

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES VELCHECK

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

MOLLY GRAHAM

PISCATAWAY, NEW JERSEY

SEPTEMBER 1, 2015

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Jim Velcheck. The interview is taking place on September 1, 2015 in Piscataway, New Jersey. The interviewer is Molly Graham. Last time, you talked about your friend who dared you to enlist in the Marines and you mentioned going to Parris Island and your Caribbean cruise. I want to back up a little and ask you, what were your first impressions of Parris Island? In the notes you sent me, you had talked about how you went with a group of Marines who were mostly from New Jersey.

James Velcheck: Yes. As far as I know, it was entirely from New Jersey. It was what they called a “named” platoon. It was named in honor of a World War II Marine, who was coincidentally named Raymond Marine; his last name was Marine. In my platoon book there’s a picture of him at the back, but there’s no real explanation about it. We were formed up here and went to the airport, Newark Airport, and got on a Piedmont Airlines airplane. I think Piedmont is what became or one of the ones that in conglomeration, became US Airways, I think. Piedmont Air was kind of a redneck airline, in that their planes weren’t the most dependable planes. We sat in Newark Airport for hours until they could finally get the plane to work. We flew down there. It was the end of August 1966. We were from, at least, Somerset, Middlesex, Monmouth, and Ocean Counties. There was a ceremony. I think they bussed us maybe to Trenton for a ceremony with this Raymond Marine. I think Trenton, but I’m not sure, and then back to Newark Airport. They bussed us around a fair amount before we finally got to the airport. It was at night when we landed at this little tiny airport adjacent to Parris Island in Beaufort, [South Carolina]. It was just a little--as a terminal building, it was a little cinder block building. I think all recruits end up arriving at Parris Island tired and at night because they do it on purpose that way. They like to have you vulnerable. Everybody gets bussed into Parris Island to the transit facility there, the incoming facility, reception facility. In front they have--you may have heard--the yellow footprints in platoon formation. The drill instructor comes on the bus yelling and screaming and profanity. It’s your first shock as part of the shock treatment that they hit you with initially. They keep you up all night; running you around, getting uniforms, getting your hair shaved off. It’s a real shock treatment. I don’t even know if we ever got to bed at all that night. It’s always been that way and still is that way, although there’s always been the internal Marine Corps regulation that they can’t be too rough on you, they can’t use profanity, they can’t hit you or put their hands on you. I know in the old days they hit you and put their hands on you. I don’t know if it’s mellowed now. It may or may not have, I don’t know, but even when you go back to Parris Island, or the recruit depot it’s called in San Diego, it’s the same thing when you go back for a reunion. You bus onto the base and the drill instructors come on the bus yelling and screaming but it’s a lot more gentle because there are wives and family along.

MG: You mentioned being stuck waiting in the airport for a long time.

JV: I called my father during those hours long wait because I don’t think he had come along to the ceremony. They figured it was nighttime already before we got out of Newark. He figured I was in Parris Island, but I called home at a pay phone from Newark. He said, “Oh, you’re allowed to call from Parris Island?” I said, “I’m not in Parris Island. I’m still sitting in Newark waiting for this stupid plane to get off the ground.” You know, prop plane. There might have been a couple of them even. I don’t know. There were about eighty of us in the platoon, so I don’t know if all eighty fit on one plane. I guess we probably did. It was a good size prop plane.

MG: How did your parents feel about you going off to the Marines?

JV: I don't remember them having a lot of heartburn about it. I know one of my aunts, Aunt Eileen, my mother's youngest sister, she was quite upset. In fact, the story that I heard was that she contacted somebody, a senator or representative on the federal level, and told them not to take me, but of course, it didn't have any effect. I don't remember my parents being really upset about me going in the Marine Corps. I mean, we weren't a real military family, in that there was nobody had a career, but my father was in the Army Air Corps during World War II. His family, there were, all together, four siblings of his that were in the service; three during World War II and one afterwards, the youngest one. On my mother's side, her brother was in the Navy and her two sisters' husbands, I think, also were all Navy. So, her side was a Navy family. No careers, but they did serve. Of course, the Marine Corps is a department of the Navy, otherwise known as the men's department. [laughter]

MG: This is jumping ahead, but it seemed like your father had a particular sensitivity to knowing what you needed while you were overseas in Vietnam. He sent you things such as socks and the Christmas tree.

JV: As much as he could he tried to give me what I needed. I probably mentioned this. There were things that I would mention in letters that he would send me that he could, but there were things I would mention in letters that he couldn't send me, but wished he could; things like McDonald's hamburgers and flush toilets, but he did send me a picture of the toilet in the bathroom. I don't know where that picture ever went to. Hopefully, it's in my stuff someplace, but I don't know where.

MG: Also, I read that you were seeing a woman who had a boyfriend in Vietnam and came back. He was quiet about his experience in Vietnam. I was curious about that relationship and wondering if you were seeing guys returning from war.

JV: When I was in?

MG: No, before you left.

JV: Okay. The Marines only went into Vietnam; combat troops went into Vietnam in March of 1965. I went to boot camp in August of '66. So combat troops had only been in for a year. I didn't know anybody, Marine Corps combat troops, who had been in. However, I think who you're mentioning is, Mike Tamaro, who had been in the Green Berets from South Bound Brook. While he was away--I don't really remember how serious the relationship was between the two of them. I'm trying to think of her name, her last name--Theresa Carlton, that was her name, also from South Bound Brook, where I grew up. I knew them both. Mike was a few years older than me, but Theresa was a year or two younger. She was going out with me. I don't have any recollection of them being engaged or anything, or even a particularly steady couple, but I do remember that suddenly, when he was about to come home, she said, "We can't go out anymore because Mike's coming home." [laughter] So maybe it was a more serious relationship. They

ended up getting married. I didn't really have anything to do with him once he came home, maybe because of that complicated relationship.

[Tape Paused]

JV: So, Mike Tamaro, he was a little older. I didn't have anything to do with [him]. I really didn't have any interactions with anybody who had been in Vietnam before I went into the Marine Corps. It's one of the things--I don't know if I mentioned this the first time--I have always been somewhat embarrassed about the fact that I knew nothing about Vietnam when I went there, as did, as far as I know, all or at least most of the other guys who ended up in Vietnam. A lot of us had never heard of it, never knew anything about it. The only thing I recall--and I probably have mentioned this before--was that a history teacher had said, in our junior year or senior year, in talking about what was happening in Vietnam, that the Buddhist monks were lighting themselves up like Roman candles, other things that were going on there, and the Green Berets who were there, and advisors who were there, that some of us may well end up there. Even that didn't make me look into it further. That was part of the problem with the whole war. I don't think any of our leaders really knew either. I mean, war was a thing for thousands of years in Vietnam, and the Vietnamese were always really tough. I know a lot more about it now. China, with the size and might of China, had war with Vietnam several times over the years and was never able to really conquer Vietnam. [Editor's Note: China conquered Vietnam four times in history. However, each time it ended with Vietnam regaining its independence, the last time being in 1427.] Of course, the French got defeated by the Vietnamese. [Editor's Note: The French were defeated by Ho Chi Minh and his Vietminh forces in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu. The battle ended the First Indochina War and caused the French to withdraw and give up its colony.] How we thought we could go in there--and we never really went in to win. [President Lyndon B.] Johnson said, "We're going to bomb them and they'll realize they can't win and they'll just give up." Well, that was never going to be true. Body count was supposedly so important. "Yes, we're killing more of them than they are of us." They didn't care about that. We're the only ones that did. They knew that as long as they were killing enough of us that we would eventually get tired of bringing home bodies and that we'd quit. That's the way it turned out.

MG: Prior to being called up, were you paying close attention to the news or getting a sense of what you were getting yourself in for?

JV: No, I went in under what was called the 120 day delayed entry program. You would think that once I had signed up and raised my hand and had a date to go, that I would have looked into it more, but I don't recall ever really researching what I was getting into, either Marine Corps-wise or certainly Vietnam-wise. I mean, now, [laughter] if I were to do it now, I would spend half my time or all my available free time in the library researching what I was getting into, but I don't remember doing that. Young and stupid.

MG: I think that does come with maturity. You have more at stake and a family to think about. What was the mood on the plane with that platoon from New Jersey? Were you anxious or excited?

JV: All of the above. Scared. [laughter] But really scared once we got there.

MG: Yes. You mentioned the drill instructors.

JV: No, but they're sweethearts now when you look back on it. I haven't been in touch with any of my--our platoon has never had a reunion. Some platoons do have reunions, Parris Island or San Diego platoons, and I see in the back of my magazines all the time that yes, this platoon is having a reunion. That platoon is having a reunion. There is one Parris Island platoon that also was a named platoon that went through, I believe, in 1962. I was '66. I've been in contact and interacted with that platoon. The Marine Corps League detachment that I belong to is the John Basilone detachment. [Editor's Note: John Basilone, a Marine sergeant, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions on Guadalcanal in 1942. He returned home a hero but volunteered to go back to the Pacific. He was killed during the invasion of Iwo Jima in February 1945.] John Basilone being the World War II Medal of Honor recipient from Raritan. The big parade every year, it's September 21st, I believe, in Raritan. It starts at either eleven in the morning or one, I forget which. If you google "John Basilone Parade" you'll find out all the information about it. There was a John Basilone named platoon at Parris Island. John Basilone Platoon #251, and they march and ride in trucks in the parade and I've gotten to know them through that. In fact, I had a message on my cell phone yesterday from Earl Miller, their coordinator. They have a dinner the night before at Houlihan's on Route 22 in Bridgewater, wanting to know if Sara and I, my wife and I, are going to be there this year for the dinner. So I got to check with her, and if we're going to be there, let him know. So I have had contact with that platoon. I'm on their e-mail list and all that. But my own platoon, I run into a couple of the guys over the years in my Marine Corps League detachment that meets in Milltown. One of the guys in the detachment is a guy from my platoon in Parris Island. With so many from this area it makes sense. It's not so coincidental that there would be somebody in the Marine Corps League detachment. I ran into one year ago at Lyons Hospital who had been in my platoon and I saw this guy who looked kind of familiar and, sure enough, he was in my platoon.

MG: Did you have options for enlistment? You had a two year enlistment, but could you have done something differently?

JV: Yes. The typical enlistment is a four year enlistment for either the Navy or the Marine Corps. They had opened up a three year enlistment probably in 1965, I'm just guessing, when the combat troops went into Vietnam and they needed to boost up the numbers of the Marine Corps. Then in '66, when I went in, they were pouring more troops in and I think based on their need, they opened up a two year enlistment to compete with the draft. My friend John, who said I didn't have the balls to do it, he was a two year enlistee also. I don't remember the details of why I chose two years. Whether it was because he did or because I just didn't want to commit to a longer period, I don't remember the thought process involved, but I did the two years. What I do remember is thinking, "Yes, if I live through it and like it, I could always stay longer. If I don't like it, then two years and out." Somehow, I ended up with that Caribbean cruise first, which I thought was unusual because it was the need in Vietnam that was their big need, not their need for people to go on a cruise. So by the time I came back from the cruise and had thirty day leave, I only had ten months left in the Marine Corps. I didn't think they would actually send me with only ten months when a normal Marine tour was thirteen months. A tour for

everybody else was twelve months, but they gave Marines an extra month because they knew Marines loved it so much. But they did. I heard subsequently that they sent people with as little as six months. But in ten months I came back. They didn't extend me. We had already passed the peak in August of '68 when I left Vietnam. The troops in Vietnam that had been going up, by August of '68, it had started to come down. So they weren't as desperate anymore. I told them I would stay in the Marine Corps for a guaranteed Mediterranean cruise when they gave me the reenlistment speech in Da Nang before I left. I guess it was Da Nang--Da Nang or Phu Bai, probably Da Nang. To their credit, this captain who was trying, without a lot of pressure, to get me to reenlist said they couldn't guarantee a Mediterranean cruise. Now, when I went in they were guaranteeing people anything that you wanted to hear. I shared foxholes with guys who were aviation guaranteed, whether that meant that they really didn't get what they were guaranteed or that they had tried it and washed out or whatever, I don't know. But I remember there were guys in our company--and our company had nothing to do with aviation in Vietnam, but they were aviation guaranteed.

MG: Were you promised anything that did not turn out?

JV: I was never promised anything. Today, I've worked with recruiters in recent years, and my cousin's son went in a year and a half ago. You pretty much know what you're going to do in the Marine Corps before you go in, and they really try to make it happen. Now, in his case, it didn't turn out and he wasn't happy with the Marine Corps the way it happened. I can understand that. He wanted to be an air traffic controller. He was trying to decide whether he should go into the Marine Corps and be an air traffic controller or go to a school that he knew of and researched that had a good program in teaching air traffic control. He chose the Marine Corps. In all the testing--see, he also went in under, I believe, a 120 day delayed entry program. It's a lot different today than what it used to be in my day. I don't remember having any real contact with any Marine entity during that 120 days when I went in. But today, they have a formal program where on weekends you actually go and participate in [local] activities with the recruiters. The ones going in that program are cooled "poolies." They're in the pool. As they get ready, as the drill instructors deem them ready to go to Parris Island and as the poolies themselves are ready to go, they go off to Parris Island. They have physical training. They get to learn about the Marine Corps, the Marine Corps gets to learn about them. They have various testing. He passed all the testing--color blindness and everything--to enter the Marine Corps. You would think that since he was being promised he would be in the school for air traffic control, they would have tested him for whatever is applicable to becoming an air traffic controller. He didn't find out until he was through Parris Island, through advanced infantry training and gets down to Pensacola where the school is for air traffic control. Then they give him this advanced color blindness test and he failed it. No more air traffic control. So the Marine Corps didn't do a good job there. He was very upset. He ended up spending months driving Marines and maybe Navy around to their medical appointments and he wasn't happy. However, then he did get into, first, a school for aviation supply in Mississippi, and then somehow that ended, and he is now in Okinawa, training to be a helicopter door gunner. [laughter] So, it's inexplicable the way the Marine Corps, and the military in general, functions. It's not the most sensible kind of stuff.

MG: It sounds like it has changed a lot between when you were in the Marines and today. Do you know why those changes took place?

JV: Well, the Marine Corps has done some improvement in the way they function, obviously, in that “poolie” program, because some, I’m sure, end up not going through. They sign themselves up, but if there becomes some kind of issue where either the recruiters notice something that they really don’t want them, or if the “poolie,” himself or herself, decides that maybe the Marine Corps is not for them, and there can be a justifiable reason. I mean, you’re signed up, so you’re going to have a good reason from your standpoint as to why you don’t end up going to boot camp. It seems to make a lot more sense, in that they do, I think, do a better job, and because they’ve always wanted to get--they’ve made steady improvement in the quality of recruits that they get. Back in my day and before, there were a lot of people who ended up in the Marine Corps as a result of a judge [saying], “Boy, you’re either going to go to jail or the Marine Corps. It’s your choice.” There was a lot of that, but that might result in not the best Marines. Now, the Marine of today is as good or better than any Marine in history, as far as the quality of who goes in, and the quality of the training is excellent. It really is.

MG: Getting back to boot camp, tell me about those first couple weeks. It must have been so hot in South Carolina in August.

JV: August in South Carolina. Yes, it was hot. They looked out for us in policy, philosophy. If it was a certain temperature--I don’t know what that temperature was. I don’t know if we ever knew what that temperature was, but they would raise the black flag on a special flagpole, and that meant that the drill instructors were not allowed to PT us, physical training, running, push-ups, calisthenics, that whole bit, because it was too hot and that wasn’t good for you. Well, in actuality, all it meant was that the drill instructors couldn’t work you outside, where it would be visible. They would work us inside. We would be in the squad bay. The squad bay was one big long building with a row of double racks on each of the long sides, with ten or twelve feet in between those rows of racks. We would be standing in front of our racks doing calisthenics. There was no air conditioning in those buildings, so it was probably worse to do the calisthenics inside than it would have been to do them at least in the shade outside. They would work us so hard on those days. I remember that when we got done with the calisthenics, they would assign a half a dozen recruits to go into the head and get buckets and mops, and come out and mop the deck because it would be totally wet and slimy with sweat. I specifically remember that.

MG: How did you fare with all that physical training?

JV: I was young and strong. I did okay, but being tall and skinny, 6’ 1” and three-quarters and hundred and forty pounds when I went in, I didn’t have a lot of upper body strength. Pull-ups and push-ups were somewhat problematic for me. I was able to do the minimum, but there were some guys there who could rattle off a hundred or more push-ups and twenty, thirty pull-ups. That wasn’t me. However, I could run. Running was something I could do fine.

MG: Were there some guys that could not cut it at all?

JV: Oh, yes. There were people who were overweight particularly. Underweight, they could build you up just through the normal training. Some guys who were underweight--I don't remember me being this, but they would get extra rations and such. But the ones who were overweight and couldn't hack it in the regular platoon ended up being pulled out and go to a special platoon, motivational platoon, whatever they called it. I remember the term, "Fat bodies," where they would work you particularly hard. During that period of time, the focus was not on making you a Marine; it was on shedding the amount of pounds that you needed to shed. So you were on a restricted diet and they worked you particularly hard I guess. I was never in it, but this was my assumption of what was going on in there. Some people were able to then join another unit because ours had already advanced, and kind of start over again. Others, I'm sure, were not able to be successful in that and were sent home.

MG: How would they wake you up in the morning?

JV: [laughter] O-dark thirty. The drill instructors would come in yelling. Some people have remembered it was 4:30 in the morning. I don't necessarily remember if it was that early, because we didn't have watches. There was no clock in the squad bay. They came in yelling and screaming, and banging on the GI cans--that's a metal garbage can. What they would do--you'd have like two minutes to get dressed in your little red PT shorts, a yellow t-shirt or whatever it was and your sneakers I think it was, and fall out in formation in the front. Then PT, and we had our flashlights. You very quickly learned to wake up just before they came in and go in the head, the bathroom, the restroom, and take a leak, because they didn't give you time to do that. You'd be out front in formation with your flashlight in the dark and they would probably do a roll call or something, make sure everybody was there. Then, on the parade deck, you'd be running. I'll never forget the sight of all these platoons running in different directions. What you would see was bouncing flashlights, everybody had their flashlight on. I remember, whether they did it on purpose this one time or whether it was an accident I don't know, but the drill instructors who were running our platoon and another platoon, the two platoons crashed head on. [laughter] It was confusion for a few minutes. Nobody was hurt, but drill instructors were running, yelling and separating these two platoons, getting us back into formation to continue running. I don't know how long we would run. Whether it was ten minutes or a half hour, or an hour, I have no recollection of that, but if you hadn't been to the head, it was painful. [laughter] Then they would bring us back and let us go into the head and do what we needed to do. Then, I guess right after that, they marched us off to the chow hall for breakfast, SOS.

MG: Yes. Shit on a shingle.

JV: Yes, and it was good.

MG: Yes. You described liking the SOS.

JV: Yes, it was creamed beef on toast. I liked it.

MG: Would you get to eat whatever you wanted because you had to bulk up a little bit?

JV: Well, I don't remember them giving me extra. I might have been borderline or whatever. I mean, I was able to keep up. The strength they were building, but the actual weight--most of the focus was on those that were heavy. I don't know. I assume that if you were particularly underweight they might have bulked you up. I think I heard that they did, but I don't remember that ever being done with me, not that.

MG: Would you have conversations in the chow hall with each other?

JV: No, not really. You ate and got out of there. You learned to eat quickly and get out.

MG: How were utilities distributed, when you got your uniforms?

JV: You went into this building probably that first night I guess it was. I'm sure it was. They would pile everything on you, give you a sea bag and all this stuff, and it was only an approximation of size. I guess, they were pretty careful about making your boots fit because your feet needed to remain healthy. But as far as the other stuff--and it was basically the utilities that they gave you initially. I don't know that there was ever really anything else that they gave you in that initial--I'm looking for something here in my pictures. I don't know if I ever showed this to you. I don't know where it is. But in talking about weight--I don't know. It should be right in here. There it is.

MG: Wow.

JV: That was in Vietnam, close to when I was getting out. I had been in for almost two years by that point. When I got out, I was twenty pounds heavier than when I went in. So I was about a hundred and sixty pounds here, twenty pounds heavier than when I went in.

MG: Wow, because you're pretty lean.

JV: But it's muscle.

MG: It also looks like you have a forty-pack.

JV: Yes, it was muscle. What was there was muscle. There wasn't an ounce of fat on me. As you can see, I haven't changed a bit. Did I show you any of these pictures, Vietnam pictures?

MG: Maybe some, but I would love to see some more.

JV: Yes.

MG: Did you have a bunk mate or a few guys who were in the same area that you would hang with in the barracks?

JV: Yes.

MG: That picture looks like you have been in Vietnam a little while.

JV: This was after that other picture was taken, the skinny one. I was still several months away from leaving then. This one, I was less than a month away from leaving. This is Hill 689. This is where we had--I don't use the term overrun because overrun implies that you're fighting them and they overpower you. We had gooks sneak in the line several times [in] the end of June and beginning of July. This was a night after the big one. We had a number of them get in the line. The two nights before this--you can't see this, but I have a little Band-Aid on my back where I got my wound two nights before this.

MG: Your Purple Heart.

JV: But that rifle--what?

MG: Your Purple Heart?

JV: Yes. That rifle I ended up bringing home and had for a couple years, but ended up selling when my daughter was born. So I came home in '68. She was born in January of '72. So four years later, I ended up selling it to pay for formula and diapers. I took it from one of the dead North Vietnamese who was there at that bunker. There were three of them that were dead. They're the three who had cut me off, and that's a whole story by itself. That was when after I left that hill and got back to Phu Bai and got cleaned up. That was my first moustache.

MG: It looks good.

JV: I was cute, wasn't I?

MG: Yes. [laughter]

JV: You're supposed to say like my grandkid, "Gee, what happened, peepaw?" [laughter]

MG: [laughter] Tell me more about life in the barracks. What would you do during any down time?

JV: I was thinking about this earlier. After this reunion that I just had--this reunion was of an infantry battalion, the battalion that I was in in Vietnam. We were combat Marines. So these guys that I just spent this last four, five days with were all combat Marines. We shared that experience. There's a big difference between those Marines that I just spent time with and the run of the mill Marines that you run into for the most part. The guys in my Marine Corps League, they're 1st Marine Air Wing, they're supply, they're this, they're that. They were in not during periods of war. Most of them were in between. Most of them are a few years older than I am and they were in during the lull between Korea and Vietnam. That was a twelve, thirteen year lull. Very few of them are combat Marines. The reason for that is because they say that out of every ten troops, one is going to be a combat Marine, the rest are going to be administrative, headquarters, supply, and all the supportive functions. So you don't have a whole lot in common with ninety percent of the other Marines. Now, that doesn't answer your question, but it gets to the point that being an infantry Marine, the whole time you were in, you don't have a whole lot

of down time. In Vietnam, there is some rear times, some barracks time, but there is no going out on liberty or anything. In Vietnam, I was there for ten months. I had twelve or thirteen operations that range from days to weeks in length. We were always busy. If we were in the rear, we were standing guard duty and things like that. I don't remember ever having mess duty in Vietnam, but I did on the Caribbean cruise. Now, on the Caribbean cruise, it was a mixture of work and liberty. There were guys that I would go on liberty with in the Caribbean. Weekends, when I was in North Carolina or in California--I was only in California for three weeks, but I was free on weekends. Three weeks of going over and two weeks coming back. But in North Carolina, I would sometimes--it was called swooping--go home for the weekend. Now, New Jersey was beyond the limit of what you were allowed to swoop on a weekend, but there were lots of people doing it. There was an assembly point on the base where if you were looking for a ride or if you had a car and were looking for passengers to share the expense, you would go there and hook up with people and rides. I'd come up the Turnpike and get off on Exit 9, New Brunswick, and my father would come and get me. The first time I did it--remember, I was a Marine--I walked home from the turnpike to South Bound Brook. I didn't make it all the way. I was hitchhiking, too, but it was the middle of the night, Friday night, Saturday morning I remember a guy picked me up. I told him what I was doing and then he took me home. My father said, "How come you didn't call?" Well, we didn't have cell phones and means of calling and all that. But I would sometimes come home. I remember also swooping to Cleveland, Ohio one weekend with a friend of mine, going to his house. It was where he was from. So we did have friends, people that we got friendly with. In Vietnam though, that was a dangerous thing to do because they might not be there tomorrow, but there were some guys I was closer to in the unit in Vietnam than other guys. Guys that you had something in common with, you couldn't help but form some kind of a friendly relationship with. Then, when they didn't make it, it hurt.

MG: This is jumping ahead, and I will jump right back to boot camp.

JV: I know the first time we did a lot of jumping around and it was, I think, my fault.

MG: I do not mind. Now it is my fault.

JV: This time I was determined that I would let you lead your interview and go wherever it was you wanted to go. So now, yes, I feel better that you're doing some jumping around too.

MG: Well, you bring up friendships. Something that I thought was so interesting that you said in the other interview was that really depending on where you were in your tour of duty, shaped how you formed friendships. You talked about short-timer's syndrome.

JV: That was that thing about in the war not wanting to get--well, the short-timer--no, that wasn't that thing. Short-timer was totally different, yes. Short-timer syndrome has to do with when you first get there, and you first see people die and get shot at and all this, and over a period of the first few months, you come to the realization and the acceptance of the fact that there's a good chance that "I ain't going to make it." That, in itself, doesn't necessarily keep you from forming relationships. It affects your behavior in that if you accept the fact that you're not likely to live through the whole thing, you take some chances and you do your job basically without reservation during the bulk then of the middle part, and towards the end of your tour.

But the short-timer part comes in as you start to get short. People would have these elaborate things, like a paint-by-numbers thing, of a helmet or of a Marine or of Vietnam, whatever, all these little things with numbers and you start filling in--I don't think I ever had one. Not everybody had one. But, as there's not too many filled in spaces left, you start to come to the realization, "Well, hey, I'm getting short and it looks like maybe I will make it," and you start getting careful. When you get careful, you may not be doing your job anymore, what you need to be doing. I knew a number of people--I don't know whether they were doing their job or not, but they end up getting killed in the last week either being over cautious or just being unlucky, or whatever. You tend to remember that. Here this guy was about to go home and he ended up dying. A guy from Gettysburg in particular, Gerard Jude Sanders was his name. He was someone I was somewhat close to. He was within days of going home. Sometimes it might be a good thing for you to be careful. Sometimes your sergeants or lieutenants or whatever, if they knew you were about to go home soon, they might hold you back from some of the more dangerous stuff, operations, or patrols or whatever. So it was different. As you got short, behavior was different in whatever way and for whatever reasons, because it looked like you might be making it.

MG: Getting back to boot camp, did you feel yourself changing over those eight weeks there?

JV: Yes, certainly. [laughter] Nobody comes out the same as they went in. I became a Marine. I was never the poster Marine, but they did put muscle on me and I came out a Marine. Yes, I changed a lot. I was not a Marine at all going in, but I was a Marine going out.

MG: You talked about the morning routine. What was the rest of your day like?

JV: It was a combination of classroom stuff and physical stuff. Marches, drilling, was the physical stuff, handling the rifle, the rifle drill and all that. The classroom stuff was learning about the Marine Corps, learning about the various weapons, taking the rifle apart, cleaning it and putting it back together, particularly the rifle. In boot camp, the rifle was the M14, which had been developed during or after Korea I believe. Then, when I went to advanced training in North Carolina--boot camp is South Carolina--AIT, ITR, and I don't remember--Advanced Infantry Training was the AIT. ITR was, I think the unit that we were in, Infantry Training Regiment. Advanced Infantry Training is what we were doing. So we were doing AIT and ITR, I think was the way that the designation was. There we learned about our specific MOS. Well, some more advanced basic stuff, but it was short for those people who were not going to be infantry. If you're not infantry, you did just the minimum of that because every Marine is a rifleman first, but then they would go on to their own schooling or whatever training for their specific MOS. Since I was infantry, I was not rifleman infantry, but I was weapons infantry. So, we would learn about the weapons, but, I think even basic rifleman had an introduction to the other weapons, the M79 grenade launcher, the M60 machine gun, things like that. But my MOS covered the 3.5 inch rocket launcher; the LAAW; the Light Anti-Armor Weapon, the one shot thing; gas of various types, tear gas mostly, not any of the really nasty stuff--we didn't use any of that--demolitions; flamethrower; 106 recoilless rifle. All that stuff was covered under. So, my MOS, military occupational specialty, was miscellaneous light weapons.

MG: Were you given your MOS at advanced training?

JV: No, I think before we left Parris Island, but it was one of the last things that we got was the assignment of our MOS, I think.

MG: Does that happen as a result of being evaluated in some way for what your skills are?

JV: You would hope. Maybe it was a dart board or maybe it was just, "We need this." But my friend John, the one who went in the Marine Corps that influenced my going in, he was also the one who had the surprise wedding that I was telling you about. He and I have been back in touch in recent years after having not been touch for many of the intervening years.

MG: Good.

JV: From the twenty-fifth anniversary; now they're up to their forty-fifth. We had some Christmas card interactions, was basically it, and most years we don't send Christmas cards, but they did for most years. His wife, I don't think ever really worked. My wife has always worked. We don't have time for Christmas cards.

MG: Before we started recording today, we were talking about hunting and using crossbows. Did any part of you think, "This is so cool; I get to use all these different rocket launchers," or was it more serious than that?

JV: Well, it was serious, but it was cool at the same time. Yes. When I went in the Army Reserve--I don't know if you ever mentioned this in the first interview, but after I got out of the Marine Corps in '68, I worked for a year, went to college for a couple years, and got married and started having kids. Then, in like '73, '74, the career wasn't going real well in work. I talked to the wife and I looked into getting back into the Marine Corps. I went to Newark and went through all the testing again. I remember sitting down with a captain afterwards. He said, "Well, you're eligible for anything that we have, so we'll take you back. But there's some caveats." I didn't want to go back into the infantry. There wasn't anything else that they had that was an overwhelming appeal to me. The appeal of going back into uniform appealed to me, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. Plus, the fact that he said it would take six months to process a new MOS for me of whatever I might end up going into, and I would have to do guard duty and/or mess duty at one of the main bases--Pendleton in California or Lejeune in North Carolina--while processing a new MOS. Plus, they had a formal process of where you lose a stripe every six months that you're out. So I had come out as an E-4 corporal, which after two years was okay. In fact, I made it in fourteen or sixteen months, something like that, because there was a considerable turnover in combat. Since I had been out six years or whatever, I would have to start back over as an E-1 private. They never make you go through Parris Island a second time because it would never be as--you'd laugh at the drill instructors, which would not be a good thing. [laughter] So I remember all these things as specifics of why I didn't go back in. And there was more. I got married in '71, had the first kid in '72, and my wife was pregnant with the twins when I was looking to get back in, in '73, because they were born in April of '74. So it was either late '73 or early '74 that I was looking to get back in. It was very weird. I remember telling the captain all about this and he said, "Well, that's not a problem. Officially, you're only allowed to have one dependent coming back in." I said, "What are you talking about

being 'okay,' because I got two already with two more on the way?" He said, "That's okay. We'll just put down that you have one." I said, "Well, what about housing?" He said, "Well, that's okay too. We'll just put you down for big housing in that you're anticipating having a big family." [laughter] So all of that stuff combined, I didn't go in. But my in-laws, at the time, lived in Piscataway and their neighbor was a colonel in charge of the 78th Division Army Reserve unit at Camp Kilmer, which was a training division. He said, "We'd love to have you." So, in, I think it was, either '73 or '74, I ended up going into the Army Reserve and becoming a trainer with them. Now, there were still a lot of guys in there who had joined the Reserve to get out of Vietnam, so it wasn't as military as the Marine Corps would be, but we'd go to Fort Dix and take over the ranges, train the recruits in the weapons that I was very familiar with. The range that I worked on was the M79 grenade launcher, M60 machine gun, LAAW, which was really my weapon, and Claymore mine. You know what all those are? Okay. So it was fun for me. You talk about fun and weapon; that was fun. We'd shoot demonstrations and then work with the recruits. They got to shoot most of these things. They didn't all get to fire a Claymore, but they did all get to shoot the M60, the Army recruits. Plus, we'd have some other groups come through too; ROTC groups and such. So, it was fun.

MG: Was Camp Kilmer still functioning as a base in the '70s?

JV: It wasn't functioning as a recruit training base or as an active duty base, but it did have the Reserve center there. Fort Dix was still an active recruit training facility then, although it isn't anymore.

MG: Would you ever get breaks or time off, maybe on Sundays, during boot camp?

JV: You would get breaks. I think each evening there was like an hour that they called a break, but what you were supposed to be doing during that break was spit-shining your boots, writing letters home. So it was not strictly a break. It was a structured break. Then Sundays, as I recall, there was church service in the morning that I don't believe was mandatory, but those who wanted to go to church service in whatever denominations they offered church services in were allowed to go. They couldn't refuse you to go to church service. I don't remember all the activities of Sunday afternoons, but again, I'm sure it was structured. That might have been the day that we did our laundry. The way that we did our laundry was that outside they had these concrete--you could call it a table. It wasn't as wide as this, but they were long. There were water spigots periodically on it. You had a scrub brush and you had a bar of lye soap. You spread your utilities out on this concrete table, wet it, put some soap on your scrub brush, and scrubbed your utilities and rinsed them off under the water. That part I remember. I guess there were clotheslines where you then hung them to dry. Now, I've been back to Parris Island; I was there twice last year. New buildings were built shortly after I had left. They were built with these facilities in the back of the building, but they don't use them anymore. It's now a laundry service. Just like in the mess hall, recruits used to have mess duty, and I guess I did. It used to be, in the old days before the Vietnam rush, boot camp was thirteen weeks long. Twelve weeks of training and one week of service. Service was utilitarian stuff around the base and mess duty. There would be recruits who were finishing up, just before graduation, who would be the ones putting the slop on your tray. But since then, that has all gone away. They don't do that and you don't scrub your own clothes anymore either. So that kind of stuff might have been done on

Sunday afternoon. Another break period that we had was smoke breaks. Periodically, I'm sure it was at least once every day, and it might have been more than once every day, the smoking lamp was lit. When the smoking lamp was lit--again, it was a structured activity--smokers would take a cigarette from their footlocker or wherever it was--presumably it was kept in our footlockers--and matches, and we would go outside. A drill instructor would march us outside where we would form the smoking circle around the butt can, the can with sand in it. On command "the smoking lamp is lit" we'd be standing in this circle. We'd light our cigarettes. We'd smoke them. Then the smoking lamp is out, we'd put them out in the butt can and march back into the squad bay or wherever it was that we had come from and gone back to. So it was a structured activity. So it was a break, [laughter] but it was a structured break. They don't do that anymore; there is no smoking in boot camp anymore.

MG: I would not think so.

JV: No, no. With the prohibition on smoking in society, it has extended to boot camp.

MG: Did you remain a smoker?

JV: I started smoking as about a fourteen year old. My parents didn't know anything about it. I used to steal cigarettes from the local Shop Rite. I am one of the ones who caused cigarettes now to be behind the counter because they used to be on an end cap and you could get to the back end of--the end cap would be a little bit wider than the regular shelf row. When nobody was around, you open the back of a carton and grab a couple of packs out and stick them in your pocket. I did that when I was a kid. I'd go to the towpath, between the canal and the river, and I used to smoke over there. Yes, there were a couple of us that did. Yes, I smoked for a number of years afterwards, but then I ended up quitting, not through any effort of will. I just petered off and I would then smoke when I was having a beer or at night or something. Then even that stopped. But then in 1999, when I ended up on that Philip Morris Project in Richmond--I don't know if I ever told you about, but I was down there for three and a half years full-time working; home being New Jersey, but working in Richmond. They would give free cigarettes to employees and contractors. I was a consultant contractor. Every two weeks they'd give us two cartons of cigarettes. My son and his wife smoked, so I'd give them cigarettes. My wife started up again during that period. I gave cigarettes to her and I started up during that period again for a period of time, but then I quit. But then the wife kept on smoking for some years after that before she finally was able to quit. My son and his wife both quit. So now there's none of us in the family who smoke. I was smoking a pipe for a while, until the granddaughters got on me so bad about evil tobacco, devil tobacco, that I ended up giving that up too. Not so much because of the granddaughters, but they did give me a lot of pressure. I think it was in 2011, when I went to Memphis on a project, I brought along my little smoking pack with me--a little pouch that I had my pipe cleaners and lighting materials and a pouch of tobacco and a pipe or two, all the paraphernalia that goes with smoking a pipe, and the bowl scraper, which was a pen knife. I had it all in my checked baggage that I took to Memphis with me. Then what I would do is once a month, I would fly home and just have a backpack and my computer bag with me to come home. Suitcase and all that stayed in my apartment in Memphis. I figured I'd go out on the balcony and smoke a pipe in the evening, which is what I would do here. I'd go sit on the deck or on the front porch in the evening and smoke a pipe. Well, I didn't do it down there. So I was there for

a couple months, eight months all together, and I would periodically take stuff home that I wasn't using and bring stuff back in my backpack that I was using. I didn't want to accumulate a lot of stuff. So I took the pouch of tobacco home in my backpack, not realizing that it has to go through security and here's this pen knife in there. [laughter] The TSA woman says, "You can't carry this on the plane." I said, "I never even thought of it." So they took my pen knife away from me. They've also taken things like my corkscrew for opening wine bottles away from me because it has a one inch blade on it to cut the foil. It's all so stupid. I remember in 2001, I was having a battalion reunion that was scheduled for the 20-something of September in San Diego. They, at first, were going to cancel the reunion because planes weren't flying for a while after 9/11, and they did close Camp Pendleton where we were going to go for our trip. But then they opened flying back up and they opened Pendleton back up, allowed us access. So we did the reunion, yes, a couple hundred of us. I remember flying out there. They took my fingernail clipper away from me on the plane, but my roommate--because I was working in Richmond at the time, they put us up in two bedroom apartments--he flew to Portland, Oregon all the time because his girlfriend was there. They paid for a trip wherever we wanted to go basically every two weeks. He flew so often that they upgraded him all the time to first-class. Same time they took my finger-nail clipper away from me, they gave him a real knife and fork to eat his meal with, because in those days they were giving you real meals too, such as it was. It was shortly after that they started talking about arming pilots. I said, "Well, they've got these thousands of confiscated fingernail clippers and they're such dangerous weapons, they should just issue a couple of them to the pilots and they can protect the plane with them." Well, what they did was--we can be so stupid as a society. What they did was they confused something that could do harm to somebody with something that would be capable of being used to take over an airplane. Now, those razor cutters that were used to take over the airplanes on 9/11, yes, you could do a lot of damage with them and you could kill people and you might be able to still takeover an airplane with them. Although, I say that with the way people were looking for anybody who wanted to take over an airplane after that and willing to fight them, it would take at least a dozen terrorists armed with razor cutters to take over an airplane after 9/11. A fingernail clipper was never something you could take over an airplane with, even pre-9/11. You could poke somebody's eye out with it, but you could poke their eye out with a pencil or your finger. So it never made any sense to take away things like fingernail clippers and one inch blades on corkscrews and stuff like that. What was your original question? [laughter]

MG: I read that someone during boot camp had gone AWOL.

JV: Yes, he went off into the swamp. Parris Island is surrounded by swamp, mosquitos and alligators. He was out there for a number of days. I understand they finally found him and he was pretty well bit up. I don't know that he was alligator-bit, but he was insect-bit. I don't know whatever happened to him. He may have gone off to the brig. He may have been sent home. I don't really know. But the way that I initially found out about it was in the middle of the night. They always have somebody outside guarding different posts, and they might be recruits. They had internal guarding going on and that I remember doing. It was called fire watch, and that was recruits. Who was doing the guarding outside, I'm not sure, but I remember being awoken during the night by hearing a guard out there calling out, "Corporal of the guard, post number four," or whatever. That was how word was passed to the corporal of the guard that there was something going on. That was when this guy took off. I don't think he was from our platoon.

There were four platoons in each building. It was an H-shaped building. The middle part of the H was two stories of administrative offices. Two stories, the long pieces of the H, was four platoons, making up a recruit company with one platoon in each of those four squad bays. Internally, what was going on the fire watch was they would have a schedule for each night of what recruit was doing whatever one or two hour period of walking through the squad bay keeping an eye on things, making sure that there was no fire presumably. When your watch was up, you woke up the next guy, make sure that he got up, got dressed, you give him whatever it was you had in the way of equipment if there was equipment. ... So that was the kind of guarding that was going on. There was that outside stuff and inside stuff. It was through hearing the outside calling corporal of the guard that somehow we ended up hearing something about this guy, but I don't remember any details about what or how we might have heard about him.

MG: Did you ever hear of anybody being sent to Leavenworth?

JV: No, no.

MG: I am missing anything about graduation day from boot camp? What that was like? I know your father came to visit.

JV: My father came for it. Nobody else came. Well, they ended up going to Washington D.C., but for whatever reason, I don't know why she didn't come. Nobody else from the family came for whatever reason. Now family day is Thursday and graduation is Friday at Parris Island. Whether there was a separate family day then or not and then graduation the next day, I don't really remember. I remember eating a meal with him and I was telling him about how we're forced to eat so fast because we're in there for just a short period of time, but then that meal that I ate with him, I guess it was in the mess hall, I slowed down because it wasn't necessary to eat fast. I don't remember a lot about the time and I don't think he took any pictures of it. Now I'm taking pictures all the time. Just of these last two weeks I downloaded a hundred and ninety pictures; deleted some of them, but I always have the camera with me. I don't remember having or seeing any pictures that he took. So I don't remember a whole lot about it, but he was there.

MG: After graduation, did you go right to Camp Lejeune or did you have some time off?

JV: The next day after graduation they put us on busses and took us to ITR, AIT, where things were a little bit looser because now we're Marines and yet we're still in training. So we weren't full-fledged Marines as such. We did get more respect and the treatment that we got from the trainer--we didn't have drill instructors. The training that we got from the people who were in charge of us there, it was more respectful to a degree.

MG: That was something else that was interesting to me. I read that you were never called a Marine until graduation.

JV: Right. We were told while we were recruits that--and they used to call us ladies. They told us we were lower than a whale shit and that's on the bottom of the ocean.

MG: Pretty low. [laughter]

JV: Pretty low. [laughter] So, yes. It was more respectful once we got to Camp Geiger, which was the part of Camp Lejeune where we did that advance training.

MG: Does finally being called a Marine give you a sense of pride?

JV: Oh, yes. Sure. Most definitely.

MG: Describe Jacksonville, North Carolina.

JV: Well, the town that's right outside Parris Island. Other than landing at the little airport there, we never did get into Beaufort. In Jacksonville, North Carolina, I don't think during AIT, ITR, we ever got into town. However, after AIT was finished, came home for thirty days leave, and I got home as I recall on Christmas Eve of '66. But then in January, late January I guess it was, my next orders were to go back to Lejeune and join a regular company there. Then we did get into Jacksonville, I guess, but I don't really remember much about it. We would take a bus, I do remember that. There was a bus that would go from Lejeune into Jacksonville to take people there on liberty. I don't think we ever went in on a weeknights. But on weekends, we would go in and I don't remember what we might have--we must have had to have something in writing, a liberty pass, whether we were allowed to go in for a whole weekend or not or it was a daily thing. I don't remember ever spending the night in Jacksonville. So I think it was just a daily thing. Frankly, I don't remember really anything about activities in Jacksonville. I don't even remember if we were drinking. I remember drinking in what they call the slop shoot, which was the canteen or the beer drinking facility, but as I recall there was only beer on base. It was that near beer, which had a reduced alcohol content. Called near beer. Maybe equivalent to today's light beer or something, I don't know.

MG: That first experience at Lejeune, what was the training like there? Were you doing amphibious training? How is it different than boot camp?

JV: Yes, it was quite different than boot camp in that we would go--coastal Lejeune was pine forest and I remember spending time out there overnight, you know, pup tent kind of thing. I don't know for how many days at a time, but I know we spent a lot of time out there. It was more on tactics; fire team maneuvering and operation war games sort of thing. So it was quite different from boot camp. Also, I'm sure there were ranges where we would--this is where we would fire the other weapons, the 3.5 inch rocket launcher and machine gun and all that kind of stuff. We didn't do that in boot camp. It was only rifle in Parris Island, but it was these other weapons in Lejeune, both ITR and afterwards, because then it was more MOS training. We'd fire the flamethrowers and all this other stuff. At some point, I don't remember whether it was Parris Island or ITR, we also went through the gas chamber, where you'd have a gas mask on and go into this little building. They'd release tear gas and you had to take off the gas mask so that you became familiar with the effects of tear gas.

MG: Which were?

JV: Coughing, tearing. It was terrible, but after a few seconds of that, you marched around singing the Marine Corps Hymn without the gas mask on and then they let you go out. It was a real mess. Whether that was Parris Island or ITR, I don't remember. For Lejeune, that was our first exposure to C-rations. There's something called K-rations, which also comes in cans but that's larger cans that would be used in the mess hall. The C-rations are individual meals in a box and it was composed of a main course, a supplemental, a dessert and an accessory pack. You can look all this stuff up online and see all the details of it. In the accessory pack, were a little tiny roll of toilet paper, a pack of matches, a two pack of Chiclets, a three or four pack of cigarettes--Chesterfield Lucky Strike, Pall Mall. Presumably, in the newer C-rations, which I got in Vietnam, there might have been filter cigarettes in that little pack. I don't remember. But I do remember specifically in North Carolina, in training, in our first exposure to C-rations, it was old World War II leftovers. Stamped on the side of the box, [it] said, "1945." This was 1967, early '67. So we were smoking cigarettes that were twenty two years old. You had to be a Marine to smoke those. They weren't our first choice of cigarettes, but when we ran out of whatever we might have had in the way of regular packs of cigarettes, we would smoke those accessory pack cigarettes. Yes.

MG: Would it give you kind of a connection to World War II?

JV: No, not really. No. No, not really. Although, there must have been some training--I never felt any real connection. I don't remember learning about John Basilone and all that in training, but today, the recruits all know who John Basilone was. At Pendleton, there's a road called Basilone Road. I'm sure we learned about some of the others, Dan Daly and General Lejeune and all that. I don't remember. There must have been--yes, the Marine Corps is all about tradition. So yes, we knew we were upholding a tradition, but whether having a real connection with World War II Marines, I don't remember having that much of a connection with them.

MG: There was more classroom instruction at Camp Lejeune, as well.

JV: Oh, yes. I'm sure there was. I don't remember details of it, but I'm sure that there was, yes.

MG: How long were you there before going home for thirty days?

JV: The AIT, ITR training, I was home Christmas Eve. So, you could calculate. I got to Parris Island, I believe it was on the 31st of August and was there for eight weeks. So, to the end of September, the end of October. I must have graduated around the end of October to ITR. Was then in ITR November and December. So it was another six, seven weeks, because Christmas being the week before the end of December. I would say six or seven weeks. Then I was home for thirty days. It was the end of January that I went back to Lejeune. Then we went, as part of that company, which was G Company, Golf Company 2-2, 2nd Battalion--it was actually 2-2-2; 2nd Battalion 2nd Marines, which is shorthand for 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, 2-2-2. When I went to Vietnam I was 1-1-1. So it makes it easier to remember. [laughter]

MG: Then how is that Christmas and New Year different knowing that the next year you would be going overseas?

JV: Well, I didn't know I would be going overseas. I assumed that I might. They kept telling us in boot camp and ITR that yes, we'd be going to Vietnam and that some of us would die. I don't remember having any feeling about it one way or the other really. On the cruise that we went to as a part of 2-2, of the Caribbean, I went through the Green Beret Jungle Training School in Panama for a week or so. We lost a guy there on night maneuvers with triple canopy. He fell in the river. I don't know if they ever recovered his body. We rebuilt bunkers, filled sandbags around Guantanamo Base in Cuba, pulling apart the old rotted sandbags of bunkers to replace them with new ones because it was a burlap, canvas kind of material. There were scorpions under the sandbags. In California, when I then got there, it was three weeks of tune up training before I went to Vietnam. At night, there'd be tarantulas out in the desert. Yes, big hairy spiders that big. You think daddy long-legs are bad. [laughter] So on the cruise I had liberty in San Juan several times and St. Thomas in the Virgin Islands. You were on ship a lot. It was a combination [of] training plus presence of US might in the Caribbean.

MG: Were you just with Marines or were there other troops there?

JV: Well, on the ships, of course Navy crew and Marine baggage, but I remember we had a combination of war games in Puerto Rico. We'd be climbing the mountains in Puerto Rico in simulated warfare. There were mountains in Puerto Rico. I recall that there were other services there. I don't remember any specifics, but I remember that it was combined training with maybe Army and Air Force also, I think. I don't think we interacted with them directly, but I remember there were other troops involved in this practice playing at war stuff. Also, there was some issue. There was something going on in, I think, the Dominican Republic, where we almost went ashore. This was in spring into the summer of '67. You could probably look it up to see what was going on. I don't remember what was going on then, but we didn't end up going ashore. I remember that there was a possibility of going ashore for some kind of police action or something. Our crew was just after the action in the Dominican Republic.

MG: I am curious about this Caribbean cruise. How did you get ready for it? How did you spend January, February, March?

JV: Well, I told you I was in the pine forest maneuvers and C-rations and all that. You had asked me about amphibious stuff and I didn't mention that, but yes, to go back to that, we did do practice during that period on ship, and going out to sea and climbing down the nets into landing craft. So we did do that amphibious kind of training also, during that January, February, March. Well, not January, because I was home in January. It was the end of January that I went back to Lejeune. So it was February, March. Probably sometime in April or May is when we left on the cruise. As I recall, it was about three months in length. So if it was May, June, and July--and then another month's leave. I remember having quite a bit of leave. Home in August. Pendleton in September. I got to Vietnam the end of October. So roughly, that was the kind of time period we're talking about.

MG: Tell me more about that month you spent at home. When I go home to Maine I make sure I see my favorite people, I eat a lobster roll, I go to my favorite Thai food place. Were you soaking up everything you could about New Jersey and home life before heading out again?

JV: I think today young people are somewhat more sophisticated and mature about some things at least than we were. Remember, I was nineteen at the time. So that was still pretty young. Even at that, I was a year older than most of the other guys in boot camp and ITR. Most went in right after high school, but I worked for a year before going in. I had just turned nineteen, August 22nd, and then a week later, left for Parris Island. So, I was twenty when I came home from the cruise, in August of '67, which is pretty young. So, in some ways, I was still a kid. I don't remember doing--I certainly didn't go to my favorite Thai place because they didn't exist in those days. I'm sure that I went to the place called the Green Leaf, which was the corner hangout. It was kind of like--did you ever watch the series *Happy Days*?

MG: Yes.

JV: It was more like that. But of course, it wasn't as entertaining as that. But there was a counter. We would drink vanilla cokes and hang out. I don't remember doing a whole lot of other stuff. Spending time with family and going to the Green Leaf, those are things that I'm sure I did on leave. And spending time with friends, but I don't really remember any specifics. I was never a ladies man, in that I never did a lot of dating when I was a kid. I was introverted and shy. I'm much less shy now. You can ask my wife about that; she'll tell you. When we first got married, we were both quite shy and quiet. In many ways, she still is, but I'm not. Over the years I have become somewhat more sociable and extroverted. But in high school, I spent my time fishing and hanging out along the canal, trapping muskrats, hunting in the lowlands, shooting rabbits and pheasants. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of dates I had in all of high school. Now, I used to go to the high school dances sometimes; the boys would be on one side of the auditorium and the girls on the other side. I don't think it's that way anymore. I think there's a lot more interaction and sociability these days. I can remember--I've told people this. Recently, I've mentioned this. I was telling the guys at the high school reunion that we had. We had a high school reunion in May that I--we got together before May. I don't remember when we had gotten together, but I have since been back to my fiftieth high school reunion in May. I also told the guys this last week when I was at the battalion reunion. I had a lot of girlfriends in high school; they just never knew it. [laughter] I liked the girls, but it was from a distance. At these dances, I remember dancing with a couple of girls, but it never went beyond that. I remember in high school study hall there being couple of girls; we would make eye contact across the big room and kind of stared at each other, but never went beyond that. There was a couple of girls I would walk home with from high school, because I walked from South Bound Brook to Bound Brook because South Bound Brook never had and still doesn't have a high school. But as far as dating, no. My senior year I might have had a couple of dates. I could remember one girl I dated once or twice, but it never went anywhere. I don't even remember who she was. So I missed out on a lot. I think I was turning twenty three, had been home from Vietnam for two years, when I then got engaged to my wife and got married six months later. So there was just that two years between coming home from Vietnam in the Marine Corps and getting engaged that there were two girls that I went out with, one from Newark and one from Peapack-Gladstone that I went out with for a period of time. But that was basically it.

MG: Is there anything we are missing from your second time at Lejeune, the training there or the people you met?

JV: There were friends. There was the guy from--there were a number of us who had been together in AIT and probably in boot camp, although I don't remember anybody specifically. I don't remember anybody from boot camp that I went together with all the way to Vietnam, but I think there probably were people from AIT, ITR, who then came back to 2-2 and maybe even to my company, Golf company. But then I know there were people from golf company who I went to Vietnam with who ended up in Delta Company in Vietnam. Specifically, there was Carlos Fisher and there was Jamie Vasquez, who had been on the cruise with me who were also in Delta Company with me, and probably others, but those are two that I can remember right off hand. I was in a fairly friendly with them and others from the cruise time--the guy from Cleveland, Don Wagner--to the point where even some couple of years after I got married--I think we had Darcy at that time--my wife and I ended up driving out to Cleveland and connected with Don Wagner. Then I've since lost contact with him. There isn't anybody else from the cruise--well, that's not totally true. Carlos Fisher from North Carolina, he was at the Reno reunion six or eight years ago, eight or ten years ago, whatever it was. Jamie Vasquez was a machine gunner with third platoon in Vietnam, who had been on the cruise with me. He went on to become councilman and Deputy Mayor in Jersey City. Did I mention him in the first interview?

MG: Off the record. He is someone we might want to interview. (Editor's reminder: Velcheck's corrections state that Jamie Vasquez died two years ago (Likely 2016) from the point when these corrections were made.)

JV: Yes, I haven't had contact with him in years, but I keep running into people from Jersey City who knew him. In recent years, I've been told that he wasn't doing real well. Somebody told me he might come to this reunion that we just had, but he wasn't there. I haven't had contact with him myself in years, but I do have something I wanted to give him. This neighbor over here, the guy that owns the house owns the Portuguese barbeque on Clinton Street in South Plainfield. He's Portuguese. The woman who lives there is Brazilian--same thing--and works for him in the Portuguese barbeque restaurant. She had told me a couple years ago that there's a guy [who] comes in there who knows Jamie Vasquez. I wanted to give her, to give to him, to give to Jamie, a DVD that I have of the New York City "welcome home" parade in 1984. I'm in it. It's a professionally produced DVD. Well, it was a VCR, but I had it transferred to DVD. I'm in it in two places and Jamie Vasquez is in it, marching behind a banner saying, "Jersey City Vietnam Veterans." I never did give it to her, to give to him, to give to Jamie.

MG: Well, maybe it is not too late.

JV: Maybe it is not too late, yes.

MG: When were you told that you would be going through the Caribbean?

JV: Sometime during the training, I guess we knew. Sometime after having gone to 2-2, golf company, we knew we were getting ready to go on this cruise. But exactly when we found out about that, I don't know and I couldn't tell you.

MG: What was your feeling? Were you thinking, “All right, I’ll go to the Caribbean instead of Vietnam?”

JV: Yes. At some point, I guess there must have been some surprise, relief, whatever, about learning about going on a cruise, maybe even as far back as we got the permanent assignments at the end of ITR, AIT, because that’s when I would think that it happened. We got our MOS’s at the end of boot camp. We got our permanent orders for next duty station, I would think, towards or maybe right at the end of AIT, ITR. So then when I went home on leave I knew I was going back, at least to 2-2 or at least to Lejeune, and maybe even knew what company I was going to. I don’t know. When we found out about the specifics of the cruise, I couldn’t tell you. When I found out when the cruise was going to end and when the next duty station, the next orders were going to happen, I don’t know. What I do remember is that toward the end of the cruise, they asked for volunteers to go to Vietnam. So by the end of the cruise we knew there was going to be something next. We were going to be leaving and going on to something next. I remember thinking and calculating that I only had ten months left in the Marine Corps after the end of the cruise and another thirty day leave. Is that showing up on the tape? [Editor’s Note: Mrs. Velcheck’s pet bird is chirping.]

MG: It might. [laughter]

JV: [laughter] Did I tell you last time that that is the world’s smallest parrot. It’s not a parakeet.

MG: No.

JV: Yes. The wife says “paralet” or something like that. I don’t know what it is. It’s her bird. All these animals are hers. The goats and the chickens were mine, but these are hers and I tend to not hear it anymore.

MG: The bird is giving its oral history, too.

JV: Yes, yes. At the end of the cruise they asked for volunteers for Vietnam and to actually sign up on this thing as a volunteer. We were all gung ho. We were all trained and that’s what we were training for. I remember thinking, “I’ve only got ten months left after we end the cruise and go home on thirty days leave. A tour is thirteen months. So, they’re not likely to send me.” Yet, I’ve subsequently heard that they sent people with as little as six months. We got our orders and I knew I was going to Vietnam. Now, I don’t have any recollection of what my initial response was when I saw Vietnam, but I do remember that when I went home on leave, I didn’t tell them that I was going to Vietnam because, of course, they asked me right away. “You’re on thirty day leave. Where you going next?” All I told them was I didn’t know what was coming next but that I was going to California, but they knew. The orders said “WESTPAC” and I think I told them it could be anywhere around the Pacific Rim.

MG: Yes. For the cruise, was your first stop Fort Sherman?

JV: Oh, I don’t have any recollection of what the order of cruise was. We were there for about three months. We spent a considerable amount of time at sea. The places that we were, were

Guantanamo, Cuba; Puerto Rico, both liberty and training; Vieques Island, which is an island off the coast of Puerto Rico; St. Thomas; Curacao, which is in the Dutch West Indies off the coast of South America. Some of these places we went back to a couple of times. Some of these places we spent a fair amount of time at. Some of these places we just went to for liberty. Old San Juan, Puerto Rico [and] St. Thomas, I might have been there for liberty a couple of times. Curacao, I think I was only there once for liberty. Vieques Island, we might have been there a month or several weeks, because I remember having mess duty there. Fort Sherman, that was a period of time that might have been a week long, might have been three or four days. I don't really have any recollection. I know that I never took a ship through the Panama Canal, but they had a train that basically went parallel to it. It was not just a canal dug all the way through. It was some canal dug, partially lakes. But I remember taking the train from one side to the other, and I don't remember which side--one was Panama City, the other side was Colon. I don't remember which was which. I think Colon was the more depraved city, in that cab drivers would have rolodexes of obscene shows you could go see, things like that. I partook of some of that. In Cuba, you didn't get off the base at Guantanamo. You didn't. I remember Guantanamo being fairly self-contained. Because of that there was everything there you need, because permanent people had their families there. There were stores and baseball fields and stuff like that. Old San Juan, some of that was pretty depraved too. There were bars there with activities going on. [In] St. Thomas, I remember meeting a girl from Minneapolis, Minnesota, who I think worked for an airline and she could get free or cheap tickets. So she and her friend would periodically come down there to St. Thomas. I remember spending some time with her, nothing much. So I have basically good recollections of the cruise. I don't remember any major problems there. It was training and liberty. It was all pretty good.

MG: Where did you do the Green Beret training?

JV: That was Fort Sherman, yes.

MG: What was that like?

JV: It was kind of a jungle setting with triple canopy jungle, and we would do some night maneuvers there. It was pitch black down on the ground under that and it wasn't flat. There was some swamp there, but it was also slippery hills, you had to go up. It was a mess. Like I say, we lost one guy in the river on one of those night things. When you're moving through that jungle, you basically had to have your hand on the shoulder of the guy in front of you. One night, I lost contact with the guy in front of me, I led the rest of the group off in another direction and we didn't come out until daylight. It was my fault. Although, I don't recall anybody ever finding out about that, [laughter] that it was my point in this thing that separated. Also remember some simulated rice paddies that we had to slog through, maybe knee-deep or so. I remember seeing a snake in one of those that was coming towards me. It was a small thing, a water snake of some sort. I remember pushing it away with the butt of my rifle. We got introduction to exotic food. We ate what they said was--a taste, kind of like what you get in Costco, of alligator and snake and maybe some other stuff. Maybe it was chicken, who knows, but that's what they called it.

MG: Was the idea also to acclimate you to the climate that you would experience in Vietnam?

JV: Maybe because it was similar, yes. I remember there was some simulated villages setup that might be similar to a village--clearing hooches and things like that.

MG: Were you practicing doing some digging in?

JV: Don't remember whether we actually dug holes either in North Carolina or on the cruise, or even in that tune up training in California. I don't remember digging holes, but I do in Vietnam. We dug lots of holes in Vietnam. Some of that ground was real hard. The guys and I were talking about this one instance where we were moving from one hill to another in Vietnam, the northern part, not far from Con Thien or Khe Sanh or one of those areas. It was going to be a two day move, so we went half one day. We dug in for the night on this little rise. Whoever it was who was digging in--because you basically dug two-man positions. You didn't sleep in it; you slept next to it, but there was supposed to be one guy awake all the time while the other was sleeping, and it went back and forth. It was dry, hard, ground, and we dug down about six inches and an outline about four feet by two feet. That's as far as we got and we kind of slowed down. Helicopters had delivered chow and they delivered cases of C-rations, more than what they normally would have delivered, so that it was one whole case for each position. So we were looking forward to being able to pick and choose our favorites out of the twelve meals that are in a case of C-rations. It was sitting behind where we were digging the hole on this little rise about ten or twelve feet back from the hole. We got hit with incoming mortars that walked along our position, along the one part of the perimeter. This other guy and I, whoever he was, we got everything important down below ground level in that hole, and a mortar round landed about ten feet behind that case of C-rations. You're shaking your head. [laughter] Now, I can laugh about this stuff, but of course, it wasn't funny then. A mortar round landed about ten or twelve feet behind where the case of C-rations was, maybe twenty feet from us, and several pieces of shrapnel punctured the case of C-rations and got all the good cans of stuff. The can of pears, the can of peaches, the beans and franks that everybody always liked. So, we lost some of our favorite cans, I remember.

MG: That is a tough break. Did it affect morale?

JV: Yes, we continued digging after that. We dug the hole down the rest of the way, whatever depth it was we needed the thing. So it was kind of a motivator to get digging, I don't know. I don't remember that affected morale as such, although we were not happy about our favorite stuff getting hit. I mean, if we took everything like that as a hit to our morale, our morale would always be going down because there were always things that you could say--I mean, people you knew being killed and all this kind of stuff. Yes, it all impacted your morale, but you got over it because you knew you had to get over it. You continued with what you had to do.

MG: You did not really have a choice.

JV: Right.

MG: When you were finally getting called up to go to Vietnam, you first reported to Camp Pendleton in California.

JV: Yes, at the end of the cruise--I mean, I had my orders to Vietnam; I just didn't tell the family that I was going to Vietnam. It wasn't until the final days before I actually left for Vietnam that I told them where I was going. I left a couple days early for whatever reason. I don't remember why. I got to Los Angeles, and I spent at least a day in Hollywood before reporting to Pendleton. I lost my main album. Did I tell you? Two years ago, I lost my main album of photos, but I have most of them in the computer. I have another small album that's in my stuff someplace that I have pictures of the cruise and of the time of Pendleton. I have a picture or two in there of the hippies that I spent time with and spent the night with. They put me up for the night [in] Haight Ashley. But we were hanging out on the street, and then I reported to Pendleton the next day. I got into Pendleton, showed my orders at the front gate, I guess, and they told me where to go and how to get there. I don't remember what conveyance I was using. I don't remember how I got to Pendleton, but I got there--because I didn't have a car, didn't rent a car, or anything--no car. Somehow I got from where I was in Hollywood into Pendleton. I don't know if I took a bus. I don't know. I never really thought about how I got there, but I reported to where I was supposed to be, reported in, and I was there for about three weeks. That was the first place that I ever got exposed to the M16. Boot camp in Parris Island--I started to tell you this--was the M14, which is what the 16 replaced. What I had in AIT, in Geiger, was the M1, which was the predecessor to the M14, so it was older. But then when I got to Pendleton, I had an M16 and went to the ranges, and we shot that a number of times. We also had physical training. We had other maneuver kind of training. That's where I encountered the tarantulas at night. It's too bad you can't record that look on your face. [laughter] Stuff like that. I did get weekend liberty there. At one point, I went down to San Diego to look up John, my friend who had gotten me into the Marine Corps, and thank him and say goodbye to him, let him know that I was on my way to Vietnam. I don't remember whether we had ever communicated by letter because everything is by letter in those days. There was no email, no cell phones. We never really got a chance to use a telephone either. I don't remember ever calling home, even in Lejeune or Pendleton where it would have been possible. But long distance calling was also expensive in those days. I do remember what's known as a MARS [Military Auxiliary Radio System] hookup. [Editor's Note: The Military Auxiliary Radio System, or MARS, was a phone patch system which used short-wave radio. It was used by the military to allow service members to call their family in the United States.] Did I mention this in the first [interview]? I called from Curacao.

MG: I don't think you told me about it.

JV: Yes. Not knowing where I was and I told my mother I was in Caracas. The people used to never break-in--the guys doing the switch from radio to telephone back and forth, but he did break in that time, said, "No you're not. You're in Curacao." [laughter] Again, that's part of the stupidity. I was no more stupid necessarily than anybody else. We were all pretty stupid in those days.

MG: When were you in Curacao?

JV: Sometime during the cruise. During that three months of the cruise. Again, like I say, I have no clue what the schedule was or when we were where, no recollection at all.

MG: How did you get to California in the first place? Did you take a train or did you fly?

JV: No, it was fly. In my orders there was some provision--I think it was a civilian flight from Newark, but I don't remember how that came about. I don't remember if they gave me a ticket or if I paid for it and be reimbursed. I don't remember any of that. I have no recollection. I do remember that coming home--I think they gave me a ticket when I got out of the Marine Corps in August of '68. Then I ended up flying standby and it ended up being cheaper than what it was originally supposed to be. I remember the number seventy-seven dollars is what the ticket was supposed to have been coming home. I don't know why I remember that. Some things stick in here and others don't, and I don't know what's the criteria for what's going to stick and what doesn't. Some of the guys at this battalion reunion, where I was over this past week, they would remember some specifics of when we were both in the same place and should have experiencing the same thing that they remembered clearly and that I have no recollection at all. There are things in my head from many years ago that just will not leave. It's not because of the significance of the things. If we talked about this in the first interview, I may have mentioned this, but forty years ago, in the early '70s--forty-five years ago, whatever the early '70s were--I worked at the copper foil factory. I may have mentioned this. This is after the Marine Corps. I got out in '68. In the early '70s, I worked in this copper foil factory. For a number of months, maybe six months, maybe less, we had these two guys working there who were just off the boat from India. One of them wore a turban, the other one didn't. I had been working just for a number of months at this place, so I was partially trained, and the boss told me to train these two guys in what I knew so far. Now, I was upset because these guys were making a dime more an hour than I was. I was making like two dollars an hour and they were making 2.10, something like that, or a dollar an hour and a dollar-ten. It's the early '70s and it's just a factory job. I was complaining. "You're paying me less than paying them and you want me to train them?" "Yes, that's what we want." I said, "Well, how come you're paying them more?" They were given subsidy from the government is what it was. They said, "Well, that's what we have to pay them and they won't work for less." I said, "What if I say I wouldn't work for less?" They said, "Well, you can leave. We don't care. We're not getting a subsidy from the government for you." So I had to train them. It wasn't long before they moved on to something else. But the name of the one not wearing the turban, but the other one, was (Parshotam Kumar Malhotra?). Now, you tell me why that name is still right up there in front of my brain, other than the fact that whenever I'm talking to somebody and the topic of what we remember and what we don't comes up, and I mention this to some of the guys when we were talking about things they remember and I didn't, or I remember and they don't. For some reason, that guy's name is right up front in my head. I haven't seen him since those days, but his name is in there.

MG: It is not easy to pronounce.

JV: Yes. Why is it there? I don't know.

MG: I like that story you told about the hippies in California taking you in for the evening. Were there protests at this time?

JV: This was still pretty early. This is summer of '67, and I think most of the demonstrations were later than that. I don't think it was so much the hippies who even, when demonstrations

started, were doing the demonstrating. It was more these more militant types of anti-war protestors. The pure hippies weren't the ones actively protesting for the most part. They may have had long hair and all this stuff, but in '66, '67, it was all about the hippie lifestyle; the drugs, the sex and all that, and they weren't militant. Yes, some of them went on maybe to change or become militant, but it was more your militant types to begin with that may have come from other aspects of society, rather than mostly out of the hippies, I think, in my opinion. But these were nice guys. The fact that I was in the Marine Corps didn't seem to bother them too much. I don't remember too much about that day or two. I don't remember doing drugs with them as such, but I remember being with them. I was a naïve kid. I had no clue what marijuana was in those days. My first exposure to marijuana, as I recall, was in Vietnam. Marijuana, in rear areas, was available. Then of course, after that, when I went to college in Tennessee and in Montclair, there was some marijuana, some hashish, but I've never done anything more than that.

MG: How different was the M16 from the M14?

JV: Night and day. Different caliber, different characteristics. When the M16 was first introduced into Vietnam, which was just before my time, there were big problems with it. A lot of guys died because of those problems. Have you ever heard of the problems with it? It would jam a lot. Initially, troops were told that it didn't even need cleaning because it was so high tech and effective. Then come to find out that yes, it needed cleaning, but the cleaning was not the problem. A lot of troops got in trouble and got hassled at the beginning of the problems because they thought the realization came yes, that it needed to be cleaned. So we were wrong there. That wasn't really it. The problems were trying to save money with the ammo. The powder that was used was a stickier residue kind of powder. After use, you'd get residue of the powder, and the fact that the chamber that the round went into got this residue in it, and the walls of the chamber were not as slick and smooth as they should have been. The problem was that when you fired the umpteenth round, the ejector that would grab a hold of that and kick it out to feed the next one in, would break off the back of the case because the case ended up stuck in there. So a lot of guys died with cleaning rods in their hand trying to bang that from the barrel, bang that out the back in the midst of a firefight. So a lot of Marines, and presumably some Army, were found dead, with their rifles and their cleaning rods in their hand, killed by the enemy, where they didn't have any way to shoot back. Then they changed the powder and they chromed the chamber to make it a smoother surface, and then the problems pretty much went away. So by the time I was there, we didn't have problems. I didn't so much carry the M16 because I had made lance corporal on the cruise, which was an E-3, a Private First-Class, E-2, which I presumably made in North Carolina before we went on the cruise, and then Lance Corporal on the cruise, or right after I got to Vietnam. I'm not sure. I was the gunner in rockets, meaning I carried the 3.5 inch rocket launcher and then I had an A-gunner who carried ammo. The A-gunner carried an M16, but the gunner carried a .45. So I had a .45 in Vietnam. But I mean, I did have an M16 too after a while. When we went to the LAAW, from the 3.5 to the LAAW, that's when I picked up the M16.

MG: About how heavy is the rocket launcher?

JV: Eleven pounds. It's aluminum, in two pieces. Screws together to make the extended piece. Each rocket was eleven pounds, in my recollection. Maybe the next time we get together, I'll dig out all the paperwork that I still have on all of this.

MG: Yes. I think we will have a whole other chapter talking about Vietnam and then life afterwards.

JV: That is the Velcheck family military history that I know we talked about too. Although I said I'd do this [inaudible], I said to myself and mentioned to you, that I'd let you run this interview because this is your interview and I'd go wherever you wanted it to go, I would like to, before we finish today, give you a bit of introduction to the Velcheck family World War II history, also.

MG: I am interested in that. This is a team effort, so we get to both decide what we talk about.

JV: Okay.

MG: Why don't I ask you about Pendleton and then we will stop there so that when we get together next time we can talk about Vietnam. Is there anything we are missing from three weeks there?

JV: Just three weeks, yes. When I went down to visit my friend, we went out. We got motel rooms. I don't remember all the stuff that we did. He was a brig guard at the time. His first half of his tour he was an amphtrack [amphibious tractor] mechanic. An amphtrack is an amphibious troop carrier basically. But the second half he was a brig guard. He was a brig guard when I went down there. He took me to a meal in the Navy mess hall where he ate because it was 32nd Street Naval Station brig where he was working. I remember I was so impressed with that mess hall because where I had been, even in Pendleton, was a regular Marine mess hall, where you get your tray and you get stuff. It wasn't as quite as primitive as Parris Island, but it was still a Marine Corps mess hall. When we ate at the Navy mess hall, in San Diego, there you give your order and the civilians would bring you the food. Now, at all the mess halls, it's now civilians that prepare the food and that serve the food. So it's more like that now, even at Marine mess halls. I can't really think of anything else pertinent to Parris Island or Geiger or even Pendleton that we haven't already gone over. So that's pretty much all the highlights of it.

MG: Okay. Well, let's pause here and then you can tell me about some of the stuff in the suitcase.

JV: Okay.

[Tape Paused]

JV: These are the four siblings who served during World War II from the Velcheck family. Private Stanley Velcheck. For some reason we always called him "Uncle Sam" and I don't know why. I don't know if his middle name might have been Samuel, but he was never Uncle Stan, which you would think he would've been. Aunt Mary was in the WACs. Joseph

Velcheck, he was the one who was killed in Luxembourg. Then, John Velcheck was my father. My father was in the Army Air Corps. The rest of them were in the regular Army.

MG: Is this a photo copy?

JV: You can have that copy if you want.

MG: Yes. I can put this in your file.

JV: Okay. This is Uncle Joe's Purple Heart. I ended up as the only one of my generation to serve in the military. None of my cousins on either side of the family served. I have male cousins on both my mother's side and my father's side, but none of them served in the military. I was the only one. I was the lucky one.

MG: Do you feel as if they should have served?

JV: Did you detect a note of something negative? This was Uncle Joe in his high school graduation picture.

MG: He is described as, "a quiet fellow, but a good one."

JV: Now, I don't know why I only have--of the four of them, I don't know why I only have--okay, I do have one. See there's the original and there's an article with it. Why I didn't copy that as part of that? But here I did copy it on this one.

MG: Okay.

JV: It's a lousy copy. These are all the same.

MG: Thanks.

JV: Here, have one of those. Then there's a number of communications involved in notifying of the death and in return of the remains. Then this one, it's just a small article, but it's one of the highlights of the whole thing.

MG: "World War II kept Joe Velcheck from bigs. Joe Velcheck was more of a baseball player than a football player for Bound Brook High School in 1940. He was so good on the diamond, he was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers." I did not know that.

JV: Never got to play.

MG: "Then before he ever got a chance, Velcheck went off to fight in World War II. He was killed in action in Luxembourg. Joe's brother, Sam Velcheck, real name is Stanley, was a key lineman on the Bound Brook High teams of '38 and '39 when (Neil Bower?) played." I'm not sure who Neil Bower is?.

JV: Yes, no clue. This is the highlight of the whole thing. Read that.

MG: The handwriting is a little tough. “Dear Mrs. Velcheck, as a general rule, the chaplain writes the type of letter I am sending to you. I feel that I can write--”

JV: It’s from his lieutenant after he was killed.

MG: “I feel I can write and give you more information than you would normally receive. Your son was killed with one shot and it was all over quickly. He did not suffer as some men did with a lingering and painful death. Your son and four of his buddies were engaged in street fighting and they were clearing houses on one side of the street, and another group of our men was on the other side. Your son was situated in a house, which they had just finished clearing of Germans. The next house on the street was separated from the one he was in by a stone fence such as in the sketch below.” Then he draws a picture of the two houses with a fence in between.

JV: Isn’t that amazing?

MG: Yes. “There was an enemy machine gun between the second house and the fence, but there were no Germans near it. After clearing house number one, your son started out first, followed by the other three men. Staying near the fence, your son came near the machine gun and knocked it over with the butt of his rifle. As he straightened up, a shot rang out from across the street. Your son turned around and said to his buddy, ‘Where did that come from?’ Another shot rang out and he fell to the pavement, hit between the eyes. While one of the men ran to your son’s aid, the other two started to fire across the street where the shot came from. When the soldier examined your son, he found that he was already dead. The three of his buddies then made their way across the other street,” I think that says, “risking their lives that much more to try and kill the occupants of the house. They threw a hand grenade through the window and then went inside. The German soldier was dead, but in a way, it was rather late. There’s nothing else I can add which could replace your son, so I will not try. You know the reason we will all fought and some had to pay the supreme sacrifice. The only thing I can say is that we were all proud as hell to soldier with your son. He was as good a soldier as the Army ever produced. All through life it seems that the best go fast and the Lord seems to take care of the weak.” I think that’s what that says. “The War Department will notify you when his body can be brought home. Just watch the papers.” I think that’s what that says. “Just watch the something, is about all you can do. The place of your son’s death was in Kruchten, Germany.” Is that how you say that?

JV: I don’t know.

MG: “If there’s any other way I can help, let me know. Second Lieutenant, Howard James.” That’s incredible.

JV: Isn’t that amazing?

MG: Yes.

JV: I don't know what the family reaction was when they got that. I don't know if it was positive or negative.

MG: This was sent to your grandmother.

JV: Yes. The Mrs. Velcheck is my father's, Joe's, everybody's mother. Yes. I guess this is Aunt Mary's obituary.

MG: Was she in the WACs?

JV: Yes, she was the one in the WACs.

MG: She died in 2003.

JV: Here's a bunch of articles about her.

MG: Wow.

JV: Yes. She had had Alzheimer's. Now, they lived in Bound Brook. I have no clue why the mayor of New York City would send them a condolence letter.

MG: This is written in 1949. "As mayor of the City of New York and on behalf of the citizens of this city, I extend my heartfelt sympathy to the family of Sergeant Joseph Velcheck, who so honorably gave his life that others might enjoy peace and freedom. I trust and pray his sacrifice will have not been in vain."

JV: Yes, 1949. I don't know why.

MG: That was a number of years after he died.

JV: Yes. Yes, he died in, what was it, February of '45, just before the war ended.

MG: This is great that you have kept all this. I don't want to disrupt its order.

JV: Yes, it's all just kind of thrown in there. It's not organized. So are you interested in having copies of all this stuff?

MG: I would love that, yes.

JV: Yes, all right. Well, the next time you come I'll have a decent copy of everything.

MG: Yes, and if anything pops out from this pile that you want to share with me, we can add it to the record. Then we can get into more of your Vietnam experience. Again, you have been so generous with your time. It's really a treat talking to you. The time flies by and I just get so wrapped up in all the stories you are telling.

JV: Oh, good. Well, before we end, let me give you get a little preview of the Vietnam stuff. This is stuff that I had with me on the trip to the reunion. The picture of me on Hill 689--689 was the highlight or lowlight of my whole time there.

MG: Yes. I was reading quite a bit about it.

JV: There's a book coming out that may make some reference to me because I've been in touch with the author, but very late in the writing of it. I had been in touch with him years ago, but then he didn't get back in touch with me. Actually, I think the stuff that I'm looking for is still in the back of the Jeep. I'll be right back.

MG: Okay.

[Tape Paused]

JV: Did I show you that?

MG: No. It is from 1995. There's a quote from you, "I carried a loaded pistol for a year and a half after I got back. It was because I was used to being armed." Were you also feeling on edge?

JV: Not so much on edge, but just felt naked without [being armed]. This was the week leading up to the dedication of the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial. They featured a different veteran every day and I was Mr. Thursday.

MG: It's a good picture.

JV: I didn't like it, but the reporter liked it. The incident that I talk about in there is basically based on this letter that I wrote home after 689. This is the newspaper article that my father submitted to the *Courier News* after that. You can have these two copies. You can see he marked stuff out, so I wouldn't get in trouble. I was somewhat critical of Marine Corps tactic that resulted in a lot of guys getting killed.

MG: When were these articles written?

JV: After he got that letter.

MG: In the late 1960s.

JV: Yes, it would have been in August. I wasn't home yet, so it would've been August of 1968. They didn't have copy machines in every drug store in those days, so he didn't make a copy of the letter first. So I don't know what's under it. This is a copy of my enlistment. This is scores that I got. Here, Vietnam, these are operations that I was in. Two pages of them.

MG: Is this something I can have a copy of?

JV: Yes, I'll make one for you. You can take that and the letter, the article and the letter. I'll find the copy of the article that I'm sure I have someplace, I think. Yes, between the family and my own stuff and the pictures that I have, I got a bunch of stuff. So, if that can be used for research that would be a good thing. It would serve some purpose.

MG: Yes, this is a treasure trove.

JV: Good.

MG: Well, I will end it here today.

JV: Oh, that article. Where is that copy of that article?

MG: You can email it to me if you cannot find it today.

JV: Actually, I do have it on the computer.

MG: That is just as easy. I can print it out and save you some paper.

JV: Yes, in fact, I have some of this stuff.

MG: You can send it all to me.

JV: The letter and the articles, they're all on the computer.

MG: Okay.

JV: I'll email them to you.

MG: That sounds good. They will help me prepare for our next interview.

JV: Well those you can have, because I have numerous copies of those, the letter and the articles from it. But this article I'll email to you and whatever else I have I'll email to you.

MG: That sounds good, Jim. I will turn this off for today, but thank you so much.

JV: Okay.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 1/19/2016

Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/3/2018

Reviewed by Jim Velcheck 12/15/18