of shaving heads and laughing, playing cards and what have you, but it
25 wasn’t that way going on that airplane. It was completely different.

26 KC: I think you mentioned it was real when you got off that plane, for sure.

27 JC: It was real, right.

28 KC: So you made your way down to the Annapolis Hotel. This place was
29 somewhat infamous for a variety of different reasons. Could you describe the Annapolis
30 to me please?

1 JC: To the best of my recollection it was barracks, quickly made barracks. It was
2 surrounded by, is it Constantine wire, if that's the correct term, barbed wire. There were
3 Army Military Police around sandbags all around the hotel, if that's what you want to call
4 it. Inside there were two or three stacks of wooden bunks and that's where everybody was
5 sleeping while they awaited to go to their different embarkation points. Sometimes it
6 took, as a matter of fact, I think it took me about a week, or maybe about a week and a
7 half to get to my final destination. So it was a hub, if you will, for accumulating sailors
8 going to different points.

9 KC: Now, you were in Saigon, you mentioned you came in two or three o'clock
10 in the morning. You see this city that is so heavily fortified in a lot of ways and the
11 humidity, the heat, the overall strangeness and I think it's probably fair to say the eerie
12 glow of some of these flares that are around the city. What's going through your mind,
13 young man from El Paso, Texas? What are you thinking when you're going through
14 there?

15 JC: I'm thinking, "My God, I might get killed here. I'm scared."

16 KC: It must've seemed very bizarre, I would think.

17 JC: It truly was, but it was surreal, basically to me, everything seemed surreal.
18 The second night I was there, they gave me guard duty and one, this guy gave me an M-
19 14 and he said, "Be careful because before you got here last week, the VC (Viet Cong)
20 came into town. There was shooting in the streets and a couple came through the wire
21 and I shot a couple." Now whether that's true or not, I don't know, but that's all I needed
22 to hear.

23 KC: Sure.

24 JC: So I remember walking around in the dark through the compound area.
25 Inside the area where everybody was asleep with this M-14 and then there was some
26 artillery fire that started and then you could hear some rounds down the street and you
27 could hear the MPs yelling something. The flares went up again and then I, you know
28 how it is when you get really scared, the hackles come up. Sometimes you break out into
29 a sweat because it becomes very realistic. It's getting close to you. I never saw anything.
30 I heard some close rounds. I heard some artillery outside of Saigon, but it was enough to,
31 like a slap in the face, you know.

1 KC: Now, you mentioned that took you about a week to find your unit or to make
2 your way out to your unit. Did you spend the entire time there in Saigon at the Annapolis
3 or were you going to different units on the way there?

4 JC: You know what? If I recall I spent two or three days in Saigon. One day they
5 sent me out, they sent us out on work parties. My second day I think I was sent to, I
6 know I was sent to the American embassy building. It's the same one that the helicopters
7 were lifting off the Vietnamese as the VC moved in, what was it, 1973, '75? It was that
8 same building. They put me on watch and they gave me a .45 and put me out on the
9 veranda and told me to watch for motorcycles.

10 KC: Did they tell you why to look out for motorcycles?

11 JC: Yes. The reason was because they had apparently had a lot of theft. My
12 instructions were, it's actually comical, "If you see any Vietnamese walking to those
13 motorcycles yell down to the MP. Tell the MP to hold them for you so you can go down
14 and check their papers before allowing them to continue." I didn't know what papers I
15 was supposed to look at to begin with. Those were my instructions. While I was out on
16 the veranda, a couple of girls came out and we were talking and laughing or whatever we
17 were doing and I saw a Vietnamese civilian, I don't know where he came from. I assume
18 it was out of the building, walking toward the motorbikes. So I followed through with
19 my instructions and I yelled down to the MP, "MP, stop that man so I can check his
20 papers!" I don't know what type of language you, can I be truthful or—?

21 KC: Please.

22 JC: Okay. We're all grown up here. His response was, "Fuck you. If you want
23 him checked, check him yourself." I didn't know how to react to that type of response. I
24 wasn't, you know I was told to do what I was told to do. I assumed that we all were on
25 the same team. So rather than run down, I just watched this guy get on a motorbike and
26 drive off. I wasn't going to start shooting a gun in the street.

27 KC: Of course.

28 JC: The guy who loaned me, who traded the pistol, another story, a week before I
29 got there he got in a running firefight with somebody who stole a motorcycle. Again, I
30 don't know if that's true or not, but these things stick in your mind and I'm thinking, "I'm
31 not going to be shooting this .45 down a busy street with a bunch of people in it. I'm just,

1 I'm not going to do that." So I just let this guy go and it wasn't five minutes later that the
2 master-at-arms was up threatening me with a court martial and captain's mast and what
3 have you, if the bike was stolen. Apparently it wasn't stolen because I never went to
4 captain's mast.

5 KC: Well, your arrival at the airport was your first indication of how strange this
6 was going to be. It seems to me that your time here at the Annapolis gave you a different
7 idea of how strange it was going to be in a different way, it seems to me.

8 JC: Well, you know what? There was a strangeness about it, but each area, or in
9 my perception, had its own strangeness, its own aura, its own bubble of strangeness. The
10 city was a different battleground, say, than the rice paddies or the river or what have you.
11 It was kind of, you know, the city was, of course, kind of dirty and there was a stench to
12 it. Say, if you don't mind I'm in the process of reading this book called *The Eagle Mutiny*
13 where in two young men hijack a tramp steamer and took it to Cambodia. I'm sure
14 you're aware of this. Anyway this was in 1970, but I think they describe the smell here
15 and I'll just read this quick blurb on page thirty-nine. It says, "Everything was suffused
16 with overwhelming smell of fresh fish oil, kerosene, urine, cheap perfume, tropical rain,
17 lush vegetation and garbage." That's a pretty good description, I think. That's how the
18 city kind of smelled. It was always busy with thousands, hundreds of motorcycles and
19 scooters. I kept looking for people throwing grenades at me and all the horror stories that
20 you had heard about previously.

21 KC: Sure. In the midst of all this, what was your impression of the Vietnamese
22 people at this early stage?

23 JC: Well, you know, I had no real impression other than I thought they were
24 backward. Of course, now, you have to remember I'm a spoiled American, the ugly
25 American, if you will. I've had it pretty good in life so when you're—although I lived
26 next to Juarez, Mexico, I've seen poverty before, I don't think I've seen it to this level.
27 People defecating in the street, women squatting to urinate, things like that. You just,
28 you kind of, it throws you back into a primeval world if you will, primordial world, but
29 they were very nice to me. I had no real anger bent toward them.

30 KC: Now, you had to eventually find your way out to the *Garrett County*.

31 JC: Yes, sir.

1 KC: How did you make your way out there? Did someone tell you, “Get on this
2 bus, we’re taking you out there”?

3 JC: Yes, sir.

4 KC: Okay. Explain that process to me.

5 JC: Okay. Some of that’s lost in my memory. I know that they said, for instance,
6 “It’s time to go, pack up your sea bag.” We’d be taken on a bus and I remember going to
7 a river or docking area where we caught a swift boat and the swift boat took us across a
8 large bay area up to another area where we met a supply, a small supply ship and then the
9 supply ship, we got on the supply ship and the supply ship took us upriver to the, there
10 was three LSTs that were working in this task force. I think it was Task Force 116.

11 KC: Yes, 116 the Game Warden.

12 JC: Game Warden. That was the USS *Hunterdon County*, the USS *Garrett*
13 *County*, and the USS—God, I’m sorry. I can’t think of it right now.

14 KC: It started with an H, I can’t think of it right now.

15 JC: Yes it did, Hunterdon, I just can’t think of it right now, but in any event,
16 probably got it written down here, but in any event that’s how they got us up to the LSTs
17 on this supply boat. Once the supply ship got there, I think it went every two weeks up
18 the river and once it got to the LST to unload for food, ammunition, and things like that,
19 it was a working party, if you will, for the ship’s company and then we transferred and
20 reported in, that type of thing.

21 KC: Okay. Well, you’ve finally made your way out there to the *Garrett County*.
22 You know that you’re going to be a shipfitter. You know that you’re going to be welding
23 as part of your duty for sure. So when you see the boat, like you said before, you had no
24 idea what an LST was when you first entered the Navy and had no idea what about this
25 Navy riverine effort there in South Vietnam, in the Mekong Delta area. What are your
26 impressions when you see this LST?

27 JC: You know it looked like the *Queen Mary* sitting there, to me.

28 KC: Is that right?

29 JC: As we came up on it. The ride on—let me step back one. The ride upriver
30 took two days on this supply boat. We stopped somewhere, unloaded supplies, took on
31 more supplies. I volunteered once to cover somebody’s watch on the deck with an M-60

1 machinegun because this boat would go, I mean it got so close to the jungle that
2 sometime the leaves and stuff would actually touch the hull of this thing. Then there
3 were areas of the river that were extremely wide. So it took about two days to get up to
4 the *Garrett* and as we came up to the *Garrett*, I remember the water was brown just like
5 the Rio Grande river here, only there was a lot more of it. The water was a little choppy
6 when we arrived and I just remember looking at this thing and looking up at it and
7 thinking, “I need to go home. I can't stay here. I just can't stay here.” That's the truth.

8 KC: It must've been quite a change from what you're used to seeing in El Paso,
9 I'm sure.

10 JC: Yeah.

11 KC: So you spent two days on a supply ship on your way to the *Garrett County*,
12 like you say.

13 JC: Yes.

14 KC: Well, you finally reach the *Garrett County*. You're gonna get off the supply
15 ship and you board your new home, what will be your new home for the next year or so.
16 Again, I'll ask this question, as a young twenty-year-old man, what's going through your
17 mind when you get on that ship?

18 JC: Again, my thought was, “I just can't, I don't think I can handle this. I need to
19 go home.” It was all so strange. It was like landing on the moon to me. After a while,
20 again, you acclimate, you meet people, you talk and I think somebody sent me to get the
21 bow door keys which, of course, there is no such thing.

22 KC: Yeah, exactly.

23 JC: Like the good sailor swab jockey I was, I ran to get them to take up to the
24 captain and became the focus of a lot of jokes, but I got used to it.

25 KC: Were you the only one who came aboard the *Garrett County* for duty at this
26 time?

27 JC: You know what? I think there were two others. There was a black guy with
28 me named Holmes, was his last name ironically. I saw him here in El Paso thirty years
29 later. It was ironic, but—

30 KC: Just coincidentally?

31 JC: I'm sorry, sir?

1 KC: Was it just a coincidence that you saw him?

2 JC: Yes, he was a soccer coach and I said, "I know that guy," and we got to
3 talking. Sure enough, it was the same guy that was on the *Garrett County* with me.

4 KC: That's strange.

5 JC: I think he left earlier, though, I think he had to go home on an emergency
6 family problem and he never came back. I think he was there a couple of months, several
7 months.

8 KC: Describe the *Garrett County* for me.

9 JC: Well, it was a World War II, they had refitted a World War II LST number
10 786. It had gone for refitting, I understand, I think in the Philippines. They had put air
11 conditioning ducts in it and converted some of it for helo deck because we carried two
12 helos, helicopters, at all times. The booms on the starboard and port side were hitching
13 posts, if you will, for the PBR (patrol boat, river) boats that we supported. It was a huge, I
14 think it was I want to say 320-foot-long vessel. Typical old style ship, grey paint, some
15 rust spots despite what the Navy might tell you. It looked—I don't know, it was sitting
16 on this river and it just sat there on an anchor chain until we were deployed to certain
17 areas.

18 KC: What was your initial duty there?

19 JC: You know what? My initial duty there, they were short on—here we go, they
20 were short on mess cooks.

21 KC: Something you hoped to avoid.

22 JC: Exactly. I was an E-3 when I got there because once you come out of A
23 school your automatically an E-3. They should've kept me there three months in mess
24 cooking, but they kept me almost six. So I'm a little bit bitter. I was bitter about that
25 because the work was very difficult on the hours, et cetera. I wasn't allowed to spend as
26 much time in the shipfitter shop as I wanted to or should have until they had a lower class
27 come in. I think the guys I was under were already third-class petty officers, E-4s.

28 KC: What sort of things were you doing here, in the mess? What were your
29 duties as the new guy?

1 JC: Well, everything. They had you up in the kitchen. They had you in the
2 scullery. I spent a lot of time in the scullery, extremely hot, sweaty work, cleaning the
3 tables, loading and unloading food supplies, things of that nature.

4 KC: But eventually this duty was passed on to someone more junior than you?

5 JC: Yes, eventually. Not quick enough for my liking. Then I was glad I wasn't a
6 cook on a submarine.

7 KC: So then did you go back to shipfitting, back into the machine shop?

8 JC: Yes, sir. I went to the shipfitting shop and I was again the little man on the
9 totem. They had a lot more experienced welders and stuff there, pipefitters. It was kind
10 of on-the-job training. We had a lot of—some of those jobs were not very exciting. We
11 had SEAL (Sea, Air, Land) team operations off the ship numerous times. We had South
12 Vietnamese military in conjunction with CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) operations,
13 which meant the ship had over three hundred people on it, and you had to clean up
14 stopped up toilets and things of that nature. That wasn't too fun.

15 KC: Sure. Well, you become part of Task Force 116, like we said before, the
16 Game Wardens. Tell me what the mission of the *Garrett County* was. What was your
17 purpose for being there?

18 JC: Okay. Personally, I was never advised what our specific mission was. I
19 think it's just as you stay on the ship you start understanding what's going on. We acted
20 as a mobile home base for both Seawolf helicopter detachments. We supported PBR
21 activities that were acting as basically police units, stopping sampans, checking for arms,
22 munitions and things of that nature being smuggled. We also acted as a home base, as I
23 said, for Special Operations groups and also for fire support for Army troops who were
24 bogged down somewhere who needed assistance in fire support. If I'm not mistaken, I
25 did not work in CIC (combat information center) although I had some friends that did and
26 I believe our call signal, call name was Joe's Favorite.

27 KC: All right. You say you were there to support the PBRs.

28 JC: I'm sorry, sir?

29 KC: I'm sorry. You say you were there to support the PBRs in their mission.

30 JC: Yes.

1 KC: Explain to me what supporting the PBRs meant. What sort of support did
2 you provide?

3 JC: Can I put you on hold just one minute, please?

4 KC: Sure.

5 JC: Hello?

6 KC: Yes.

7 JC: I'm sorry. I thought maybe that was, had another call and I thought I had to
8 answer it. Anyway, I'm sorry if I broke the continuity of the interview.

9 KC: No, no problem.

10 JC: What was your last question?

11 KC: You were describing to me the mission, how you were supporting the PBRs.

12 JC: Okay. PBR support meant we acted as a home base. We fed them. We
13 housed them. We worked on the boats if they were hit or damaged on the rivers. In the
14 event there was activity further up the river too far for the boats to go, then the ship
15 would go up the river, pulling the PBRs or having them be ahead of us as though they
16 were a scout unit, if you will, or maybe behind us, with I would assume helo cover when
17 we did something like that.

18 KC: Now, being part of a PBR crew, you'd have seen some very, very hairy
19 things, I think.

20 JC: Well, I was not, personally, I was not part of a PBR crew. I was ship's
21 company.

22 KC: Sure, sure. I'm sorry.

23 JC: That's all right.

24 KC: What I meant to say was that for these sailors who were on the PBRs, they
25 saw some pretty intense action an awful lot of the time.

26 JC: A lot of them did, yes. They were in firefights frequently.

27 KC: Sure. Now, like you say, you were part of the ship's company.

28 JC: I'm ship's company.

29 KC: When these guys came—

30 JC: I'm just as swab jock. Okay?

31 KC: Sure, sure.

1 JC: But we made friends and befriended a lot of these PBR sailors. Some were
2 from, in my case, some were from Las Cruces, New Mexico, which is only thirty miles
3 up the road. Two weeks before I got to the boat, one of their PBRs was hit and it killed
4 everybody on it. The PBR was trying to check a sampan that was, I guess in police
5 terminology was in hot pursuit of a sampan down a river. The VC had put up a claymore
6 mine up in the bushes. So as the PBR went close to the bush or underneath, they set it off
7 and it just destroyed everybody. I think the coxswain was able to get back to the *Garrett*
8 *County*, but he died shortly thereafter. The only reason I know this is because one of my
9 friends on the *Garrett* was ordered to go clean up the boat afterwards and he got there
10 about two weeks before I did. So other than that, I saw some with holes in them, but
11 luckily none of the crews when I was there were shot or wounded.

12 KC: So you established, it sounds like, a pretty good working rapport with the
13 PBR crew.

14 JC: Oh, yeah, yeah.

15 KC: Not animosity between the two crews.

16 JC: They were fun guys. They would give us rides sometimes or you could put
17 in a chit to go upriver. It had to be approved by the captain. I put in a chit, but by the
18 time it was approved, I think I found out I was leaving in three days and I decided I'll
19 leave that excitement to someone else.

20 KC: I think that probably a pretty good decision. So you never got to go up river
21 with one of the PBR?

22 JC: Not, no, no, not really, unh-unh.

23 KC: What sort of things would they say to you when they came back in?

24 JC: They would tell us about, you know, how scary it was when they stopped
25 sampans. They took a few small rounds over the bow. Sometimes one would hit the
26 hull. One of them took a, if I'm not mistaken, one took a P-40 rocket through the main
27 hull, but it didn't explode. It just ripped a big hole in it. So, again, as part of the support
28 group, they would lift these PBRs up with the ship's boom and drop it down into the tank
29 deck and there those guys would fix it. They were made out of fiberglass. They would
30 have to work on these things with fiberglass and grinders. Those were the guys that I

1 really felt sorry for. Those poor guys just worked their butts off and they were inhaling
2 all that fiberglass constantly, it was just a nasty job.

3 KC: About how many PBRs would the *Garrett County* support?

4 JC: This is only a guess, I really don't know, but I want to say maybe nine,
5 something of that nature.

6 KC: Okay. Now, was the *Garrett County* ever called in to provide any sort of
7 closer support rather than refitting and repairing? Were you involved in any actions
8 upriver?

9 JC: We fired over two thousand rounds, 40-millimeter pom-pom guns. Hang on
10 just a second.

11 KC: No, that's no problem.

12 JC: Yeah. We fired over two thousand rounds to support Army troops. We'd go
13 up and down the river sometimes on firing missions and we would fire on hooches,
14 Vietnamese huts, et cetera. I guess they were getting intelligence indicating that they
15 were supporting VC operations and we were looking for secondary explosions. We can
16 come back to that later if you want. What else? During Tet Offensive, we woke up and
17 you looked out over the jungle which wasn't too far away and you saw a whole bunch of
18 VC flags flying. Before, they weren't there. That was another shocker because you
19 realize, hey, those jungles really do have enemy in them. We were given orders to
20 proceed to Vinh Long because it was under full attack by VC and North Vietnamese
21 forces. So we proceeded upriver at general quarters, all the guns loaded. The PBRs were
22 going with us. We came into the, I guess, the bay area of Vinh Long. The whole city
23 was on fire. It looked like something to me out of *Gone with the Wind*, the movie *Gone*
24 *with the Wind* when Atlanta was burning. You know what I'm talking about?

25 KC: Yes, oh, absolutely.

26 JC: Okay. That's what it reminded me of. The ship turned around, dropped
27 anchor, and we were going to fire the 40s, but we kept getting calls constantly, "Don't
28 shoot here because you'll hit us," "Don't shoot here because you'll hit us," et cetera. We
29 never fired and rounds there. We acted as a hospital boat taking on some casualties, a lot
30 of civilians, a couple of nuns. As a matter of fact, I had a call from somebody in New
31 York who's writing a book on the Seawolves who met these nuns and has them in his

1 book, but in any event, that, we stayed there for I want to say, a week maybe, five days in
2 this one area while this—the battle actually probably lasted a day and a night. You could
3 see tracers going up, tracers coming down. It was Fourth of July, the real thing.

4 KC: What was your role in all this while this is going on at Vinh Long?

5 JC: I was running coffee, food to the people that they were bringing on, trying to
6 help people come up and down the Jacob's Ladder. Nothing, nothing tremendous, just
7 running here and there.

8 KC: But you say that, although you were there to provide whatever support you
9 could, the *Garrett County* was unable to fire.

10 JC: It was unable to fire, that's correct.

11 KC: How'd that make you feel sitting in the middle of that and not being able to
12 return fire?

13 JC: We felt impotent. That's the only word I could come up with at this time, it
14 just totally impotent, angry and with good reason. You couldn't fire and hurt and kill
15 your own troops, but it was just the idea. Now we actually have the chance to actually do
16 something worthwhile or as far as the war effort was concerned, really and you can't do
17 anything. It was extremely frustrating.

18 KC: What sort of impact did the Tet Offensive have on you, Mr. Calamia, in
19 terms of your understanding of the war and the way it was being conducted and what you
20 knew about the conflict up to that point?

21 JC: Well, at that point I realized that we didn't own the night. We didn't own the
22 day. We didn't own anything. Those people still had control of the situation, maybe not
23 for long periods of time, but they definitely were there and they could weave in and out
24 anytime they wanted. It was frightening.

25 KC: Did any of the PBRs that you were supporting at this time, how much action
26 were they involved in? Was it something automatic—?

27 JC: Oh, they were in back and forth. Matter of fact, I have a really good picture
28 in here that I took with a Polaroid camera off the helo deck of a PBR going in toward the
29 city and you can see, if you look it was blown up to an eight-by-ten which, of course, had
30 lost some clarity, but in the process you can still see some fires on the beach and the
31 boats are moving with the—they're kicking up a rooster tail and it's quite a neat picture,

1 actually, but they were constantly weaving in and out firing. They had twin 50s on the
2 bow and they had a single 50 port and starboard. Some had a 50 on the fantail and some
3 were using M-79 grenade launchers. It was a crank type weapon and belt fed, it was
4 developed by Honeywell, if I'm not mistaken. They were cranking those off. It was
5 something to see.

6 KC: Now, you were there for, like you say, around five days.

7 JC: I want to say five days, maybe four.

8 KC: Well, when you get your orders to pull out of the Vinh Long area, had the
9 city been secured by that time?

10 JC: You know what? All I can do is tell you is I assume so, yes. Things had
11 settled down.

12 KC: Now you're headed back down river I assume after this, probably with the
13 Cochin, I guess.

14 JC: Yes, sir. To my knowledge, we operated on two rivers, the Bassac and the
15 Cochin.

16 KC: Cochin, yeah, and you would've been on the Cochin at this time, I guess.

17 JC: You know, I don't remember. I'm sorry, I don't know which one runs in to
18 Vinh Long.

19 KC: Sure, I believe it's the Cochin, but we'll look at that later.

20 JC: What we did, we'd switch rivers. *Hunterdon*, we switched with one of the
21 other *Garrett County*, one of the other counties and a week later one of them got hit with
22 a recoilless [rifle]. I understand it killed eighteen sailors on it.

23 KC: Wow.

24 JC: So we were real lucky that they didn't hit us. We were in range almost
25 constantly. Why we never got hit more or never took rounds, we took a few over the,
26 some small arms going up the river during Tet, but why we never really got hit, I'll never
27 know. Maybe they felt sorry for us stuck out there, I don't know.

28 KC: Well, after your time there at Vinh Long, as a result of the Tet Offensive,
29 you're headed back down river hopefully to a more safe place and more secure place.
30 You had seen the real thing. You had seen combat out there. What was your reaction to
31 it?

1 JC: Well, you know, I think you have mixed reactions. I felt somewhat guilty
2 because I couldn't participate and I'm sitting there doing nothing while guys are getting
3 shot at, wounded, and killed. Then on the other hand, I think you're glad you're not, but
4 even if you're helping people and whatever it just doesn't seem as worthwhile at the time,
5 especially when you're twenty, I turned twenty-one in Vietnam. So I guess when you're
6 twenty, twenty-one you're thinking, "Shit, I should be out there." Kind of a guilt feeling,
7 I think.

8 KC: That's certainly a common response to that question. Well, once you
9 received your orders and you're back down out of the river itself, I guess, what are your
10 duties then? Were you called into, for more and more support, more upriver support?
11 What became of the *Garrett County* after the Tet Offensive?

12 JC: We were always on call to do support firing and what have you. Otherwise
13 we sat there, ship's work commenced as normal. We landed—helicopters were coming
14 in all the time, flight quarters. We worked many hours. We worked our tails off. Every
15 night you had a watch or I did. You were really tired. You were just walking zombies, is
16 that you were in a zombie state for lack of sleep. Sleep deprivation was one of your
17 bigger enemies, I think. It wore you down.

18 KC: Well, take me through your typical duties here. You talk about these. How
19 long of a day would you work, et cetera?

20 JC: Can we do that tomorrow, Doctor? It's 1:30 and I've already got an attorney
21 out here in the courtroom. I'm afraid I'd better get in there and do my bailiff of duties.

22 KC: Absolutely, we'll pick it up.

Interview with Joseph Calamia
Session [2] of [2]
11 July, 2008

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager, continuing an oral history interview with Mr.
2 Joseph Calamia. Today is 11 July 2008. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
3 Texas Tech University and Mr. Calamia is joining us from his office in El Paso, Texas.
4 Good afternoon, Mr. Calamia.

5 Joseph Calamia: Good afternoon, Dr. Crager.

6 KC: We were discussing the Tet Offensive toward the end of our interview
7 yesterday. Why don't we pick up there? I have a few specific questions that I wanted to
8 ask you concerning the Tet Offensive and your position, or your experience, I should say,
9 on the *Garrett County*. Now, of course, the Tet Offensive begins the end of January of
10 1968 and there you are, part of Task Force 116 on the LST in the delta or plying the
11 rivers of the Cochin or the Bassac. How did you find out about this massive effort that
12 was known as the Tet Offensive in your area? How were you notified?

13 JC: Okay, I believe I said earlier I woke up in the morning and from both sides of
14 the shoreline, you could see Vietnamese flags flying. I didn't really understand the
15 impact of it where we were because we were not being overrun like a lot of the Marine
16 bases and Army bases, but it was quite evident that there were a lot of people out in that
17 jungle. Shortly thereafter, the ship went to general quarters and I do not remember the
18 exact term or words that the captain used, but to paraphrase it, it was something of the
19 order, "Now hear this. Now hear this. General quarters. General quarters. This is not a
20 drill. Man your general quarters station." So we're running to our general quarters
21 station. I was in a damage control party since I was a fireman. Up near the, I think I was
22 on the port side of the ship up near the bow. I was a phone talker and relaying messages
23 to the bridge. In the process I could hear some of the information being passed along and
24 then the captain came over the loudspeaker again and said, "We will be proceeding to
25 Vinh Long. The city is under attack. We are expecting to be fired upon. Stand by. Be
26 alert," and something of that nature. At that point, you realize it was no game and you
27 kept thinking that maybe something coming through that bulkhead, but we could hear the
28 ship's screws start turning, you could feel the ship vibrate and we were proceeding

1 upriver at a relatively good pace. I don't know how many knots we were going. We
2 proceeded into, up to, and into the harbor area of Vinh Long.

3 KC: Now, prior to this experience here during the Tet Offensive in '68, had the
4 *Garrett County* plied its way up into these rivers very far, any great distance prior to this
5 or was this the deepest you'd been on the river?

6 JC: I'm sorry. At nineteen, twenty years old, twenty-one years old, you don't
7 know where the hell you are. All you see is the river and you know that the land
8 changes, the shore either gets closer or further away. Since I was not privy to CIC
9 communications, you just rode the ship. It was just you're there for the ride, but the ship
10 did go up and down the river. It was mobile constantly. You just never knew where you
11 were going. I guess it depended on Seawolf needs, helicopter support and things of that
12 nature. When I first arrived there in '67 we did lose one helo over the deck and one of
13 the sailors there who had befriended me was killed in that wreck and his body was never
14 recovered along with the pilots. So you did see some things that occurred even as just
15 part of the ship's crew.

16 KC: We went through the efforts of the *Garrett County* and the PBR and then
17 Seawolf helo support like you said yesterday in your discussion of the Tet Offensive
18 there. Now, when it was finally over when you were steaming back down towards the
19 delta, I guess, or towards the mouth. Once the fighting was over and you knew that you
20 were out of danger, at least for that part, how did you assess what you had been though
21 there? What'd that mean to you?

22 JC: That's a difficult question because I think at that time, you were just totally
23 exhausted from being up long hours. The adrenaline running through, you know, even
24 though nothing happened you're still in a situation that causes your body to kick in more
25 adrenaline than is normal. So when it's all over and done with, I think you're probably
26 just looking anyplace anytime to find time to sleep and just get back to the normal
27 routine. I don't remember exactly what initiated our return or when it stopped. I think,
28 like I said, I think we were there for about four or five days. It just slowly basically
29 petered out. You have to remember we're on a ship on the river. We don't have access
30 to communication other than our shipmates. So we really don't know what's going on,
31 on the beach.

1 KC: Okay, I was going to ask you that.

2 JC: Yeah, it's amazing how departed you are from what's really going on. I had
3 no idea of how intense Tet was until much later, actually.

4 KC: Now, when you say much later, were you still in-country at this time or were
5 you at home?

6 JC: No, no.

7 KC: Okay.

8 JC: I was already back and then all the information started coming in, Tet this
9 and Tet that. It was the lunar new year and the VC had made with the assistance of North
10 Vietnamese, regulars had made a concerted effort to retake South Vietnam. You knew
11 that, but you just you have to remember you're just a very small facet on this huge
12 playing field. There's only so much you can see. Your peripheral vision is totally gone.
13 You're only looking straight ahead at where you're at, at the time.

14 KC: Sure, and survival would depend on that, too.

15 JC: Yeah. The rest just comes later as you get older or as you read. It's just
16 amazing how much you don't know what's going on around you. Maybe it's better that
17 way.

18 KC: Sure. Well, let's switch gears here and ask you about something that I
19 certainly want to get to in this interview and that has to deal with the SEAL teams. I
20 know the *Garrett County* was responsible for supporting SEAL teams before you were
21 there and after, of course. What kind of relationship did you on the, you say the ship's
22 company on the *Garrett County*, have with the SEAL teams? How would you support
23 them?

24 JC: Well, okay. The SEAL teams came, I'm trying to remember, maybe three
25 times during my tenure. They would come aboard and the ship's company would, as I
26 told you earlier, it would put a tremendous amount of extra work on the ship's company.
27 Plumbing, feeding, you name it, it just added to it.

28 KC: Well, how many of these SEALs were there?

29 JC: You know, I can't tell you. It varied anywhere from, I don't know, anywhere
30 from thirty to twenty along with special Vietnamese units. They were all wearing tiger
31 camo. In fact, one night when I was on watch, I went down into the tank deck, and from

1 afar the hatch opened and out came a bunch of guys dressed in black pajamas with
2 bandoleros across them and carrying guns. Just for a split second I thought, “Oh my
3 God, the VC have taken the ship.” I just stood there. I had no gun. I wouldn’t know
4 what to do anyway. I just stood there and then a few American SEALs came up behind
5 them, dressed in camos. It was a special group that was going out that night that I didn’t
6 know of. I just apparently ran into them in the tank deck. They had apparently just
7 arrived. As funny as that seems, I remember that very clearly, “Oh my God, the VC have
8 taken over.”

9 KC: That would’ve woken you up, I would think.

10 JC: I’m sorry, sir?

11 KC: I think that would probably wake you up, I would think.

12 JC: It most definitely did. Hang on just a minute, my phone is acting up here.

13 KC: Sure.

14 JC: I’m sorry for that. Are you there?

15 KC: Yes, I’m here.

16 JC: Okay. Now the relationship, if you’re talking about a working relationship,
17 the *Garrett County* and, by the way, we were talking about the other LSTs yesterday, it
18 was the *Hunterdon* and the *Holmes County*.

19 KC: There you go. That’s the one.

20 JC: I assume all three LSTs acted in the same capacity, but none the less we acted
21 as a feeding station, a berthing station, to fix things if they needed things fixed and a
22 place for them to clean their weapons and load up and hit the beach early in the morning.
23 Sometimes, at one point, some of these teams had CIA operatives with them who were
24 dressed as a civilian. I met two of them.

25 KC: Did you just assume they were CIA, or did you—?

26 JC: No, you know what? I had no idea as a matter of fact. I asked—one of them
27 was carrying a World War II German Schmeisser nine-millimeter sub-machinegun. I
28 recognized that it was a World War II German machinegun and I said, “How come
29 you’re carrying that?” and he said, “Oh, I can carry whatever I want.” I said, “Well,
30 you’re not in the military?” He says, “Well, I’m with the CIA.” I said, “Oh, okay.”
31 Whatever you say, and he was very nice to me. He let me hold the machinegun. He was

1 wearing, if I, recall like a guayabera shirt and jeans or some other kind of pants, but he
2 definitely not military. I guess they were in charge of this specific operation, whatever it
3 may have been, I do not know.

4 KC: Now, when the SEAL teams would leave, would they leave on the PBRs, I
5 assume, and the PBRs would insert them up north?

6 JC: You know what, sometimes they did and sometimes they didn't. Sometimes
7 a small group would leave on special STAB (strike assault boat) boats, I think is what
8 they called them. It's an acronym for something, something like a rubber dingy with a
9 special outboard motor that would leave from the fantail and was almost totally silent. A
10 lot of the SEALs had special weaponry such as the Stoner machine guns and they carried
11 other weapons of their choice. They would go hit the beach, do their thing and then come
12 back and then we'd have to feed them breakfast or whatever and then they would sleep
13 all day until their next mission or what have you. If you want a specific incident, on one
14 particular night one of the SEALs came up to me, he was a huge man overweight, but he
15 must've been, I don't know, he looked huge to me, 6'4", 6'5". He was wearing black
16 pajamas, the Viet Cong style dress. He was carrying a Gurkha knife on his side. He said,
17 "Hey, boy," he says "What do you want me to bring you back from the beach?
18 Something you can write home about and tell them you're a hero." I said, "Well, could
19 you please bring me back a VC flag?" He said, "Well, I'll see what I can do." Then he
20 came back, I don't know what time it was and I think I was asleep in my rack. He shook
21 me awake and he said, "Couldn't find you a flag, but maybe you'll want this." He threw
22 it on my rack and it was a wallet. When I opened up the wallet I had a hard time opening
23 it up because it was caked with congealed blood, just gobs of blood. Inside was a picture
24 of a Vietnamese, his wife or girlfriend and some other documents or paperwork. Of
25 course, I told him how nice it was to have that, I would send it home, but I gave it away.
26 That's not the kind of war trophy that I wanted to send home or even thought I could send
27 home, for that matter.

28 KC: But when you see this, I mean, number one, just how bizarre this whole
29 episode was I would think to you, when you open up this wallet especially working your
30 way through the congealed blood and you open it up and you see pictures of a wife or
31 girlfriend or family, what kind of impact does that have on you, if any?

1 JC: Well, you know what? It was a little bit shocking and reality check. You
2 realize that here's an enemy or hopefully it was an enemy and not someone else, but
3 regardless the fact was that these people had families and wives, too. Whoever was in
4 that picture would never see this person again. It did stay with me. On another occasion,
5 the SEAL teams took on a couple of prisoners, I remember. Two young ones, and one
6 older man and there was, I had never saw any water boarding, but you did see some
7 rough treatment. They were trying to get some prisoners to talk. As you know, torture
8 and that type of thing is part of war. They slapped this old man around. They put a hand
9 grenade in his hand and they pulled the pin and they had an interpreter there with him and
10 they told him in no uncertain terms, "If you release the pin on the hand grenade, you're
11 gonna blow yourself up." Then you dogged down a hatch on a ship and close it down.
12 They stuck him in the back room of the fantail of the ship and they left him there
13 overnight under guard. The next day they brought him out and he was visibly shaking, of
14 course. He had been holding this spoon on this grenade. Now whether the grenade was
15 really alive or not, I don't know. They put the pin back in, slapped him a little bit more
16 and then asked him some questions and he started talking. They took him off somewhere
17 to talk. They had two younger ones who were rough looking guys who could've, I would
18 picture as probably real VC. They took them up in helicopters and, of course, you hear,
19 well, they never got there because you know what they did? They kicked them out. I
20 don't know if they did that or not. I'm sure it happened. In this case I don't know if it
21 did or not. They could've flown them to another base for more "debriefing," in quotes.
22 The older man later was still behind a roped in section and he had a SEAL guard with
23 him who was guarding him. Young kid, real pumped up type and I kind of felt sorry for
24 the guy in one way as a human being. He was sitting there and I'm smoking a cigarette
25 and I asked him he, motioned to him if he wanted a cigarette. Of course, he said yes so I
26 handed him a cigarette. I stuck my hand over the roped in area and lit it for him and the
27 SEAL turned to me, pointed his weapon at me and said, "You ever get near one of my
28 fucking prisoners again, I'll blow your fucking head off. You understand?" I thought,
29 "Oh my God, he's serious." I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Now get the fuck out of here."
30 So anyway—

31 KC: Then what'd you do?

1 JC: That was an experience.

2 KC: I assume you left?

3 JC: I left, yes. I think he was jacked up enough he might've squeezed the trigger.
4 Or at least beat the shit out of me.

5 KC: Whatever became of this old man, do you know?

6 JC: I have no idea. They later took him off. I don't know whatever happened. I
7 don't know what the—I don't know where it came from, I don't know what type of
8 operation, I don't know the men's names, I just remember the incidents.

9 KC: Well, this takes us to a good point here in the interview because I wanted to
10 ask you about the VC. What were your perceptions of the enemy that they were facing
11 there?

12 JC: Well, being on a ship, being in the Navy on ship's crew, you don't get
13 normally that close. Now, we had a few sampans come up. As far as your question goes,
14 I pictured them in black pajamas with hats, I guess like the VC, what are they called?
15 Sapper? Is that the term, sapper?

16 KC: Yes.

17 JC: That's how I pictured them. Of course, getting a smile and shake your hand
18 today and cut your throat at night, just like they do in Iraq or actually any other war. It's
19 just part of a warzone, I guess. We had a no-shoot zone, I mean a no—we had a
20 parameter apparently around the ship that I really wasn't aware of, but if a sampan came
21 too close, they would fire warning shots to say you're getting too close, get away. I
22 remember on one occasion, I only, I saw part of it. The sampan came too close to the
23 boat. The officer was the executive officer at the time who had the watch. I don't
24 remember his name, I just remember he was somewhat of a dork, excuse that, but it's
25 true.

26 KC: Why do you say that?

27 JC: Just, he was an arrogant son of a bitch. You could just, he was just extremely
28 arrogant. He was an officer and, you know, the Navy has a real class or I assume it still
29 does there, a real class variation, even maybe more so than the Army. He was extremely
30 arrogant and this boat came too close. It was a fishing sampan. He fired a couple of
31 shots from an M-16 over the bow and the bullets ricocheted in the water and the guy

1 started raising his hands and yelling, I don't know, you know, "I'm going," or whatever
2 he was saying. He then, that wasn't good enough for this guy. The sampan was not
3 coming toward the boat at this time. It was in retreat. He loaded an M-79 grenade and he
4 fired it and it hit next to the boat and the shrapnel hit this kid on the boat and the old man
5 or the fisherman, flipped them out and dropped them into the boat. We sent the LCVP
6 (landing craft, vehicle, personnel) out, picked them up, brought them back on deck. I
7 came up later, I was on watch, I came up later and they had already flown the kid off for
8 medevac. He had received a lot of shrapnel wounds in the groin. The old man was still
9 on the deck and there was shrapnel all over his legs. It looked like somebody took a can
10 opener and went up and down his legs is what I remember, that's how I recall it.
11 Somebody yelled and told me to go get the medic. So I ran downstairs, downstairs, I ran
12 down in to the sickbay area and I told the medic, "There's a Vietnamese guy up there got
13 hit and they want you up there to give him something for pain. He's in a lot of pain." He
14 said something to the effect, "Fuck the gook. I'll take my time getting there." I said,
15 "Well, I'm telling you they want you there," and I ran back up. He finally got up there
16 with his bag and I don't know if he was simply afraid to try and do anything because he
17 was inadequate or he was just so prejudicial that he could care less, I really don't know,
18 but it was upsetting the crew because this old man had not done anything and those who
19 saw everything knew the situation and they said, "Come on, come on Doc, give him a
20 shot, give him a shot." He says, "Fuck him, I'm not giving him, I don't give a fuck." At
21 that time I think the feeling was mutual, everybody just kind of circled the corpsman or
22 the doc and said, "You will give him a fucking shot or you're gonna go over the side in
23 front of the officers and everybody else." "Okay, okay, all right." So he gave him
24 something to kill the pain and they flew the old man out to medevac him later or shortly
25 thereafter, too. One of the Seawolves took him off.

26 KC: I would assume probably never be heard from again?

27 JC: Oh, no, no, I don't know. I'm sure they took him to a hospital. I don't think
28 they would throw him out or anything like that. He was not a prisoner of war, he was just
29 a wounded civilian or appeared to be and that was something that stuck with me, too.

30 KC: Did you see a lot of this, this kind of callous attitude toward Vietnamese
31 regardless of political affiliation?

1 JC: You know what? No, not so much from the sailors. I think a lot of the Army
2 guys were more hardcore. One of the problems that I saw or felt was that we stayed on
3 station I think about five months straight or six months without women, without booze,
4 nothing. We had nothing. They wouldn't let us go on the—they finally let us go on the
5 beach one time for a drinking party and it turned out to be total chaos. So they brought
6 us, they brought them back.

7 KC: You say it was—

8 JC: You know—

9 KC: Excuse me, I'm sorry.

10 JC: No problem.

11 KC: You said that it was chaos out there. What happened out there on the beach?

12 JC: Oh, everybody, they got so drunk that they were just ridiculous, fighting and
13 they sent the LCVP to pick them up, drag them back. They had to use a boom to pick up
14 some of the guys that couldn't even walk. These people were so uptight and we'd been
15 so long with no recreation whatsoever that there was a, I won't say mutinous feeling
16 about it, but people started fighting on the ship. I remember one guy, as a matter of fact,
17 the black man that I told you about that went on the ship with me. There was a
18 boatswain's mate from the southern states who naturally didn't like blacks to begin with.
19 They got in some type of a fight about something. He pulled out his hunting knife and he
20 was chasing this poor guy through the ship. He ran into a shower and this boatswain's
21 mate said, "I'm gonna kill that son of a bitch," and he locked the hunting blade down and
22 just ripped the curtain right in half before they could pull this guy out. Somewhere or
23 another this black guy had secreted a pistol under his pillow because apparently there was
24 bad blood between these two for some time and this guy was in fear of his life. That
25 didn't really get out too far. They kind of hushed it up. I don't even know if the officers
26 became aware of that, but things like that, just started ballooning. They finally sent us to
27 the Philippines for refitting and some R&R (rest and relaxation) but it started to show its
28 ugly face.

29 KC: Wow. The pressures of combat or being on station, as you say.

30 JC: Being on station you'd work, oh, shit, a good sixteen hours a day or you
31 know you'd weld, go through ship's duties, serve your watch, get maybe if you were

1 lucky four hours' sleep a night, five at the most if you were really lucky and then start it
2 all over again in horrendous heat, rain, whatever. After a while it began to tell on you.

3 KC: Sure. Now, back before I led you astray there, with a couple of those
4 questions.

5 JC: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—

6 KC: No, no, no I that was—

7 JC: I wanted to get these stories in to you so you knew some of the things that
8 actually happened.

9 KC: Oh, please do, I'm the one who led you astray, I think, a little bit there. We
10 were talking about the perception of the Vietnamese, particularly the Vietnamese enemy.
11 Now, you mentioned the treatment of this older Vietnamese man and the younger man, as
12 well. Now, you say that wasn't necessarily something you say all that much of from the
13 Navy and maybe it was more so with the Army and, of course, the proximity, of course,
14 with the Army.

15 JC: Right.

16 KC: You're dealing with one another on a more daily basis, et cetera. What was
17 your estimation of the abilities of the VC?

18 JC: Well, you know, at the time when you first go there you think, "Shit, no
19 problem, we got it made. We're going—we have the bigger ship, we've got the bigger
20 guns," and blah, blah, blah. But when I saw those flags flying that's when my whole
21 perception changed because, again, you realize you don't control anything, they're
22 controlling you. If they wanted to hit us, they could've hit us almost anytime they
23 wanted to or maybe our target wasn't that important to them. I don't know, but you start
24 to develop some respect for the enemy. Of course, the older you get, the more you
25 realize what it took, the more you respect them. At the time, at that age, I just realized
26 we're fighting an enemy who's a lot better than we were told.

27 KC: What about the way they were conducting their operations, about their
28 tactics, about their weapons?

29 JC: Are you talking about the Americans?

30 KC: About the VC, I'm sorry. About the VC.

31 JC: Their tactics?

1 KC: Yes, what about their —

2 JC: Oh, superb guerilla fighters. They were carrying on the war, especially there
3 in the Mekong Delta probably the only way they could with the amount of supplies they
4 were getting, but they're smuggling arms and munitions via sampan just like they
5 smuggle narcotics here in El Paso with cars. But it was the ongoing, these people were
6 willing to go, well, to steal the line from General Van, was it, Van Giap? He wrote a
7 book called *Whatever it Takes* and basically whatever it took they would do and you have
8 to respect that.

9 KC: What sort of things about their abilities or their tactics in particular, I think
10 that's a very good general assessment. Was there something in particular that you saw in
11 your time on the LST or that you had heard about during your time on the LST that really
12 shook you up or really produced a sense of respect for the VC?

13 JC: No, no, not at that time, no, sir, other than just what I've said or saw. If I
14 would've seen something in a larger scale, perhaps I could comment on that, but I don't
15 think I'd be qualified to really comment on that question.

16 KC: Sure. Well, you were to some degree out there on the LST, a sitting duck.

17 JC: Exactly.

18 KC: What sort of things did you fear from the enemy?

19 JC: Well, I'll have to give you this story line because we had an admiral come on
20 the ship and you said we were a sitting duck. Yes, we were, but this just epitomized it
21 and in an almost comical way. I was chosen as a side boy for the arrival of this admiral.
22 I don't even know who the admiral was. I want to say it could've even been Zumwalt.

23 KC: Wow.

24 JC: Because he looked like I remember seeing pictures later of Zumwalt. Very
25 distinguished looking individual, and if I'm not mistaken he had a lot of stars. It wasn't a
26 one-star, two-star, this individual had a lot. I don't know, perhaps your records could
27 confirm what admiral it was that came aboard the *Garrett County*, but he came aboard on
28 a hot summer day and they lined us up and they had these mahogany tables out on the
29 flight deck. They brought them out after the helicopter landed and they had these
30 pitchers of water that looked like something in the courtroom here, very, very posh. The
31 admiral was seated there along with representatives of—well, the ship's captain and the

1 ship's XO and a few other people. Then it was somewhat of a show and tell. For
2 instance, the representative of the Seawolf detachment came up, saluted admiral and so
3 all this and so and so blah, blah, blah. If you'll look, you'll see what the Seawolves do
4 here on the river. They'd have a couple of Seawolves come in and shoot the tree line by
5 the river so he could see the action of what they did with the flex guns and the door
6 gunners, et cetera. Then a representative would come up and salute from the PBRs and
7 say, "This is PBR unit so and so, I'm lieutenant so and so. Sir, for your convenience you
8 can look behind you," and then they'd have these PBRs parading down the river right
9 next to the, running parallel to the LST with shooting high rooster tails and
10 machinegunning the tree line. This went on for, oh, shit, an hour maybe. Those Navy
11 personnel, the ship's personnel that were not necessarily needed for keeping the ship
12 running, were ordered to be out in full, oh, to be out on parade and lined up on the ship.
13 The admiral was dressed in his whites. Now, we were quite some distance from the
14 shore, but we were not that far away that a recoilless rifle or P-40 rocket or something of
15 that nature could easily have been used. It could've wiped out not just to mention a high
16 head of naval command, but a lot of the ship's personnel. As I stood there at parade rest,
17 I thought, "This is unbelievable. This is just unbelievable."

18 KC: Was there anyone else who was sharing this thought with you? I'm sure you
19 would've expressed it about that time.

20 JC: No, you know what, I didn't express it to anybody. I was just hurry up so we
21 could get back into our dungarees, that type of stuff.

22 KC: It was bad enough when you were out there before. This just makes it
23 worse, I'd think.

24 JC: I mean, I'm not a military tactician by any means, but it doesn't take a rocket
25 scientist to realize that, Jesus Christ, they could've raised hell on that thing.

26 KC: Now, you mentioned the recoilless and the P-40. What weapons did they
27 have that, of which you were aware, that bothered you the most out on the LST?

28 JC: I guess I had heard horror stories about this recoilless rifle fire. They'd fire
29 one round from the beach, do their damage and then retreat into the jungle and by the
30 time you return fire, got going, you know, it was too late. The chaos had already been
31 committed. I can tell you that one other thing that sticks in my mind as one time when

1 the ship was going upriver, there were the remains of an old French gunboat, river
2 gunboat that had been sunk during the '50s there. You could see the smokestack sticking
3 out and the very top of the bridge perhaps and you could see large bullet holes and small
4 bullet holes in the smokestack. That had an effect on me because I realized, "Well, if
5 they could do it then, why can't they do it now?" Sometimes they would dig holes into
6 the side of the riverbank and cover it up with camouflage wood and that's where they
7 would set their traps. We blew up a couple of them like that, that were located but never
8 used against us.

9 KC: What did you use to blow them up with?

10 JC: The 40—

11 KC: 40s?

12 JC: 40s. We also had an 81-millimeter mortar tube would be placed on the deck
13 and sometime we'd go up the river firing on hooches or firing for effect for whatever
14 reason, they would use this mortar with WP (white phosphorous) rounds and high
15 explosive rounds. One time, we went up river on a fire mission. This is another thing
16 that sticks in my head. The ship went upriver. The 40s were being used to shoot hooches
17 and these hooches were quite some distance away. I'm pretty bad at distances, but I
18 would tell you, I don't know, quarter mile, half a mile away maybe, maybe a little more,
19 maybe a mile, but in any event, as we went up river, some of the guys started, they
20 ordered commence firing and there was a water buffalo running across the rice paddy. So
21 they shot it, I guess so they could get their aim correct before they got into the houses. I
22 thought that kinda pissed me off just to wantonly just kill something just for the fun of
23 killing it. Then I remember this guy came out of his house, waving his arms. He was
24 very small from the distance we were at. They fired rounds into his house and one went
25 right into the door and he just kind of vanished. The house blew up in flames and they
26 kept yelling, "Yeah, we got secondary. We got secondary." I don't know if he was—
27 obviously he was hiding munitions or something. I remember that.

28 KC: Well, let me ask you about that for a second, if you don't mind.

29 JC: Sure.

30 KC: It could've been very, very easily interpreted, like you said, they fired on the
31 water buffalo, killed the water buffalo to get their aim straight before they went in. That

1 angered you that they would just, like you say, wantonly kill something like that and to
2 fire into a home, this could've been not a VC sympathizer. This home could've been
3 perfectly innocent

4 JC: Oh, yeah sure, it could've easily been one or it could've easily not been one.
5 Supposedly, if I recall, they got intelligence from somewhere saying that these people
6 were being sympathetic to the VC. Well, hell, all of South Vietnam was if you want to
7 know the truth, but the fact was it was just one minute you're there and the next you're
8 gone. There was one other incident where we were stationed on river and a Phantom jet
9 flew over the ship, so close that the whole hull started shaking. He dropped a bomb on
10 some sampans that were crossing the river, way up ahead, the bomb looked like a black
11 dot, that's how far away it was, but when it hit, there was about three or four sampans on
12 the river and all you saw initially saw were tremendous shockwaves going through the
13 air. Then the next thing you saw was this huge gusher of water coming up and then you
14 got the report from the explosion. Now, we did act as a rescue vehicle or ship. I was
15 down below, but an Air Force jet was shot down by small-arms fire. The plane went up,
16 started spiraling and came down at about a mile and a half, two miles down the river and
17 crashed in the jungle. They sent a LCVP recovery party over there and they only
18 recovered one of the pilots. The other had obviously been picked up by the VC that were
19 hiding in the jungle. That was an unusual event, too. [The surviving pilot in this incident
20 happened to be an Asian, and when he was brought aboard, the captain refused to speak
21 with him because of his ethnicity. This was found out later through later emails with
22 prior shipmates.]

23 KC: It must've been incredibly conflicting for someone with, like yourself
24 obviously with a conscience, a sense of what is right and wrong, to see just the
25 destruction that seems senseless in many cases, obviously, but sometimes this actually
26 pays off. In military terms it pays off which means it saves American lives. That must've
27 been something and this is incredibly leading, what I'm saying here so forgive me for it,
28 but it must've been incredibly difficult to deal with the conflicting emotions of what
29 you're seeing, what your experiencing there. Did anything like this—?

30 JC: Well, I think that's been the trouble of my whole life, if you want to know the
31 truth. Yeah, there's the yin and the yang. I know it's necessary sometimes. There were

1 a couple of times that I was carrying a gun and could have shot somebody, not that I went
2 out looking for it or would've wanted to. I question myself many times. One time we
3 thought we had a swimmer and one of the guards had to turn on the light and he said,
4 "Here, here, Calamia, take the rifle. If you see somebody down there, shoot." I could've
5 done that. I would've had to have lived with the after effects and it would've bothered
6 me. Truthfully speaking, it would've bothered me, but at the time, I could've done it
7 because it would've been stopping somebody who potentially were going to hurt me and
8 the people that I work with and cared about there. There was a lot of atrocious things that
9 went on in the war, a lot that I was not privy to, and a lot, you need men in a war who
10 aren't so yin and yang or conscientious about their feelings. It's a dangerous animal
11 when they come back to society, but at the time you need that type of person. I guess that
12 although I'd like to portray myself as that, I was not that type of a person.

13 KC: Sure. Well, that takes us to a, I think a decent point in the interview to—

14 JC: Could you speak up?

15 KC: Oh, I'm sorry, I think that takes us to a good point here in the interview that
16 we can look at some more general things, more general interpretations of the U.S. in
17 Vietnam and your experiences in Vietnam.

18 JC: Okay.

19 KC: I'll ask you just a very broad question and feel free to answer it however you
20 see fit. What are your thoughts on why the United States was in Vietnam?

21 JC: At that time, my only thought of reason as to why the United States was
22 involved in Vietnam was to save the good South Vietnamese people from the incursion of
23 those bad nasty communists coming over the border, similar to Korea when the North
24 Koreans went over the 38th Parallel. That was basically it. As I told you, I had no other
25 real knowledge of Vietnam. I knew the French had been there. As I got older, probably
26 like most veterans, I started questioning the validity of our incursion there to begin with.

27 KC: In what ways?

28 JC: To be truthful with you, the more I think about it, I would probably have to
29 tell you we probably didn't belong there to begin with. If some of my history knowledge
30 is correct now the French after World War II went back into Vietnam as they did
31 Cambodia trying to reestablish their French rule and by that time, of course, the idea of

1 liberalism, I mean liberating the country, et cetera, had taken hold and they'd been
2 fighting Japanese and they weren't gonna put up with the French or us, for that matter. I
3 really feel that we allowed the French, and I by no means am I a lover of France.
4 They've got some real good things with their culture, but Vietnam was not one of them,
5 but I think we kind of, we didn't want to hear from the Vietnamese. I think, if I'm not
6 mistaken, Ho Chi Minh even asked for our assistance to keep the French out. We turned
7 him down and we went on the French side probably knowing that the Vietnamese would
8 eventually win their independence from France, but we wanted to watch it, hence, i.e.
9 Dien Bien Phu. After they were beaten and they finally withdrew, all we did was fill in
10 their shoes and start submitting, putting in more troops and more Americanism, if you
11 will, to support one government against another. True there's, by no means am I pro-
12 communist, I hope you don't think that or anybody that hears that, by no means am I pro-
13 communist or pro-socialist, but in the process, South Vietnam really was part of the north
14 long, long before that. If I'm not mistaken, they also had won the elections which I think
15 we tinkered with.

16 KC: Oh, the election of 1956.

17 JC: Yes.

18 KC: The U.S. wouldn't back the South Vietnamese participation so they didn't
19 exist in the South, as a matter of fact.

20 JC: Okay, but things like that as you start learning, you start questioning, I'm
21 sorry, you start questioning your government. You start, "Did they lie to me? What were
22 the real reasons?" Well, probably some of the more realistic reasons, the more I think
23 about it was number one, we wanted more warm water ports for our Navy. Number two,
24 we wanted I assume rubber, other natural resources. I don't know what the oil is like
25 down there, but if I'm not mistaken, they probably have oil as well, and it's a huge
26 potential for making money both legally and illegally, the narcotic trade. Just so many
27 things. And, of course, I think the idea of stopping communism, we were so fearful of
28 communism during the McCarthy period and throughout that it was kind of engrained in
29 my generation growing up. Again, I would still, if it were to really stop communism,
30 okay, but I don't think that was the only reason. I think that was ancillary reason, if you
31 want to know the truth.

1 KC: Well, what about the military aspects? Regardless of why the United States
2 was there, what do you think about the way the United States approached this conflict
3 militarily?

4 JC: Well, at the lives of fifty-eight some odd thousand human beings, good kids,
5 good soldiers, good sailors and so on who were there thinking they were doing the right
6 thing. We didn't fight the war as aggressively as we should have. First of all, there's no
7 way that we could've beat their guerilla tactics. The geographical area impeded fixed
8 battles to the point that we just couldn't do that. It was unrealistic. The next step
9 would've been, which they did for a while, is to keep bombing the, what is it, Hanoi trail.

10 KC: The Ho Chi Minh Trail.

11 JC: I'm sorry, sir?

12 KC: The Ho Chi Minh Trail?

13 JC: Yes, I'm sorry, the Ho Chi Minh Trail and also continuing to mine Haiphong
14 Harbor and bombing Hanoi. We were bringing them to their knees and we would have
15 won had we continued, but they wouldn't—it was making too much money back here to
16 quit the war, I think. Industry was great back here in those days. Of course, when the
17 war quit, petered out when you got out of the service there were no jobs, but militarily,
18 they should've gone in for the larger game, if you will, shipping, industry, that type of
19 thing.

20 KC: Sure. All right, well, when do you leave Vietnam?

21 JC: I left the ship, let me see, I have that here. I left a week or two early. They
22 signed me out off the ship on 15 July 1968. They had me arriving on the ship at 2 August
23 '67. I left a week or so early because the helicopter came in, they told me to get on it, so
24 I did.

25 KC: It was a good time for that, I guess. Where did you go there, after that?

26 JC: Tan Son Nhut and from there I flew back to California, and from California I
27 flew home.

28 KC: What were your thoughts on leaving Vietnam when you did?

29 JC: You know what? I was scared, I was thrilled and I also felt somewhat guilty.

30 KC: Why do you say you were scared?

1 JC: Well, scared because, for instance, on the flight back, two reasons, one was
2 psychological, the other physical. On the flight back, the helicopter was shot at and you
3 could hear these bullets breaking the sound barriers, they popped when they went by the
4 rotor blade. The gunner said, “Hey, something’s wrong with your engine.” He laughed
5 and said, “Hey, asshole, they’re shooting at us. You better sit on your helmet.” Well,
6 that was an awakener, too. Then psychologically fearful because you’ve been, it’s like
7 being in a prison and as a federal probation officer, parole officer, prior federal probation
8 and parole officer and pretrial officer I’ve been to some prisons. It’s quite similar in that
9 circumstance, you’re on a ship, you’re extracted from society, you’re only with several
10 people. When you get back into a lot of people moving around you, you don’t know how
11 to act. I found the only psychological problem I had that I recall coming back was I
12 would shake sometimes when I was in a crowd or when I would go up to pay for
13 something I purchased at the 7-Eleven or people would gather around me, I found myself
14 shaking. Some type of anxiety attack for some reason and that eventually subsided and I
15 no longer have that.

16 KC: How long do you think it took before it subsided?

17 JC: It was probably about three years.

18 KC: Really? You also mentioned that you felt a sense of guilt upon leaving,
19 could you explain that to me?

20 JC: Sure because I was coming home and those guys were still stuck there. You
21 know, it’s kind of a double-edged sword, ha, ha, I’m going home, but it’s not right. We
22 should all be going home, something of that nature.

23 KC: What did you hope to do when you got back? What were you going to do
24 with your life, as it were?

25 JC: Well, I still had two more years in the Navy. I ended up being transferred
26 later to the USS *Concord*, pre-commissioning duty in San Diego. While I was there, I
27 ended up getting married and then they transferred the ship to Norfolk, Virginia. My
28 wife flew there to meet me. We lived in a shack there in Norfolk. She got pregnant, had
29 a child and I was transferred to the USS *Amphion* which was a tender and that was better
30 duty. Although they worked me to death, the fact was, it hardly ever went anywhere. So,

1 I ended up my Navy career there in Norfolk, Virginia. I was discharged on November
2 21st or 22nd, 1970.

3 KC: What did you choose to do next?

4 JC: My wife was and initially, my wife at that time, I'm divorced now, but from
5 her, we moved to Fort Worth, Texas, where her family was. I tried to find a job, couldn't
6 find anything. I ended up finding a job working at a gravel pit, throwing rocks off of a
7 conveyor belt and eventually worked into driving heavy equipment for a couple of years.
8 Came back to El Paso, worked construction here, as well. Then in 1973, I had applied
9 earlier. I got a job as a clerk with the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) here in El
10 Paso and stayed with them six and a half years. While I was with them, I started college,
11 got my degree. I left the Bureau in '79, transferred to U.S. Probation and Parole, stayed
12 with them for ten years 'til 1989. There was a schism or split in the department to what
13 they called U.S. Pretrial Services and I went with them and was there with them for
14 fourteen years. It was still under the auspices of the United States Federal Court system.
15 I was a probation/parole officer-pretrial officer. We carried weapons, but we didn't make
16 arrests. We carried weapons more for self protection. Worked as a firearms instructor
17 with them part time. They sent me to firearms school, what have you. Then I retired in
18 2004. At fifty-seven, the federal government makes you retire if you're carrying a gun
19 and stayed home for about three months, had to do something. Had applied here as a
20 part-time bailiff which I had never done that type of work before. They started calling
21 me to work as a bailiff and I started working here as a bailiff part-time for about two
22 years. Some of it got slim. They wouldn't call anymore for a while because of cutbacks
23 and I found a job working at a funeral home for about six months and then came back
24 here. Then about two years ago, two years in August, I have been with this court on a
25 full-time basis.

26 KC: When you came back home in 1968—

27 JC: 1970, oh, you mean from Vietnam?

28 KC: Yes, from Vietnam in 1968 and this goes all the way through 1970, of
29 course, because the war's still obviously still going on as well. What were your
30 impressions of the anti-war movement in the United States? As someone who had
31 participated and had seen what you had seen, what was your impression of these people

1 who were so vehemently against the United States being involved in this conflict?

2 JC: It angered me. I was very angry with them for doing that. You don't have to
3 agree with your government's, you don't necessary agree with your government's
4 actions. Matter of fact, if you're just a yes sir man all the time, then you might as well be
5 a robot, but the fact is when you're under military jurisdiction and when you're in the
6 military, you do what you have to do. You're committed and it's your duty. I felt it was,
7 you know, it was a duty. I didn't like it. I have to be truthful with you. I was very self-
8 centered. I was extremely angry that I was over there for sometime while others were
9 over here doing nothing or rioting or running around with peace signs. Now the free love
10 movement and some of the go-go girls and the blinking lights, though, that was okay.

11 KC: A man has to pick and choose.

12 JC: Yeah, that's right. You gotta take a little from each. But as far as the actual
13 revolutionary or revolutionist idea and the Che Guevara flags and later on when I was
14 with the FBI it was the what, SLA, Symbionese Liberation Army group, those, they
15 angered me and it frustrated me and I had a very—it took me a long time to, I guess, I'd
16 say forgive those people. I really don't hold any grudges against them. If they're truly
17 believing in what they did, they did what they had to do, but at the time, I was very
18 angry.

19 KC: If you can give me just a broad impression, what were your thoughts on your
20 overall participation in the Vietnam War, either at the time or since then?

21 JC: My overall thoughts of my personal participation were, as I stayed there
22 longer, it was not enough. I felt that I had only kind of on the outside looking in type
23 thing. Perhaps I should've been engaged in, I was more of a noncombatant actually and
24 there's so many that were in actual combat so you feel somewhat, again the term guilty.
25 How would I have acted had I had been in a real firefight? How would I have acted had I
26 seen some of the horrible things that the other people had to see or live through? Perhaps
27 I wouldn't be so philosophical as I am today. Perhaps I would've been in a mental
28 hospital. Who knows? A lot of time working in the federal legal system, I saw a lot of
29 them come back that entered the system for drugs. They got hooked on heroin, they got
30 hooked on grass. It changed their whole life. It destroyed a lot of people, not just from
31 arms but psychologically. I was somewhat angry the government didn't help reinitiate or

1 debrief these people when they came back into society as what I see happening now with
2 these kids coming back from Iraq and stuff, which we're already starting to see a lot
3 come through the system, you know DWI, drunk driving, shooting up houses. It's having
4 an effect and I particularly feel that the kids today probably even have it worse than we
5 did in Vietnam because they had to serve, they're having to serve so many tours of duty
6 because there's not enough men. I don't know if that answers your question or not.

7 KC: No, no, no, it certainly does. Of course—

8 JC: I get very angry when I see young women in military, in combat. If they
9 want to do that, that's fine. That's not my reason for anger. I salute them and I give
10 them all the kudos in the world. Those are real human beings. What angers me is the
11 fact that this country allows this. It's okay for the girls to go join you guys and get your
12 ass shot off and blown and maimed while the rest of the country, again, back to this
13 Vietnam thing, sit here and worry about who's going to be the next teenage idol, or
14 dancing idol or American Idol on TV. To me, I'm sorry, it shows a real flaw in this
15 country. My father's generation was definitely the best generation.

16 KC: Well, Tom Brokaw certainly thought so.

17 JC: Yes, sir.

18 KC: Enough to write a book, anyway. Well, I think you've given me a pretty
19 good idea on what you came away from this with and what this meant.

20 JC: It made me grow up. It made me question my own mortality, of course. It
21 also made me realize that I wasn't the only guy around. I wasn't as important as I
22 thought. I wasn't so clever. I realized that I wasn't so tough at all, that a hell of a lot of
23 people out there that are really tough. It made me realize that war is a nasty, it's a nasty
24 reality but it's a necessary one, I'm afraid. I don't think that the world is set up where
25 you will, the Beatle's live in peace and above you there's only sky, et cetera. I think
26 that's a fantasy. Now, if we can reduce it, that's fine, but overall there will always be
27 wars. There will always be unfairness, but hopefully there'll always be enough good
28 people involved who carry on afterwards to maintain some stability in this world.

29 KC: Sure. Very well put. One last question I think I have for you here.

30 JC: Yes, sir.

1 KC: You've given me a very good idea of what the war meant to you personally.
2 What do you think the war means to this country? When someone says, "What was the
3 Vietnam War about for the United States?" what comes to mind for you? The legacy of
4 the war.

5 JC: Well, what was it about? I don't think we know. It was about a lot of things
6 to a lot of people. I don't think there's one specific answer other than the fact if you want
7 to throw out the old to stop communism. We probably helped in some way bring down
8 the capitulation of the former Soviet Union because they were pumping in so many arms
9 and stuff, that must've cost them a good penny during those times as well. In some small
10 way perhaps we did help bring down communism, too, but again to what end, you know?

11 KC: Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add, Mr. Calamia?

12 JC: No, not that I can think of. I really appreciate your time and interest and
13 taking your time to even ask me questions like this. I enjoy talking about it because it
14 shows that somebody's still interested out there. Not so much about me personally, but
15 the thoughts, the things that went on, how the war was for me as compared to somebody
16 else who had it much worse and believe me, I know I was very lucky. Then some of the
17 other Navy guys were much luckier because they floated off the coast, fired off a few
18 rounds and then went off and went to the Philippines or to Australia, you know.

19 KC: Right.

20 JC: But I wouldn't trade the experience for a million dollars, but I wouldn't want
21 to have to relive it.

22 KC: Sure. I understand. Well, that'll put the end to this interview, then. I really
23 appreciate you taking your time. I will ask you to hold on after I wrap up the interview.
24 We'll chat for a moment, all right?

25 JC: Okay.

26 KC: This will end the interview with Mr. Joseph Calamia.