

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES VELCHECK

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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PISCATAWAY, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Molly Graham: This is an interview with James Velcheck. Am I saying that properly?

James Velcheck: Yes.

MG: The interview is taking in Piscataway, New Jersey. The date is March 12, 2015 and the interviewer is Molly Graham. Can I call you Jim or James? What do you prefer?

JV: Jim is fine.

MG: Jim, when and where were you born?

JV: Well, I don't remember it, but they tell me it was in Somerville, Somerset Hospital, August 22, 1947.

MG: Did you grow up in that area?

JV: I grew up in South Bound Brook.

MG: Which is not too far from where we are right now.

JV: Which is halfway in between where we are now and Somerville, where I was born.

MG: What are some of your earliest memories of growing up there?

JV: Well, our backyard ran right into the Delaware-Raritan Canal, so I usually had a boat. I fished and trapped muskrats along the canal, which might have been why I still continue to fish and hunt. Although, I don't do any trapping anymore. South Bound Brook was a small town. During the summer, I'd get on my bicycle and be gone from early morning until I had to be home by dinner time. If I went out after dinner time, I had to be home by the time it got dark. Other than that, I was free and I did whatever I wanted to. I didn't really get into any trouble as such, although there were a couple times, a little bit here and there, but I was a pretty good kid.

MG: Tell me about the little trouble you got in.

JV: We broke antennas off cars in a junkyard in town one time and affixed them to our bicycles. Didn't think we were doing anything terribly bad, but it turned out we got in some amount of trouble. No major thing. Hey, my father had to pay twenty bucks or something for these broken antennas in a junkyard.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your family history, starting on your father's side. For the record, say his name and a little bit about what you know.

JV: John Velcheck, he was born also in South Bound Brook or Bound Brook, one or the other. My mother, she was not born here, but she was born [in] Woodbridge Township, Sewaren, and moved here at an early age. There's a section of blocks in South Bound Brook where I grew up known as Little Dublin. It's where a lot of the Irish immigrants lived who were involved in

building the Delaware-Raritan Canal. They were, back in the 1800s, the minority of the day, and they got those kinds of jobs like digging without heavy equipment, but with shovels and picks, digging the canal. A lot of them ended up dying during the construction of the canal, but I think with my mother's Irish heritage, that's probably how she ended up in Little Dublin, although it was considerably after the time that the canal was built. They were three years apart. My mother was born, I believe, in 1921; my father in 1918. By living in the same town, they grew up together and ended up getting married. I think they got married around 1940, although I'm not sure the exact year. I didn't ask my mother. I haven't talked to her in the last few days. My father was a World War II veteran. He was in the Army Air Corps. He was a B-24, I believe, mechanic and he taught B-24 mechanics in World War II. His sister was in the WACs and two of his brothers were in the Army. One of them, Uncle Joe, was killed just before the war ended in Luxembourg; shot by a sniper, very interesting in that I have information. I have a letter from Uncle Joe's lieutenant describing all the details surrounding his death even with a sketch. It's amazing and it's something you might be interested in one of these days. I'm going to get a drink of water.

MG: Sure.

JV: My mother had one brother and two sisters. My uncle served in the Navy during World War II also. I don't know too much about his military service, but he's gone now. In fact, everybody on both sides of the family are gone except for my mother. She's the only one left. She had two sisters who are both gone, and her brother is gone. All of my father's family is gone; the last one passing away a few years ago.

MG: When you said the lieutenant had the details of your uncle's death, what were they?

JV: They were in a city and clearing the city, on the street, houses. There wasn't a lot of enemy action, but there was a fence and two houses and there was a machine gun nest set up there between these two houses with a German machine gun, but there was nobody there. It was just a machine gun sitting there. The story is that Uncle Joe went up to the machine gun and kicked it over. When he did that a shot rang out from a house across the street and hit him right between the eyes. His comrades then went into that house and cleared out the sniper who had been in there, who killed Uncle Joe. I believe it was in February of 1945, just a month or so before the war in Europe ended. I don't know the details other than that about Uncle Joe's service. It's been on my list to look further into, it but I haven't. He's buried in a cemetery in Bound Brook, but I do have that letter from the lieutenant, which is one of my treasured possessions.

MG: Was it something your father talked about?

JV: No, I don't remember anything much in the way of discussion about it, no.

MG: Where was your father's family from originally?

JV: Supposedly, my father's father was born in Bohemia Province of Czechoslovakia, and it was when the border with Russia was in flux. He might have actually been born on the Russian side. Supposedly, the family had come there from Poland through Austria, ending up in

Czechoslovakia, and they ended up over here. There was my father's father and my father's father's brother, at least from the family who ended up over here. The brother had eight kids and my father's father had eight kids. We were South Bound Brook. The other part of the family was more Bridgewater, Somerville. There are still some of them around in that area. I never knew any of them growing up, but there is another Jim Velcheck, who was a Somerset County jail guard for years. I did finally meet him a number of years ago. But as far as other military, nobody from my generation served in the military except for me. None of my cousins on either my father's side or my mother's side served. Of course, neither of my siblings [served]. My sister didn't serve, and my brother is retarded, developmentally deficient, whatever you might want to call it, plus being physically disabled now.

MG: Was it because your cousins were not draft age?

JV: No, they were of age, but for whatever reason, they either never got drafted and they never enlisted. I have one male cousin who's older on my father's side and a couple who are just a couple years younger. On my mother's side, I have one or two male cousins who were within a couple years of me, but I don't really know. I don't know of any physical reasons why they wouldn't have been eligible for draft. I was in and out before the draft. The draft, I don't remember exactly when it started, but it was relatively late into the whole thing. I served until August of '68, and the draft might not have come about until sometime after that, but I don't remember. I don't know exactly. The draft number system came later, but I think there was a draft before that.

MG: Do you know what brought your father's family to New Jersey in the first place?

JV: No, I don't know how either family actually ended up here, although they were in Pennsylvania first. They were in eastern Pennsylvania, Allentown, Bethlehem area, my father's family, but exactly how and why they ended up here, I'm not sure. Although, I do have information and maybe in a subsequent meeting I can have some of this stuff ready for you and show it to you, because I do have relatives that have put stuff together about the family on my father's side and on my mother's side. My mother's brother, who was the Navy veteran in World War II, who's deceased, did a considerable amount of genealogy work, Uncle Richard. Supposedly, we are related to the Dunham Family. In Woodbridge, part of the church in Woodbridge, there's a house called the Dunham House. We're supposedly related to that Dunham, who also is supposedly the same Dunham, who is [Barack] Obama's mother. She was a Dunham. So, this might be something I eventually want you to take out of my interview because I don't know of anybody who's really an Obama fan, but we're supposedly related to him, through his mother's side.

MG: That is interesting.

JV: I haven't looked at the stuff. I have the information my uncle put together. I have the stuff that on my father's side was put together. Like I said, I can show it to you at some point, but I don't know how much it goes into about Dunham Family, but presumably, there's something about it.

MG: Did these relatives ever tell you any stories about their experience in World War II?

JV: Not a whole lot. Other than Uncle Joe, who, of course, was not around to tell me anything, nobody that I know of served in combat. My father was a B-24 mechanic and he taught B-24 mechanics at a base in Michigan in the Midwest. He had Gene Autry in his class, which is a story he always told without any detail, just that Gene Autry was one of his students. [Editor's Note: Gene Autry was a performer and actor. During World War II, he was a C-109 transport pilot in the China-Burma-India Theatre.] He was on his way to Europe on a ship as the war ended. So he arrived. He was in London, Paris, Luxembourg, right after the war. It must have been party city, but he never went into any great details about that either, just that that's where he was and when. He got General Eisenhower's autograph and I may have that someplace or maybe my mother has it. I'm not sure. He also got somebody else's autograph and I forget who now, but I can ask my mother or I can look through the stuff that I have. I haven't had a chance to look through this stuff. Life is particularly busy these days. The older I get, the busier I get. I work part-time. That's where I was this morning, from eight o'clock until I got home at ten thirty. I drove a hundred miles already today.

MG: Where did you go?

JV: Down South Jersey--well, south of here, thirty six miles away in Millstone Township, down there by the Millstone River, down towards Trenton. I do part-time work for Stericycle. Stericycle is a company that's into a number of different things, has a bunch of part-time contractor type reps that do various things. Part of what I do is supermarket auditing when a recall comes out. They'll give me a list of supermarkets to go to, or drug stores, or whatever kind of store, to go to and look for those products, make sure they're taken off the shelves. The project that I'm working on right now and what took me down to Millstone Township was there's a recliner made by a furniture company that has a switch, an electric recliner, and the switch has been recalled because of the danger of overheating. So I go and I replace the switch, yes. There's a number of different things that they've had me do. I've travelled as far as Missouri on Stericycle projects, but it's part time. My main field--I'm gearing up right now for a new project and that will be in Flagstaff, Arizona. I expect to be there by the end of the month, by the end of March.

MG: Right. We talked about this. What is the project?

JV: That's a project with an FDA [Food and Drug Administration] regulated type company to work on their quality system. Not anything to do with Stericycle. There's a company in Edison, Oriel STAT A MATRIX on Oak Tree Road in Edison. They come up with these. They contract these projects and I'm one of the contracted workers. I was in Ohio all summer, up until October, working on a project in Ohio with a company through STAT A MATRIX. In 1999, I went to Richmond, Virginia on a project. They said, "Be prepared to stay a year." I was there for three and a half years. People say to me, "How do you like travelling all over working on these projects and being away from home?" I told you a little bit about my home life. My response is, "Anything that gets me out of the house can't be all bad." Then they look at my wife and they say, "Sara, what do you think about Jim being away from home, going on all these projects?" She says, "Anything that gets him out of the house can't be all bad." 1990 and '91, I

was working in China. I made three trips to China for a company in California. It was totally separate. So, there are times when I spend a lot of time travelling and then there are other times where I don't travel. 2011, I tell people I was sent up the river for eight months. I was living on an island in the Mississippi River in Memphis on a STAT A MATRIX project, with a company in Memphis. 2012 and 2013, I didn't travel at all. I did just part-time work. My wife works full-time. I started collecting Social Security a couple of years ago. So, that's how we get by. That's one of the good things about this travel. Me coming home is a big deal and absence makes the heart grow fonder. Also, when I'm away on these projects--I was up in Maine for five months or so a number of years ago, in Memphis, in Richmond--my wife comes and joins me. Some of these long term projects, they put me up in a corporate apartment, a fully furnished apartment. Some of the shorter projects it's hotels. Like, in Ohio, she never got to Ohio, where I was for a few months this summer; I was living in a hotel. But in Maine, even though that one was also a hotel, she came up and we spent a couple of weekends together. In Richmond, she was coming down every few weeks and spending a long weekend because most of our kids and their offspring at the time all moved back in while I was away. Then the project ended and they all scattered because they heard Dad's coming home.

MG: What has been your favorite place to do this work?

JV: They've all been interesting in their own way. We loved Richmond. We're not city people, but Richmond, there was always things going on; wine festivals, and beer festivals, and music festivals, and the history in Richmond. So Richmond was definitely a favorite. Memphis was okay. She came out and we went on the riverboat in Memphis, as we had done a riverboat in Richmond on the James River. I tend to really get into the area; the history of the Richmond area and the countryside. I went deer hunting down there, harvested a couple of deer. I went fishing down there because it's not far from the coast. In Memphis, I hooked up with one of the guys I was working with in Memphis and we went trout fishing in the Ozark Mountains in Arkansas. In fact, in 2013 I guess it was, after I had been home over a year after the project ended, my wife said to me in March in 2013, tentatively she says, "I've been talking to my sister and mother, and we're thinking about going for a week down to Texas to visit my brothers." She's got two brothers. "What would you think of me going away for a week?" I said, "I'd love for you to go away a week because coincidentally, I've been thinking about something." Turned out, I ended up driving out to Memphis, hooking up with my friend out there. We went over to Arkansas for a few days of trout fishing. So I was away from home for two weeks. The opening for me to bring that up was her saying she was thinking about going away for a week. So she went away in April and I went away then in May I guess it was.

MG: Good. We got a little off track. [laughter]

JV: You think? [laughter]

MG: I was curious how your mother spent the war years.

JV: There was some similarity between my mother and my mother-in-law, in that they were both soldiers' wives. They were both married at the time during the war, and they travelled with their husbands. My mother lived in Michigan, in an apartment when my father was out there

teaching mechanics. In fact, my brother was born in 1943 in Michigan, in Detroit Hospital I think it was. As far as details about their life, I don't have a lot of information about that. I don't think she worked at all. In fact, as far as I know, she's never had a driver's license even after they were here and living in South Bound Brook along the canal. She was a homemaker. She never worked, never drove. In those days it wasn't that unusual for the mother or wife to be at home and even not drive. Of course, there were a lot of women that did work and a lot of women that did drive, but there were more that didn't than there are now.

MG: Do you think having a special needs son required more of her time and attention, and being home?

JV: Well, he ended up not being home much. He went to kindergarten in South Bound Brook. He was a behavioral issue. He ended up going through kindergarten twice, and after that he never went any further in formal schooling. He was institutionalized. He was at the Johnstone Training and Research Center in Bordentown outside Trenton for twenty years or more. So we would go down there, not every Sunday, but I remember--oh, in fact, where he first--now that I think of it, where he first went--and I don't even know the name of it--was an institution in Vineland, way down in South Jersey. I remember going down there to visit him. Then, for whatever reason, they transferred him from there to Johnstone. So he was a little older by the time he got to Johnstone. He would have been six or seven when he went to Vineland, but I think he was a teenager when he got to Johnstone. So he wasn't around much. My sister is about seven years younger than I am. So, [my mother] was raising me and then raising her, and being a stay at home mom who spent all her time cleaning the house. We don't spend as much time cleaning house, at least in this house, these days, as what was done back then.

MG: Well, with so many people it's probably hard to keep it clean for very long.

JV: I do an average of three or four loads of laundry a day. With two teenage girls, they'll wear something for an hour and they'll toss it down the cellar steps. We call it the "magic steps." My philosophy, there's actual laundry physics. What goes down must come up, because they complain about how much clothes come up that they have to then put away. I said, "If you don't throw it down, it won't come back up again," because at least half of what they throw down is not dirty. They'll wear it once, wear it for a few hours, and toss it down. Of course, some of what they toss down is filthy because they've been outside rolling in the mud.

MG: When you would visit your brother, what were your impressions of these institutions?

JV: They were warehouses. Yes, there was never much in the way of education, although they may have made some attempts, but he does not read a lick, he does not write. He has worked over the years in menial jobs, dishwashing, janitorial type stuff, but he can't read a bit. We took him to a facility, Middlesex County, something or the other, where they did IQ testing, and of course, it was all verbal and visual IQ testing, and he tested 80 or so IQ. As part of that, I remember they gave him a form, a blank form, and said, "Fill out as much of this form as you can." He said, "Well, I can write my name." They said, "Okay, write your name." He said, "Where does it go?" They said, "Well, we can't help you at all with the form." He says, "Well, then I can't do anything on your damn form," and he threw it back at them. Anger management

has been a lot of his problem. In fact, bad attitude and anger management, to me, is his entire problem. My father would take him down to Carrier Clinic in Belle Mead, which was a mental facility, a hospital that's been there for years. Once Johnstone closed down and they dropped him off on the front porch at my parents' house, [my father] then would take him down to Carrier periodically to get his prescription refilled. He was taking Thorazine, which is an old medication for the treatment of mentally ill, to keep them under control or whatever. I remember it being said many years ago that the dosage of Thorazine he was on was not high enough to either hurt him or help him. Since you're interested in the family history, he was unmanageable at home. My parents ended up leaving him in the house and they got an apartment. That's how tragic this whole thing is with my brother. My father would come pick him up in the morning, take him to wherever he was working at the time, if he was working, pick him up from work, bring him back to the house. My mother would make him dinner. My father would deliver dinner to him. My brother could play bingo. He didn't like playing bingo, but bingo and lottery tickets were what he considered his ticket to riches. So my father would take him to bingo seven nights a week at various churches and firehouses in the area--Manville, Somerville, Bound Brook, wherever--and then pick him up from there, because my father didn't play bingo, and bring him back home again. Then the next day they'd do the whole thing over again. My father ended up retiring early from American Cyanamid, where he was a millwright for thirty, forty years, whatever, but he had developed heart disease and he ended up retiring on disability early. He was one of the early heart bypass patients in Deborah [Heart and Lung Center] down by Fort Dix and Browns Mills, where he had a triple or quadruple bypass. Then he lived for another fifteen or so years after that, and died in 2000. So I would say it was probably in the late '80s somewhere when he had his heart bypass surgery. My sister ended up taking my brother down to Baltimore with her, and she got him a job down there in an apartment facility as a maintenance worker, clean-up person. She had him with her for several years, but then she couldn't stand him anymore and she locked him out. My wife said, "Put him on the train. We'll take him." We had him for over twenty years. I guess he was still on just that low dosage of Thorazine when we ended up taking him, but he was difficult here. With our young kids and him, it was very difficult. Once I called the cops on him and they took him away in handcuffs. He ended up at Rutgers Mental Health. He was up at Summit for a while. One time he was in Summit and somehow he ended up getting hooked up with Rutgers Mental Health. It was, I believe, at Rutgers, if not at Summit, where they--I think what Summit did was they had him for a week or so, and then they were the ones that found the place in Pennsylvania where he ended up going for six months or a year, something like that. During the course of that, they got him on the current regimen of medicines that he's on now. If you had to pay full price, it was like twelve hundred dollars' worth of stuff a month. One of the good things about New Jersey is the PAAD [Pharmaceutical Assistance to the Aged and Disabled] program. It's a partnership between the State of New Jersey and pharmaceutical companies, where needy people can get prescriptions at low or no cost. The pharmaceutical companies give the state a discount, the states pay some. He was taking a half a dozen prescriptions that would have totaled twelve hundred dollars full price, and he was paying no more than five dollars per prescription. So for twenty or thirty dollars a month, he was getting--and we got him hooked up with disability, Social Security. He was at this place in Pennsylvania for six or twelve months. It was fine and we should have left him there, but we started feeling sorry for him and he seemed to be under control. We ended up bringing him back here. That was ten, or twelve, or fifteen years ago, something like that. I don't know. I remember when he came with us, it was July of 1993, or late July, early August of 2003, when

he first came with us. The reason we remember that, my wife reminds me periodically, because it was a day or a week before my daughter and son-in-law got married, and they got married August 7, 1993. We've finally got him into a nursing home because he got to the point where he couldn't walk anymore. So he's in a nursing home in Monroe. We get down there every couple few weeks to visit him. So far it's worked and he's been there since October 2014.

MG: What was the place in Bell Meade your father would take him to?

JV: Carrier Clinic, a hospital for mentally [ill]. I don't know if they have live-in facilities there. They may not, but it's known as a mental health type facility.

MG: You said earlier that your parents had gotten an apartment. What was the purpose?

JV: Because they couldn't stand living with him. He was uncontrollable.

MG: Was he left alone overnight?

JV: Oh, yes. I mean, he could take care of himself as far as being alone, but he's never cooked anything. I've never seen him boil water. So yes, he's totally dependent for others on the necessities of life. He creates these elaborate rituals for doing the simplest things. It takes him an hour to shave and shower because of all the ritual that he--and he's obsessive compulsive about it. Most people who are obsessive compulsive realize that what they're doing is unreasonable and yet they force themselves to do it. He's even beyond that. He feels he's the only person in the world who knows the proper way to shave and shower, and it's with all this ritual. You can imagine the problem that that caused here with five other people in the house needing to get ready to do what they needed to do. We've been trying to get him into a nursing home for a number of years, and we're finally successful in getting him on Medicaid and getting him into the nursing home in October. So we're in the process of going from six people in the house with my son and his two daughters being here for over five years, because his wife had to go into a nursing home and he lost his house as part of that. I don't think when I told you that, we had this [the recorder] on. They're in the process of finding a place and getting out on their own. He works for Rutgers on Livingston campus in the facilities department. He's in hazardous waste. He graduated from Rutgers a number of years ago. My daughter graduated from Rutgers, got all three of her degrees. I graduated from Rutgers in 1997, all from Cook. My degree is in International Environmental Studies, which may be jumping ahead. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] When your father came home from the war, where did he and your mother settle?

JV: I don't remember where they lived initially. The house on Canal Street that I grew up in, they moved into just around the time I was born in August of 1947. He got out of the Army in '46 or whatever. So there was a year there that was a gap in between that I'm not sure exactly where they lived. It might have been in that Little Dublin area. I think they might have moved into an apartment or a room there, the three of them, my brother and mother and father. They might have lived for a while in my father's parents' house, which was still being lived in by the family in South Bound Brook on Elizabeth Street, just off Canal Road. For that year I'm not

positive, but yes, they moved in. He first got a job at Johns Manville, JM, in Manville, coincidentally. Then, at some point after that, he shifted to American Cyanamid and he was there for many years, as a millwright, which is a maintenance type job.

MG: I meant to ask, what about the Great Depression did your parents tell you about? Did they have any experiences from living through the Depression that they shared with you?

JV: No, not my parents. My in-laws, yes. I have a transcript. My in-laws did two interviews, similar to this, having to do with their experiences during World War II and living through the Depression. I got them hooked up with both of those interviews. The one was through the Legacy of War course, at Rutgers, that I helped with. That transcript, I have a copy of. The other one was through an archivist at McGuire Air Force Base, part of the Army Air Force, where I took them down there and they did an interview. Apparently, the recording was defective and it never got transcribed. So that one was wasted, but I have a copy and I can make that available to you also, of the one that was done as part of our course. In fact, I can e-mail it to you. I have it. I scanned the copies, the pages, just recently. A little while back I scanned it.

MG: You were born in 1947. I am just curious what life looked like during the 1950s here in New Jersey.

JV: In small town South Bound Brook it was very quiet. I was a Boy Scout. I played Little League. I was not an Eagle Scout or really committed to scouting, but I was a member. I was on the Little League team, but I wasn't any kind of star or really all that much into baseball, but I remember for a while, I was a pitcher. I didn't have much power, but I think I could put the ball where I wanted it there for a while in Little League. I did my fishing and hunting and trapping. I still have the shotgun that my uncle gave to me when I was fourteen, a .410 Single Shot shotgun; I still have that. I shot a lot of rabbits. I'd hunt between the canal and river that's now a state park. They'd throw you in jail if you tried to hunt over there. I remember, to go hunting, I would walk down Canal Street all the way to the end of the street [where] we lived. It was four or five blocks long. We lived at one end. At the other end was a railroad trestle that went across the canal, which was, if I didn't take a boat across from my backyard, I used to do a lot of--there was a period of time I didn't have a boat--with my shotgun over my shoulder, I'd walk down the street, go across the trestle and go shoot rabbits and pheasants, and squirrels, and cats, down in the low lands between the canal and the river. Now again, I'd get thrown in jail for any one of those things. [laughter] It was quiet. I was never a great student, but I did okay. South Bound Brook doesn't have a high school; they sent their students, their residents, to Bound Brook High School. Bound Brook was there for many years. There were a number of surrounding towns that didn't have high schools. Manville used to send their students to Bound Brook, which is a little strange because Manville was closer to Somerville, and Somerville always had a high school. Middlesex went to Bound Brook, before they built a high school in Middlesex. South Bound Brook never did build a high school, still doesn't have a high school, still sends their students to Bound Brook.

MG: It would probably be a pretty small high school.

JV: Bound Brook High School?

MG: South Bound Brook, if there was one.

JV: If there was one, yes. Too small to make it economically feasible supposedly.

MG: Do any teachers stand out to you, ones that you looked up to?

JV: Or down to? [laughter]

MG: Yes. [laughter]

JV: There were no teachers that I was particularly close to. I remember teachers. I remember Mrs. Lewis. She was nice. She was a math teacher, but I was never that great in math. Mr. Rizzolo was history. These were grade school [teachers], South Bound Brook. Miss or Mrs. Cronfeld was an English teacher and I didn't get along real well with her. Although, if I had gotten along with her better--and also the English teacher in Bound Brook, Mrs. Anton, she was not easy to get along with either. If I had gotten along with those teachers better, maybe I would be better at what I do today because basically what I am is a writer, a technical writer having to do with quality management. I'm the one that creates the documents and the manuals and all that. I think I do a very good job of it, but in those days, I was not any kind of a writer. I didn't start to blossom as a writer until I went back to college for the last time. I'm sure we'll get into this, but I have a half a dozen different colleges under my belt over a twenty-eight year period, ranging from as far away as Tennessee to several in New Jersey. I'm always comfortable when it's cooler. I know we keep the house kind of cool.

MG: No, no. I am fine.

JV: Are you okay?

MG: Yes. When you are built like me, you are always a little chilly, but I feel comfortable. [laughter]

JV: Okay. If you're cool let me know, I'll up the heat some, but this old drafty house--I mean, the furnace, during all that cold weather, it seemed to have been running constantly even though we keep it a little bit on the cool side. Yes. In school I was never that great. I didn't participate in a whole lot of outside activities. I was in the drama club in high school I remember, but I wasn't any great dramatist. It was a totally unremarkable early lifetime. I never had any real ambition to join the military. I never considered joining the military. People who came home from World War II, they put the war behind them and they got on with their life. So there was not a lot of war stories. My father never talked much about it. My uncle, the one who survived, never talked much about it. My aunt who was a WAC, I don't remember her ever talking much about it. On my mother's side, the uncle who was in and one of the aunts--both of the aunts on my mother's side married guys who had been also in the Navy during World War II. I don't remember hearing a lot about military from any of them, their military experiences. But none of them were combat. They were supply and my father with the mechanics, and stuff like that.

MG: Did you feel the world starting to change in the 1960s? There were so many political and cultural changes taking place.

JV: I was in high school during the early '60s. I graduated in 1965. In high school, I don't remember much of this '60s stuff--small town high school. I don't remember drugs in the high school. There was some drinking, I suppose. There may have been somebody into some kind of drugs, I don't know, but I never knew of it. It was not widespread or well communicated. I graduated in '65, and in August of '66 I was in the military. I went off to Marine Corps boot camp. So I don't remember a whole lot of craziness, wild scenes. The music, I have recollection of the music, although I was never--even less so now, but I was never really into music. When I was a kid, my parents tried to get me involved. They got me this accordion. I have no clue how old I might have been, but I have a recollection of this huge accordion in my lap and it coming up to here just under my chin and me trying to take these lessons on. It never went very far. So I was not musically inclined. Now my kids are more so--not so much now; none of them are really playing instruments now, but when they were younger they did. We had a piano for years, an old piano in the house. I forget where we had it now, but we had it here. One of them, he was "piano man," Brian, that one. He's the one that works for Rutgers. There were guitars being played. My wife was always much more musically inclined than I was. She played the guitar, sang a little, but even she has given it up years ago. Amanda, the one in the blue, on the right there, she's in the Piscataway High School Choir. She's a sophomore in the choir. Jessie, she's more down to earth, not so much musically inclined, although they both listen to their music continually. All six of the grandkids are in that one little picture there. Before the sixth one was born, the five of them were in the bigger picture there up above. Each of my three kids has two. My daughter has two boys. That son has two girls and my other son has two boys. That got off the track, too. [laughter]

MG: That's okay. [laughter] You had mentioned that you had one teacher who would talk about what was going on in Vietnam before the war started.

JV: Yes. In high school, there was Mr. Weidener the history teacher there. I don't remember a lot of discussion about it, but as it was heating up in the early to mid-'60s, I remember him saying, "Some of you may find yourselves in Vietnam after you graduate the way this thing is going." I remember that for some reason and I'm not sure why, but it certainly turned out to be true. Now I don't know of a lot of my high school graduates who were in the military. There was at least two in my graduation class that I know of who were in Vietnam, but neither one of them was in combat. There was Joe Festa, who was in the 1st Marine Air Wing, who had something to do with airplanes, whether he was a mechanic or something, I'm not sure. Then there was Oscar Thompson, who was in the Air Force, who I've recently got back in touch with--he got back in touch with me--who was in the Air Force and he his job was very classified at the time, had to do with enemy intercepts or Communist-type intercepts, communication intercepts from around the world. He had some kind of a job. He was in a bunker in Da Nang or someplace, correlating this kind of stuff. Other than that, there were a number of people in the yearbook, who said they were military bound. But whether they ever did and whether they ended up in Vietnam or not, I don't really know. There were four residents of Bound Brook who died in Vietnam; none from South Bound Brook. I knew one of them and may have known a second one, but none in my class. The other two are somewhat unknown and may have been from

someplace surrounding, Bridgewater or someplace, who may have listed Bound Brook as their hometown, I'm not sure. I have intentions of looking further into that because I do keep involved in military type stuff. I'm on the Middlesex County Veterans Advisory Council and I'm active in the Marine Corps League and things like that. At this reunion that's coming up in May--I know that in the high school there is a plaque on the wall honoring Bound Brook graduates, or Bound Brook students or residents who served in the military. I know my Uncle Joe's name is on there. I don't think it was just those killed, or maybe it was. I don't know. I've got to look further into it, but I don't know if there's anything honoring these Vietnam people who died. It's something I want to look into and see if something can be done if it hasn't been done.

MG: If the war was not going on, what would your plans have been after graduation?

JV: I went to work for a year at American--I went first to work at Inmont. This Oscar Thompson who was one of my best friends in high school, he got a job at Inmont Corporation RBH, at the Middlesex-Bound Brook border, just off River Road, and he got me a job there. I worked in the laboratory. I worked there for a while and for some reason ended up leaving and going to American Cyanamid, I think. I worked at RBH and American Cyanamid, and I think my recollection is first it was through Oscar getting a job at RBH and then, for some reason, leaving and going to Cyanamid. But then I went in the military. As I have hinted, I never thought much about joining the military. I never thought about it at all. When I did, it was a spur of the moment kind of thing. So, what I would have ended up--I know when I was in high school, I had envisions of being a game warden or something. I remember looking into college in upstate New York, up in the Adirondack Mountains, Paul Smith College. There were two primary majors offered through this college. One was game warden type stuff and the other was hotel management. I remember this. I looked into that college, maybe applied to it, but didn't get in. My grades in high school were lousy. I was just not a good student. I didn't fail and I graduated, but I was a mediocre student at best. I didn't get into that college. Whether I ever would have looked into getting into college I don't know. Would I have ended up being a factory worker my whole life like my father was? Scares me, but I may well have ended up with that. I don't know. I ended up going into the military after working at American Cyanamid for a while. The way that came about--are we ready for that?

MG: I just have one question.

JV: Okay.

MG: You were working at American Cyanamid.

JV: Yes. It's where the ballpark is now.

MG: Were you working there at the same time as your father? I know he worked there for a time.

JV: I might have been. My brother also. It was one of the jobs he did. He worked there for a while. My Aunt Priscilla, my father's youngest sister, she worked there. I don't remember what year my father retired, but I may well have been there. Yes, he must have still been working

there when I worked there, but I worked in the lab. He worked in maintenance. But we must have overlapped, but I don't have any real recollection of the two of us interacting at all.

MG: So what happened when you decided to enlist?

JV: How did it come about?

MG: Yes.

JV: My other best friend in high school, John Mitzak, who I have also been in touch with again recently, these last few years--Oscar has been only the last six months, but Mitzak, I've been back in touch with him for a number of years. I don't remember ever talking with him about the military. I don't remember him ever having a military interest. I don't know why he suddenly joined the Marine Corps, but he did. He was mechanically inclined. He was always working on his car. Before he got his driver's license he had a car, an old Ford all rebuilt, which was going to be his car once he got his license, turned seventeen. He joined the Marine Corps. Now, in those days, they had something called--well, in 1966, springtime of '66--the Marine Corps had just sent combat troops into Vietnam in March of '65. There were these periodic buildups. The North Vietnamese would--the enemy would escalate and we'd escalate. And they'd escalate and we'd escalate. More troops, more troops. It just built up. The Marine Corps, as I suppose all the services, were desperate for people in those days. The Marine Corps opened up a two-year enlistment. Normal enlistment was always four years. They had at some point before that opened up the option of a three-year enlistment. But when they got really desperate in early '66, they opened up a two year enlistment to compete with the draft. The Army draft was for two years. Mitzak and I both ended up going in under this two-year plan. As part of that, they also had something called the 120-day deferred enlistment program. Have you ever heard of that? Okay. She's nodding her head yes, even though you can't hear. [laughter] He went into it first. During these 120 days, at some point, just before he left for boot camp, which was in probably April of '66, he said to me--and I'll never forget these words--as part of it, just before he went, he said, "I had the balls to join the Marine Corps, but you don't." I said, "Oh, yes I do," and I went down to the recruiter and I signed up. It was just that quick. It was from one day having no intention of going into the military and really not knowing what I ever wanted to do when I grew up. Even today, I still don't know what I want to be when I grow up because I've always just kind of floated; floated into some interesting things, but floated back out of them again. My whole life has been a kind of search for career and work, sometimes successful and sometimes not. But I ended up going off--he was still at boot camp when--or, he was not at boot camp, but he moved on to further training when I got to Parris Island at the end of August in 1966. Then I went through the training and came back from that and got home at Christmas time. I remember it was Christmas Eve. I walked into the kitchen door. My parents knew I was going to be coming home at some point, but they didn't know exactly when. I walked in and surprised my mother. My father was at work at Cyanamid. So, yes, we must have overlapped. Yes. It was probably during the '70s sometime that he ended up retiring. Maybe even the early '80s, I'm not sure. Anyway, after a thirty day leave, in early January, I went to Camp Lejeune as a part of the Lejeune Marine personnel, G Company--Golf Company--2nd Battalion, 2nd Marine Division. I had been given an MOS, a Military Occupational Specialty, 0351, Anti-tank Assaultman. It means that I carried a 3.5 inch rocket launcher, but it was more than that. It was a miscellaneous

light weapons MOS that covered everything from the 106mm recoilless rifle down through the 3.5, demolitions, gas, flamethrower. I trained in all that stuff, but the 3.5 was my main weapon. I went down to Lejeune and we did training in the pine forests there of North Carolina, and we were training to go on a deployment, although, I don't remember us calling it deployment in those days. That's the term now, which was like four months in the Caribbean. So from springtime into mid to late summer of 1967, I was on the USS *Austin* in the Caribbean. We trained at Fort Sherman, Green Beret Jungle Training School in Panama. We rebuilt bunkers around Guantanamo Base in Cuba. We climbed the mountains in Puerto Rico. Had liberty in Panama and Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Spent time on Vieques Island, which was just given up--it had been a base for years, and just a few years ago, it was part of Puerto Rico. It was an island off the coast of Puerto Rico, but a part of Puerto Rico. We just gave it back to the Puerto Ricans because they were complaining about wanting their island back. So at the end of that cruise--that's what they called it, a cruise--they asked for volunteers to go to Vietnam. Now, me being a two year enlistee, I'm not sure how it happened because my thought was that most two year enlistees, when they finish their initial training, they'd go to Vietnam to get in a full thirteen month tour. ... Somehow I ended up with this Caribbean cruise, as did, I found out later, quite a few other two year enlistees. So that by the time the cruise ended and I went home for thirty day leave, I'm calculating, I only have ten months left in the Marine Corps. Everybody all gung ho, "Yes, I'm going to put my name on. I volunteer to go to Vietnam. Go kill gooks." So, I [say], "Yes, I'll put my name on it too, but with only ten months left I don't think they'll send me." Well, they did. I subsequently found out later that they sent people with as little as six months to Vietnam for a short tour. I remember when I came home, I had my orders. I knew where I was going, but the orders don't say Vietnam, they say WESTPAC which is shorthand for Western Pacific, which is, by definition, Vietnam. 1st Marine Division. I was with the 2nd Marine Division in Lejeune. It makes it easy to remember, 2-2-2, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment, 2nd Division. In Vietnam, I was going to 1-1-1, 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, 1st Division. I remember, when I came home, the family asking me, my mother, father--my sister was still relatively young. I was nineteen, twenty, so she was twelve or thirteen. I remember my parents asking me what was next and I said, "I'm not sure. I'm going to California, but I'll find out what's going [on] after that," knowing full well where I was going. But it wasn't until just before I left that I told them.

MG: Do you want to take a break?

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