

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES VELCHECK

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Molly Graham: This is an oral history interview with Jim Velcheck on December 15, 2015 in Piscataway, New Jersey. The interviewer is Molly Graham. Before we were recording, we were talking about the end of the tour. Let's pick up there.

James Velcheck: The cruise would have ended mid to late summer of '67. I don't know that I came home immediately after the cruise because I was part of 2nd Battalion, 2nd Regiment, 2nd Division, 2-2-2. We came back and did whatever we did when we got back. Then, I went home on leave for thirty days. After that, then I went to California for two to three weeks of tune-up training before going to Vietnam. I got to Vietnam--I remember it was late October of '67 that I arrived in Vietnam.

MG: Say again what the tune-up training entailed.

JV: That was my first exposure to the M16, was when I got to California, Camp Pendleton in California, the big Marine base there. I had never held an M16 before. So, we did shooting with that and got familiar with it. Physical training. I remember there was some night training. I don't remember the details of it, except that tarantulas are in Southern California and they come out at night. I remember seeing this big hairy tarantula in a hole that I was in, in the semi-desert there. Maybe it is desert. I don't know. It was that kind of thing. It was the same kinds of things I did in North Carolina--night maneuvers and day maneuvers. I remember there was a hill there with a trail going straight up that hill. If you screwed up, the sergeants that were training us sent us to "hell," and hell was on top of that hill. You had to run with all your gear up that path, up that hill. I have, I think, something that is coincidentally right here. Sorry. I walked away from your recorder.

MG: That is okay.

JV: There are pictures in here from that time in California. I may have told you I lost my big--that's where that is.

MG: Did you wear that in Vietnam?

JV: No. I have to tell you the story about that. There are cruise pictures in here, home pictures, and I believe--I thought there was California pictures in here.

MG: Let's take a minute to go through this. If there is anything about the cruise that we are missing, we can get it on the record.

JV: Okay. That's the one I was looking for.

MG: Is that the hell hill?

JV: Do you see that path going up the hill?

MG: Yes.

JV: That's the path to hell. [laughter]

MG: That does look like that path to hell. [laughter]

JV: These [photographs] are all mixed up. Cruise, cruise, on board ship. I think cruise, cruise. Cruise and California.

MG: What is happening in this picture?

JV: That was onboard ship. That's Don Wagner. Right there is Don Wagner.

MG: It looks like you are playing limbo.

JV: There was music playing. Goofing around. I think this was on the cruise, too. I don't know where this was, but she was gorgeous.

MG: This was someone you met?

JV: Yes. I don't know if it was at a USO or in a bar. It was a dancing kind of thing as I recall, but I don't remember anything about her. Here. There she is, too. That was me. One of the guys took the picture. This was also on ship. Some of these I've written on the back of.

MG: Can you describe the sleeping quarters on the ship?

JV: Those racks were like five-high. That was eighteen or twenty inches between racks. That's Jaime Vazquez. Jaime Vazquez, he was a shitbird in Vietnam, if you know what that means or can imagine what that means. Not in Vietnam. In the Marine Corps. He and I were on the cruise together and then we ended up--there were several from the cruise who ended up in Delta Company 1-1 in Vietnam together. He went on to become councilman and then deputy mayor of Jersey City. I keep running into people who know him. Whenever I run into somebody from Jersey City, I say, "You know Jamie Vazquez?" "Oh, yes. I know Jaime." [laughter] He was a people's politician. Several have told me that he wasn't doing well.

MG: The other man in this picture is Chappelle who fell off the nets.

JV: Really? That would have been in practice of going down from the ship into the landing craft, that we practiced. "Fell off nets going aboard Francis Marion." Francis Marion was a troop transport ship that we were on. Wow. I don't remember that, but if it says it then it must be. As I recall, this was Vietnam at a USO show.

MG: Was this before or after the Battle of Hill 689?

JV: It would have been before, I believe. Before, I believe. Eventually, I have to tell you about--oh, that one's me.

MG: Who is this?

JV: That is my sister.

MG: Janice?

JV: Yes. Day after Christmas I have to go down there and babysit my mother for a few days because my sister is going on a cruise. This is Wilton Thomas. He was on the cruise with us. I was in a company in 1-1, he was in a company in 2-1. He ended up getting killed accidentally.

MG: What happened?

JV: They were on patrol or operation or something, and when you are traveling, you travel single file. When there are obstacles, coming up out of a rice paddy or going over or under something, the guy who's in front of you will turn around and help you up, out, or whatever, preferably by extending a hand and pulling you up, but sometimes extending the butt of a rifle for you to grab a hold of, or sometimes, stupidly, extending the muzzle of a rifle to help you up. The guy in front of him extended the muzzle of his rifle. There are three settings on what's known as the selector on a rifle: safe, semiauto, full auto, on an M16. When Thomas grabbed ahold of the muzzle and pressure was exerted on it, the guy's finger hit the trigger and a three-round burst--in 2011, I attended a 2-1 reunion in Olive Branch, Mississippi, which is right close to Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis is on one side of the border; Olive Branch is on the other side. I happened to be working in Memphis at the time, so I went to some of the activities at their reunion. I talked to some of the guys from the company that Thomas was in, who actually remembered the incident. They said, "It was close. It was a three-round burst and two of the rounds skittered off his flak jacket." You can imagine he's like this, the muzzle is facing here. Two of the rounds--one round went right through his armpit and killed him, probably pretty much instantly. That was Thomas. He was a good buddy of mine. I lost the picture I had of him and me, that we had taken on the cruise or in North Carolina, I don't remember which. In one of those booths--[laughter] you're too young to know maybe what a photo booth is, but it's a booth that they would have in places like on the boardwalk or resorts of various places. I'm looking for the picture of him and me.

MG: How did you find out that he had been killed?

JV: I ran into Don Wagner, who was also in 2-1. (Don Wagner?) told me about it while we were still in Vietnam. So, I knew about it before we came home. Then, when my kids were probably--the boys maybe ten years old, and daughter maybe twelve. Or maybe the boys were twelve and she was fourteen. I don't know. We were in Birmingham, Alabama, which is where Thomas was from. We spent half a day trying to find his family. Never did find anybody. We ended up in the office of the mayor of Birmingham. We didn't meet the mayor, but talked with his staff. They hooked me up with the veterans affairs officer of Alabama. He was able to look up and give me the date that it happened. We then went to the library and found the microfilm records from several days after that and got the article that had appeared in the paper. That article said that his father, at that point, was already a retired postal worker. So, by the time we got there, twenty years later, his father may have already been dead. I don't know. Where is that?

MG: Are you looking for the picture?

JV: Yes. I thought I had a folder that said, "Thomas picture." I know I do, but where is it? I know where it is. I know where it is. Okay. There's the picture of him and me from the photo booth. That's a picture of him and his obituary. What I had always wondered [was] whether his family knew how he died. This obituary did answer that question because it says in there that he was killed by friendly fire basically. So, they knew at least something about how he had died. What the people in the mayor's office told me from this was the address or the area in Birmingham where it said the family lived was wiped out because the interstate or something had come through there. The only other thing I had wanted to do was find the cemetery where he might have been buried and go to his grave, but we didn't do that for whatever reason. Maybe because we couldn't find it. I think it had something to do also with the fact that the wife and the kids had had enough of it by that point. Yes, that was probably thirty years ago. I had been through there also once before that, a couple years after I came home from Vietnam. I was going to school in Tennessee. I may have told you about Tusculum College in Greenville, Tennessee. I didn't tell you? I was home for a year. Had gone back to work for a year. Then went to college. I should have told you about that.

MG: I'm not sure we got up to that point. We still have not talked about Vietnam.

JV: That's right. That was after Vietnam. Well, I drove through on my way to New Orleans, where I ended up being thrown in jail, and stopped at a phone booth in Birmingham as we drove through. I went down to Mardi Gras, and looked up Thomas in the phonebook because I wanted to, at that point, find family. There were four pages of Thomases in the greater Birmingham area phonebook. There was no Wilton, so he wasn't named after his father, I guess. So, there was no way of telling, which, if any, were his family. So, I gave it up at that point. Then, thirty years later, tried it again with a more extensive search. Yes, he was a good friend of mine. I was devastated when I heard how he ended up dying. When I went to that 2-1 reunion in 2011, I specifically was looking for people who had known him to talk to about it. Of course, I got information from them, about the three-round burst and all that. But I wanted them to put him in their memorial page of those killed. What came back from the leaders of the 2-1 Association was, "Well, no, he wasn't killed. He wasn't KIA [killed in action], so he doesn't deserve the same kind of recognition as those killed by enemy action." I disagreed with that, but I wasn't in any position to argue it. So, gave up on it.

MG: Friendly fire has such a stigma, as well.

JV: To me, it's worse than KIA. It's a more tragic death to me.

MG: It turns people against the war as well.

JV: Yes. There was a made-for-television movie--I don't think it was in the movie theaters, but Carol Burnett made a movie. I think the name of it was *Friendly Fire*, a true story about a woman whose son was killed, turned out, by friendly fire, and she had great difficulty in getting

information about it, maybe even initially knowing that it was friendly fire. This was forty years ago, Carol Burnett made this movie.

MG: Was it about the Vietnam War?

JV: Yes. It was *Friendly Fire* in Vietnam. The movie might have come from a book. There might have been a book called *Friendly Fire*. [Editor's Note: The film *Friendly Fire* is based on C. D. B. Bryan's book *Friendly Fire*, published in 1976.] If you're interested in that sort of thing, you might want to look up--probably still available someplace. This is what you might find [an] interesting story also. Relatively late in my tour, I went on R&R [rest and recuperation] to Sydney, Australia. Me being cheap, I wrote a bunch of postcards while I was on R&R to various family members. That one being to my aunt Pat. Then had them in my suitcase, waiting until I got back to Vietnam to mail them because as you can see it says, "Free Vietnam." You didn't have to put a stamp--you didn't have to pay for a stamp to mail anything from Vietnam. Well, when I was in Da Nang, having just returned from R&R, while waiting for transport north to where the area rear was, I ran into a guy that I knew and we decided to go to the movies. I think that was when I saw the movie *Green Berets* with John Wayne, because I remember seeing that in Vietnam. I think that was when I went to see it. Rather than lug my suitcase around, they had a building, a hooch, that was a bus terminal basically. Me being young and stupid, rather than haul the suitcase around, I just left it there in the bus depot. It wasn't much of a building. It was just a little shack. We figured it will be okay here. We come back and it was gone. Somebody lifted my suitcase with all those postcards in it. So, your question should be: well then how did this one end up here? Twenty years later, I got an envelope in the mail with all my postcards in it and a letter of explanation, which I guess I still have someplace saying, "I accidentally picked up your suitcase and it was then subsequently destroyed by enemy fire. The only thing that survived was your postcards. I got your address somehow and I'm returning your postcards to you." It wasn't signed by anybody. It was just amazing. The only thing I can figure that--he had guilty conscious for taking my suitcase. It had a couple bottles of booze in it. He said he found these. The only thing that survived was these [postcards] and he had packed them away with his stuff. Now, twenty years later, he was going through his stuff and found them and returned them to me. I think there were more of them. I either still have more or I distributed some at that point to whoever they were addressed to. It was just amazing. Why would he have kept the postcards all those years? How could they have survived and my clothes and everything else in the suitcase not survive? The whole thing was fishy and just amazing to me. But that's the story of that postcard. Why I didn't give that to Aunt Pat, I'm not sure. I think that's who--Mr. and Mrs. Madsen. That was my Aunt Pat. She just died a few years ago finally. My mother's sister.

MG: I wonder if the suitcase really was destroyed.

JV: Why would he have kept them? It just doesn't make any sense.

MG: Did you want to tell me the story about the cross?

JV: This also is after Vietnam. The cross and my gold can openers--I've done a little packaging on them. I set up an email address. I told you about them, didn't I? No? You see, on my hats

there, there's one on each of the hats. These can openers were--we lived with these. These are C-ration can openers. They're known as John Wayne P38 C-ration can openers. Back in the mid-'80s, I bought the last production run. When C-rations were discontinued, the manufacturer of the can openers were discontinued also. Now there subsequently developed a demand for this type of thing in outdoor camping stores and survival stuff. But they're Chinese knockoffs. These were made in Ohio and I bought the last production run. I put an ad in the VFW magazine. I sold some. Then, some years later, I got the idea of getting them gold-plated. It took me a while to find somebody to gold-plate them, but probably eight or ten years ago, I had a few hundred of them gold-plated. My intention was always to sell them, but all I did over the years was I'd go to various reunions and see people I knew and donate them at the reunion to the auction to make money. Some of them were sold for as much as thirty-five dollars each. In the auction, I'd donate a few. I gave them to some people. Well, this one guy that I gave them to was also on Hill 689, but he was part of Charlie Company. We didn't know each other. But I gave him a stupid 24 karat gold-plated C-ration can opener. He was so touched and impressed by it, that he takes this [cross] off, and he says, "I want you to have this. This was given to me by a chaplain in Vietnam." I was embarrassed. I said, "You don't want to give me that." He insisted. Well, some years later, he committed suicide, killed himself ... I can't find that right away, either. I thought I could go right to that. Someday I've got to get better organized.

MG: What was his name again?

JV: Barney. Well, his last name was Barnhart. He was from Virginia, somewhere outside Washington. They called him Barney because of his last name being Barnhart. I wore this for a while, for a number of years, but then I thought I would lose it, so I took it off and put it away, and then for a while forgot where it was, but it was in with these old pictures. I don't know if that's corrosion on the back there, that stripe that goes across there, or if it serves some purpose or what that is. I don't know.

MG: I'm not sure.

JV: When he killed himself, was just before 9/11 in 2001. He was going to be buried in Arlington Cemetery on or just after 9/11. They ended up postponing his funeral for a few days because after 9/11, they postponed funerals for a couple of days. It was several days after. I went to the funeral, took pictures, and that's what I'm looking for. I asked the chaplain in charge if it was okay if I took pictures. I asked his widow if it was okay if I took pictures. They both said yes. So, I took pictures that I ended up giving--this was all film still--giving copies to his widow. After the funeral ceremony in Arlington--I took a half a day or a day off from work in Richmond to drive up there because I was working on the Richmond project at the time. I said, "There's the damage to the Pentagon right over there." It was facing Arlington, the back end of Arlington, where there were no graves yet. "I'm going to go over there." I drove over there and there was yellow tape across the road that you weren't supposed to go beyond because of the damage of the Pentagon that was just a few hundred yards beyond the vine-covered fence at Arlington cemetery. But I parked there and went over or around the yellow tape--there was nobody around--walked over to the fence, and there's the damage right there. I started taking some pictures. There was a guard there and he saw me and he yelled at me. I waved at him. Then he takes out his radio and starts talking into the radio. I said, "Gee, maybe I better leave."

So, I go back over to where the gravesite was--Barney's. I got out and walked back. Everybody's gone. I had no sooner gotten out of the car, walked back up there, then three motorcycles with some kind of police-type military-whatever go racing past, over towards where I had just come from. So, I don't know what they would have done. They probably would have, I don't know, taken my film out of my camera or whatever. Where the Thomas files were, were not in "Pictures," they were in my military folder. But I'm sure that the Barney pictures were in the picture folder. They're not under "B" for "Barney's Funeral," they're under "A" for "Arlington Barney's Funeral." There's a slideshow of Barney's funeral. There's the flag being presented to his widow. The Marines doing their thing with the flag. Of course, this comes before the flag is presented to the widow. This is the Khe Sanh Veterans Memorial, that tree and plaque that had been dedicated some years before. That's the Kennedy grave in Arlington. That's half-mast, I'm sure for 9/11. That's the scene of Washington from up on Arlington Hill, toward Arlington. Eventually, the picture should be in here of the Pentagon. That's the Khe Sanh Memorial. It was dedicated in 1993. I was there for the dedication. It was raining so hard that day. Of course, this was 2001. There it is.

MG: Oh my gosh.

JV: The close-up picture was taken from where I wasn't supposed to be, but the farther-away picture was taken from the closest you were allowed to--just outside of Arlington.

MG: That is unbelievable.

JV: Yes.

MG: Do you think (Barney?) had post-traumatic stress disorder from his time in Vietnam?

JV: It was a combination. He had gotten wounded relatively seriously at some point after [the Battle of Hill] 689, as I recall. His wife said he couldn't take the physical and the mental pain any longer. That was why he killed himself. Other than that, I don't know details of what he had gone through, either physically or mentally. But it was to the point where he committed suicide. The way that he committed suicide was he took a shotgun out on the deck behind the house and blew his head off. You have to really be in bad shape to do something like that, not just to yourself, but to your whole family. It's terrible. Of course, there were a lot that had done that. Myself, I've never been anywhere near that point. I think about things I went through, but I don't have a death wish from it. It's not that I can't stand it. What I went through was not as bad as what a lot of other guys went through. My time in Vietnam, there were some moments of terror. There was one point where I was cut off from everybody else and had several NVA soldiers coming towards me, not very far away. I survived with just a bit of a scratch. My purple heart was no big deal.

MG: After the war, were you seeing that men who had served in Vietnam were not doing well? Do you know what the statistics are with suicide and Vietnam Veterans?

JV: Yes and no. I can't quote statistics. I know that there's a lot that have, but I also know that the media--the differences today from prior wars--PTSD [posttraumatic stress disorder] has

always existed under different names. In World War I, it was called “battle fatigue”--or was that World War II? It had a different name in each period.

MG: Shell shock.

JV: Shell shock. Shell shock was World War I, I think. Battle fatigue was World War II. People suffered from it and I’m sure that there were some suicides after these previous wars, but it was not as well compiled and publicized. I know that there were. You hear about Korean War veterans and World War II veterans who aren’t able to talk about the war, like they say Vietnam veterans aren’t able to talk about the war because of what they’ve gone through, which is a symptom or an example of PTSD. There’s a book--give me just a second. This is a book full of statistics, not just about Vietnam, but it compares stuff from Vietnam and previous wars--World War II, Korea. That’s as far as I’ve gotten in the book. I had that along on the cruise and got that far into it, but I’m sure there’s something in there about suicide and statistics, and comparisons from Vietnam and other periods. I’ve got a vast library as I told you before, particularly on war-type books, Vietnam and other--especially Vietnam.

MG: It sounds like in the 1980s, the Vietnam War was being revisited with dedications, welcome home parades and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. This was also the time when you started to get in touch with men you served with.

JV: Yes. The Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home--this is one picture from the New York City Welcome Home Parade. Did I show you the pictures in here from that?

MG: No.

JV: No? [laughter]

MG: You gave me the DVD though.

JV: The movie?

MG: Yes.

JV: Did you see it?

MG: Yes.

JV: Did you see me?

MG: I might have missed you.

JV: I was right at the beginning and then again about three-quarters of the way through it.

MG: I’ll look more closely next time.

JV: Yes, that was quite an experience. That was the turning point. There were parades all over the country--Welcome Home Vietnam Veterans Parades all over the country during that period. That was really, I think, what started to turn society around in how they in general looked at Vietnam Veterans. You see that to this day. It's continuing to evolve. For the first thirty years after I came home--well, '68, '78--for the first twenty years after I came home, nobody ever said, "Welcome home," or, "Thank you for your service." At that parade in 1985, almost twenty years after I came home, that was a thank you and a welcome home. It was called Welcome Home Parade. I remember a New York City policeman shaking my hand and thanking me and welcoming me home. But that's the first time. Today, it happens quite regular. I'll be wearing one of my hats or Marine shirt or Vietnam-something. Complete strangers will say, "Thank you for your service," in the supermarket or whatever. It's quite a difference. It's also in how society is treating veterans who are coming back from these current wars with the support that they're getting. There are organizations--Jersey Cares and other organizations who are sending packages regularly, continually, over there. I've heard stories about how some units are getting so many of these packages of stuff that they don't know what to do with it all. That's totally different from how the troops were treated in my day. It really is a complete turnaround of the way society looks at soldiers in general and veterans.

MG: How does that make you feel when you are thanked for your service?

JV: I have heard some people say they don't want to hear it. "Too little, too late. You should have thanked me when I came home. I'm not interested in hearing it now." That's not me. I appreciate it. Some people say they don't know how to respond. The way that I respond is, "Thank you for your thank you," or, "You're welcome. Thank you for your thank you. We didn't used to hear that, so we appreciate hearing it now." That's the standard line that I give to people. But there are guys who have said that they don't want to hear it, which is too bad because I think they should. ... This, I think I should be able to find. These are the pictures from the New York City Welcome Home Parade. We formed up in Cadman Plaza in Brooklyn and then marched across the Brooklyn Bridge. The Khe Sanh Vet organization puts out a nice magazine/newsletter, quarterly I guess it is. I, a couple of weeks ago, sent in all these pictures and the write-up that I did. I'll let you read the write-up after the pictures run through.

MG: Okay.

JV: You'll recognize some of these kinds of scenes from that video that you saw, because it's from the same day. I've seen some of these people who are in this, in the video. "Punks for Vets." This guy, that's me. So that's what you look for in the video. Now this is the New York City Vietnam Veterans Memorial. My wife and two of the kids--after it was dedicated. That's that Khe Sanh memorial. I sent all these in. I sent this in, too. I think I've shown you these, didn't I?

MG: Yes.

JV: The 689 and the Phu Bai pictures. They dedicated the New York City Memorial around the same time. That, we're marching across the bridge and I stood to the side--well, it's all explained in the--it did go all the way through, right?

MG: Yes. I read that you, at one point, started marching in formation with everybody.

JV: Yes. This park service guy, he was a gunnery sergeant. I think he had been a drill instructor. He formed us up. So, I at least told you the story. This is the write-up that I did. You'll have to scroll down as you read it.

MG: Should I read it out loud?

JV: No, just read it to yourself. Well, I can give you a copy of it that you can take and put--you can read it out loud if you want to get it into the recorder, but I can print you a copy of it.

MG: I'll read it out loud, just so we have it. Was this written on May 7, 1985? Or was that when the parade was?

JV: That's when the parade was.

MG: "Marching in the New York City Vietnam Veterans Welcome Home Parade was a memorable experience, one that I will never forget. What made it so memorable was the enthusiasm of the parade watchers and the camaraderie of what, for many of us, was the first attempt to reconnect with our fellow Vietnam veterans. This was certainly true for me. When we first came home from Vietnam--for me, that was August 1968--we resumed our lives where we left off before we left for the service. Some of us had a more difficult time with that return to civilian life than others. For most of us it took some amount of time before we were ready to examine our Vietnam experiences, an attempt to reconnect with those with whom we had served. This parade was held seventeen years after my return from Vietnam and pretty much corresponded with my readiness to reconnect with my Vietnam experience and comrades. Some Vietnam veterans I had spoken with before the parade were not interested in participating in it. They said things, 'Too little, too late.' They were still bitter at the way the war was conducted and the treatment they received when they returned home from the government, Veterans organizations, and from some elements of American society. They would have marched in a parade right after they came home, but because society blamed Vietnam veterans for a lot of the negativity associated with the war and because of the way the war ended--gradually and without victory--the mood of the country--civilian and veteran--was not conducive to parades at the time we came home. Over time, however, society changed and realized that the veteran did not lose the war. Welcome Home Parades were held in many cities around the country. When I heard that the New York City parade was going to be held, I knew I wanted to participate. It was a wonderful experience. This change in societal attitudes has evolved into support for today's war veterans and is why we now hear, 'Thank you for your service,' from so many people. I know that some Vietnam vets are uncomfortable hearing that, but I do appreciate hearing it and typically respond, 'Thank you for your thank you. I appreciate it. We did not hear that in the past when we first came home.' I grew up in South Bound Brook, New Jersey, a small town about thirty miles outside of New York City. I graduated from Bound Brook High School in 1965 and went to work at first one, and then another, local factory. I don't remember having any early interest in joining any branch of the military. I do remember my US history teacher in high school, Mr. Widener telling us boys that some of us would likely serve in the military in the

conflict in Vietnam that was just then heating up. I didn't think it was likely that I would. A while after graduation, one of my best friends decided he was going to join the Marine Corps. I said to him, 'Good luck, buddy. More power to you.' I still had no interest in the military. Then he issued a dare. That got to me. I went off to the Marines recruiting office and joined up. Anyway, when I got out in 1968, I worked for a year and then went to college for a year. I got married to my lovely wife, Sara--forty-five years in February 2016--and had three kids within two and a half years; first a girl and then twin boys. I was too busy to think about Vietnam and the people I served with there. I was doing rotating shiftwork in a factory and working on the weekends as a bartender at the Riverside Pub, a local neighborhood bar in South Bound Brook, co-owned by a friend of mine. So, seventeen years was just about the right amount of time for me to have developed the interest in getting back in touch with my experiences and the people I served with. I'm sure the dedication of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, a few years previous to the parade, was also a factor in making me ready. During the construction of the wall, I was not too interested in it. The controversy over the design and the fact that I was just so busy with life contributed to my lack of interest. Then, over the months after it was dedicated, I developed a strong interest in seeing it. When I finally got up the nerve to mention it to my wife the Spring after the dedication, she said, 'You should go to DC by yourself some weekend and see the wall.' My mother had saved all the letters I sent home and she gave them all to me. I went to the wall, got a room at the Alexandria YMCA, all I could afford, and read all the letters and cried when all the memories came flooding back. I was then ready to reconnect. The day of the parade I was working midnight shift. I took a bus into New York City to Cadman Plaza, just on the Brooklyn side of the Brooklyn Bridge, where the parade was forming. There were thousands of Vietnam Veterans milling about. They made an announcement: 'All Marines to the front.' Everyone was asking, 'What unit were you with?' and 'When were you there?' Trying to reconnect with people we served with. Some people actually wrote their units and dates on the back of their shirts to let people know in an attempt to reconnect. After the officials and dignitaries stepped off to start the parade, they fed in a group of fifty or so Marines. Between each group of veterans, they would insert a band or some other organization. I was in that first group. I had pretty well checked out everybody in that group and didn't reconnect with anybody I'd served with. They apparently didn't have a band ready, so after the first group of Marines, they just left a gap, and then another group of fifty or so Marines. We were in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge when I decided I would stand to the side and wait for the next group to catch up, so I could join them and check out that group. I joined the first ranks of the second group. As we came down into Manhattan, we could see the crowds of people and the ticker tape coming down on the first group. There was at least one fireboat in the river spraying red, white and blue water up in the air. A flight of Huey gunships flew over the bridge. It was a wonderful experience. We were coming down Broadway as pretty much just a mob when a vet in a park service uniform who said he had been a DI [drill instructor] got out in front of us and started calling cadence. We straightened up, formed ranks and started marching like Marines. At some point, I noticed the man marching next to me on my left in the front rank was looking at me as though he recognized me. He was not someone I recognized at all. Eventually, we started talking as we marched. We asked each other the usual questions—what unit were you with and when were you there? Nothing matched. He was with the 26th Marines and was in Khe Sanh for the siege. I was the 1-1 and didn't get into the Khe Sanh area until I participated in Operation Pegasus that broke the siege and was on the hills 558, 881S and 689, up until the Khe Sanh area was abandoned in July 1968. Check out the photos of me on Hill 689. He didn't look at all

familiar to me. Finally, I said to him, 'I don't think we know each other.' He wouldn't let it go. He kept looking at me and I could see he was trying to make the connection. Finally, he got a big smile on his face, snapped his finger and exclaimed, 'I got it. You're one of the bartenders at the Riverside Pub.' You know him as Sid Patricio. [Is that how you say it?] Otherwise known as 'Fish.' I can't imagine how he got that nickname. Sid had a car repair garage in New Brunswick just a few miles away from my home. A friend of his was one of the owners of the Riverside Pub, the bar in South Bound Brook where I was a part-time bartender. He'd been in a few times and recognized me from there. Small world. Sid paid my first dues for the Khe Sanh vet organization. I still owe you twenty dollars, Sid. I had my camera with me at the parade and took the accompanying pictures. I also have a DVD of the parade that was produced by an educational video company. It shows Sid and me marching the front rank. If any of you were in that parade and would like a copy of the DVD, get in touch. Included are also pictures of my wife and a couple of our kids at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Lower Manhattan that was dedicated at the same time as the parade. The only Khe Sanh vet reunion I have ever made it to was the one in DC in 1993 when the memorial plaque and the tree were dedicated in the pouring rain. I do hope to make it to another reunion before too much longer. Welcome home, everyone. Thank you for your service." When did you write that, Jim?

JV: I started writing it in 2009. I finished it on the cruise. [laughter] We had just returned from a cruise to either Bermuda or the Bahamas earlier in 2015.

MG: Can you talk about the controversy with the design of the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC.?

JV: Maya Lin was the architecture student who had the winning design that was eventually built. Jan Scruggs, who was speaker at our reunion in August, was an Army veteran from Vietnam. He got the idea of the memorial. He got some senators on his side, Senator [Mark] Warner from Virginia and others. They got approval to build the memorial. Well, they did a contest for design. This design was chosen. A lot of veterans did not like it. I mean, violently did not like it. It descended into the ground. It was a black wall. It was not at all appreciated by some people. That turned around once it finally got built. The statue of the three soldiers that was included was a compromise because it was thought that this wall--it was not a memorial that honored the war; it was too negative, too dark. So, the three soldiers were a compromise, as a more traditional kind of memorial. But yes, it was a big controversy back then. I had no interest in it really while that was all going on, but then, as I said in there, after it was built, then I wanted to go. How do you like that?

MG: I love it. Was it cathartic to go down there?

JV: Oh, yes. Absolutely. Yes. That was in '82. It was a combination of that and the parade in '85 that got a lot of people interested and that turned things around for society. The wall certainly had its part in doing that.

MG: You were still on your cruise when you got orders for Vietnam. Is that right?

JV: Well, on the cruise, the Caribbean cruise, we pretty much all knew that we were going to Vietnam, although I wouldn't have had time for a full thirteen-month tour before my enlistment time was up. It was thirteen months for Marines, twelve months for everybody else. So, I didn't really think they were going to send me, but I remember at the end of the cruise they had come out with a paper where you could put your name on to volunteer to go to Vietnam. That's what we were training for. So, everybody's putting their name on this list. I did too, but secretly thinking they probably wouldn't send me. They did. I don't remember when I got handed the orders for Vietnam, but it was before I came home, after the cruise, because I had the orders that didn't say Vietnam; they said WESTPAC, W-E-S-T-P-A-C, and that stood for Western Pacific. In those days, Western Pacific generally only meant one place: Vietnam. So, I knew I was going. But I didn't tell anybody that when I first got home. I had a ten-day leave after the cruise.

MG: You left from Camp Pendleton.

JV: Yes. I did two or three weeks at Pendleton, for what I call the tune-up training. Then went straight from there. There was no coming back home again before that.

MG: How did you get over there?

JV: We flew out of El Toro Marine air base that wasn't too far from Pendleton. They flew us out. We landed in Hawaii for refueling. That, to this day, is still the only time that I've been to Hawaii. We were there about twenty minutes to refuel. It was all Marines on the plane. I believe it was a civilian plane, but they let us off the plane for that twenty minutes. We all hit the airport bar, ordered two drinks, gulped them down. I can never remember the exact number, but the number in my mind is either a hundred and sixty or a hundred and eighty Marines getting off this big airplane, piling into the bar, each ordering two quick drinks, gulping them down and getting back on the plane. The only image in my mind of that whole thing is in looking up at a relatively close hillside that's covered with jungle and a blue sky with big, white fluffy clouds. That's the only picture in my mind from that stop in Hawaii. We flew from there to Okinawa. I think it was on the way over, the only stops were Hawaii and then Okinawa, where I spent a few days, but I don't remember why or I don't remember much about it, but I do remember having been in Okinawa on the way over. Then they flew us from there to Da Nang. Coming home, I think it was Okinawa because I know I was in Okinawa on the way home. But I also, on one of those, remember landing on Guam, either on my way over or on my way back, which would have been a refueling stop also. I don't know how far Guam was from Okinawa. I know it was Okinawa both coming and going and Guam either coming or going once. What I remember about landing in Guam was that it looked like we were coming down in the ocean because I didn't see any land anywhere. Suddenly, just before the wheels touch down, there's this little tiny island of Guam. I think that was just a refueling stop. I don't remember getting off the plane at all for that. I know that coming home was a civilian plane. There were stewardesses. As the wheels lifted off from the runway in Da Nang everybody erupted with a shout of relief that we were leaving.

MG: What were your first impressions of Da Nang when you arrived?

JV: Don't really remember much about it. There was a town or city of Da Nang, but never saw that. I was only on the military base at Da Nang, not in the city. That was pretty much the case with all places in Vietnam. I was in Da Nang when I first got to Vietnam for a couple of days while they arranged transport for me to get up to Dong Ha Air Base and then a truck over to Quang Tri, which is where the unit rear was. Our battalion rear was in Quang Tri. The unit, maybe the whole division, had just moved up from Chu Lai, which is near Da Nang. So being as far south as Da Nang, the only time I was ever as far south as Da Nang was just coming and going. I was never any farther south. I spent all my time up north. After I left in August of '68, the whole unit moved back down to the Chu Lai area, which was a whole different operational area. It was more populated, more urban. Lots of rice paddies, but there were more villages. Up where I was up north in the Quang Tri, Dong Ha, Phu Bai--well, Phu Bai was a city. But again, I never saw the city of Phu Bai. It was always the base. Then we'd go out from there to operations in various places north and west of there. But it was a more country area rather than the Da Nang area, which was more populated. I have either eleven or thirteen, something like that, operations in my record. Did I give you a copy of my record?

MG: No, but that would be helpful for me to look at.

JV: Yes.

MG: Great. I will add this to your file.

JV: I printed you a copy of that.

MG: Thank you.

JV: If you want to staple it, there's a stapler. There's my honorable discharge. A copy of it. You can have that.

MG: Your file is getting bigger and bigger.

JV: [laughter]

MG: Your DD214.

JV: It's a copy of my DD214 you can have. This is my SRB, service record book. [laughter] Where did you come from before you moved here? You just moved here recently.

MG: I was in Maine.

JV: You were in Maine. You may have heard of him--Governor [James] Florio. [Editor's Note: James Florio was the 49th Governor of New Jersey and served from 1990 to 1994.] Governor Florio was before [Jon] Corzine and [Jim] McGreevey. McGreevey was before Corzine. Florio was before him. Florio, when he was starting his campaign for reelection, he had a bunch of military people come down to Drumthwacket, the governor's home in Princeton. That was a picture taken there with Florio and one of the other guys and me in the background.

MG: Florio has quite a hairdo.

JV: Yes. Well, I had met a politician--I'm trying to think of his name--Frank Pallone. But politicians all have good hair. It was at a fisheries meeting someplace down the shore years ago. I was talking to him, giving him my opinion about the fisheries situation. He said, "That's good. You should be a politician. You should run for office." I said, "I don't have the hair for it." [laughter] Because he had this elaborate hairdo. ... I don't know if you have an interest in any of this. This is my enlistment. You can see the old stuff is all yellowed. This is an original of whatever this is.

MG: What is that?

JV: My father worked for American Cyanamid, and they came out with this company newsletter periodically. There's probably a date on it someplace, but it was while I was in.

MG: December 1966.

JV: So December of '66, I was still in training. I had gone from Parris Island to Camp Lejeune, Camp Geiger.

MG: It says, "Private James Velcheck completed eight weeks Marine training at Parris Island and is in advanced combat training at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. He is the son of John Velcheck." ... Tell me more about those first few weeks in Vietnam.

JV: I remember telling you the story about the first day that I arrived up in the company. The First Sergeant--here were six or eight of us who came as replacements in that bunch--he welcomed us aboard. He said, "I'd like to send you right out to the company. They're on an operation." That was the Operation Medina. Did you read the book *Lions of Medina*?

MG: Not yet.

JV: I think it was that operation. Maybe that one was over already. Anyway, they were off on something. He said, "I'd like to send you out there because they're shorthanded, but we've lost touch with them. We don't know where the company is and we don't have communication with them right now." We thought, "Well, that's not very good." They put us up for the night in these long, low buildings that looked like chicken coops. That night, sappers--you know what a sapper is? It's a demolitions person--NVA or VC, whatever they were. They had snuck through the wire, through the perimeter at the Dong Ha Air Base, which was just a mile or two away from Quang Tri where we were. They blew up bladders of jet fuel. They would have the jet fuel in these great big rubber bladders they called them. I remember vividly--we're in this building with open windows and doorways and such--there was no glass or doors on it--looking at each other's faces in these explosions that were going off with the flashes of light, like lightning. The look on our faces--we were all thinking the same thing: the company is lost, the world is blowing up around us, what the hell did we get ourselves involved in? We got through that and we went out to the company. I don't frankly remember the first days of being with the company. The

record there will tell you what I was involved in, in that general way, right from the beginning. There was two pages--the names of the operations and their locations and the dates of them anyway. I do remember the Marine Corps birthday, November 10th, which was just a couple of weeks after I got there. We were out in the field on something and they brought helicopters with hot chow. One of the traditions in the Marine Corps is to get a hot meal on Thanksgiving--turkey and dressing and all the fixings. They brought it out to us in the field, in the big green insulated cans, so it wasn't just C-rations. We did have that. I do recall that. But details of a lot of these operations, kind of like the picture that's in my mind from Hawaii--a snapshot, a still. I have a lot of those. Plus, I have the pictures from Vietnam of a lot of these times and activities. I don't know if I showed you through all my pictures that are in here also from Vietnam.

MG: Do you have a snapshot of this first combat operation?

JV: What was the first one called?

MG: It says, "Against Communist forces in the Republic of South Vietnam." Then "a search and destroy operation on Operation Granite."

JV: I don't associate the name Granite with any particular operation or any particular snapshot in my mind. I do know these are--this was a picture at Quang Tri, where we presumably were when I first got there. As were these pictures. This was Quang Tri. Written on the back of at least some of them is an explanation of who they are. Carlos Fisher was on the cruise with me. Putman might have been, but I'm not absolutely sure whether he was or not.

MG: Yes. George Putman and Carlos Fisher. Can you talk a little bit about Quang Tri and what was going on there?

JV: There was nothing really going on there. It was a rear area for us. You can see from the kinds of living that we did--we're living in tents above ground. We're not in any kind of fortified thing because there was no real action going on. Every now and then, as I recall, from the other side of the river that was in this sandy area right by where we were living, there would be an occasional sniper round fired from over there. I don't recall ever any damage from it. Nobody ever got shot there or anything. We were there for some period of time. I don't know how long. A couple of weeks maybe. There was another time that we were back at Quang Tri again, in a higher area of Quang Tri where there was not the sand. There was some scrub brush and such. So, it wasn't at all hostile. It wasn't as though I landed in--other than that first night where the world was blowing up, it was a relatively soft exposure to the war because I didn't get into anything right away. At some point, we turned the whole Quang Tri over to the Army. Once we did that, the Army started having lots of hard time there--enemy activity because the Army is not the Marine Corps. [laughter]

MG: Were you a rifleman?

JV: I was an 0351.

MG: Mortarman? Rocketman?

JV: No, mortarman was 0341. I was a rocketman. That was the 3.5-inch rocket launcher. 0351 was the rockets--well, 0351 was a miscellaneous light weapons MOS. It covered the 3.5-inch rocket launcher, which I had when I first got there, but then we transitioned in the LAAW [light anti-armor weapon], the disposable one-shot rocket launcher. But it also covered gas, demolitions, 106 recoilless rifle, and flame thrower. The only thing I actually used was the 3.5 and the LAAW.

MG: Can you describe how you used them?

JV: I would carry the 3.5 over my shoulder with a round in it. As I recall, there were two tubes that screwed together. It was aluminum. It weighed eleven pounds. Then the rocket, as I recall, was eleven pounds. So together, over my shoulder, it was twenty-two pounds on my shoulder. It made me a target a couple of times. There were rounds that would buzz over my head because I was carrying that thing. Radiomen were targets with that big antenna sticking up. Officers were targets because they were close to the radioman and could be identified as important people within the group or stood out as targets. The only times I used the 3.5--we had both high explosive rounds and white phosphorous rounds. What we used them for was for marking targets. I can remember sometimes the lieutenant would direct me to where I would fire a white phosphorous round to mark a bunker, an enemy bunker, for the helicopters to then come in and engage, put some rockets into or something. Never used it a lot. Never fired it a lot. I remember one time I fired it in a sandy area. I remember the rocket as it was exiting the tube, it was making a grinding noise because there was sand in the tube.

[Tape Paused]

MG: Do you remember Operation Lancaster?

JV: I remember there was an Operation Lancaster. Lancaster might have been one of the ones that were Lancaster I, II, III--Kentucky I, II, III. Those are two pages of operations there and I really can't differentiate one from another. I do have the complete copies of command chronologies, which is the battalion record of all of this. Let me see if I can find right quick a copy or two of command chronologies. I think that's what might be in this box.

MG: I always get you disorganized.

JV: Well, lucky when I can find anything. I thought there was actual copies of them in there. I'll be right back. So, everybody knows Sid Patricio from the Khe Sanh vets organization because he's one of the trustees of the organization. He's been active in it all this time. I don't know why, but here's a couple pages from command chronology. These are some pages from a command chronology. I thought I had actual copies in here, but I guess not. This is the book from the commissioning of the ship USS Gonzalez. [Alfredo Cantu] "Freddy" Gonzalez got the Medal of Honor posthumously in the Battle of Hue City. He was in our battalion, but not in my company. There was a ship named after him a number of years ago. A friend of mine went down to the commissioning and he brought me back this, plus a t-shirt and a hat. I have met several times Freddy Gonzalez's mother. She's active in our organization. She was at our

reunion again this year. I remember asking her once if--I know she's been on the ship. She was there for the commissioning and has been close with the crew. I asked her, I said, "Have you ever been on the ship when it was under way?" She straightened up and she proudly said to me, "I drove it." [laughter] Yes, she's a sweet little old lady. She's got to be close to ninety now.

MG: Maybe I will have you take a look at this. If you could scan and see what pops out to you from this chronology, that would be helpful to me.

JV: Well, there's really not much here. There's a lot more to them than this. This is a page from the July 1968 one. That's a relevant page because that talks about the activities, the action on Hill 689.

MG: Do you want to talk about what you remember leading up to this battle?

JV: Yes. Because this really came towards the end of my tour. I came home within a couple of weeks after the end of that. When I got there at the end of October, I then start going on these operations that are at least names and dates in those two pages of record. Sometime, I think it was the end of November, is when we went to the Con Thien area. We were at what was known as Yankee Station, which was not on Con Thien Hill itself, but was an outpost of Con Thien, about a half a mile or so away from Con Thien. We were there for about a month, up until Christmas time. We were there basically for the month of December. That was my first experience with Marine death. That was when Trujillo was killed. He was a new guy, who had been there--have I mentioned him before? He was killed within a week of when he arrived in Vietnam. He was from [Colorado]. I think his name was Gary Trujillo. Having just arrived from what we called "the world," the guys in our squad--he was part of our squad. In fact, he belonged to me. He was a rocketman. So, he was my assistant gunner. During the ten months I was in Vietnam, I recall having three assistant gunners. Since I had the experience and time of the Caribbean cruise first, I was a Lance Corporal when I got to Vietnam. Private, then Private First Class, then Lance Corporal and then Corporal. I made Corporal while I was in Vietnam. But me being a Lance Corporal and these three people who were under me, one at a time--as I recall, they were privates or probably more likely private first class. They were assistant gunners. I carried the 3.5 and they carried rounds for it, ammo. Trujillo was mine. Our squad was composed of machine gunners and rockets. Two machine gun teams, which were composed of three Marines per machinegun team--so there was a half a dozen machine gunners and just a couple of rocket people. Well, Trujillo was rockets. What the guys made him do--he had a bit of a singing voice. [Telephone rings]

[Tape Paused]

MG: His singing voice.

JV: He had a singing voice, so they made him sing songs that were current back in "the world." To this day, I occasionally hear those. I heard one of them recently when we were someplace. I forget where we were. There was one, "The Letter" by the Box Tops. Are you familiar with that? Because it was new at the time that was one they made him sing. The other one was--I don't recall the actual name of it. I've never been that much on music, not like some people are.

It was by the Brooklyn Bridge. It was a group at the time. I can recall the song. I just don't remember the name of it. We never had much in the way of--I remember going out on night ambushes and stuff like that, out of Yankee Station, but I don't remember there ever being any real action there, except--what we were doing there was we were building an ammo bunker. We were digging into the ground and building a place to store ammo. Also, we built a sleeping bunker. I've got pictures of all this. Don't have any pictures of Trujillo. He wasn't there long enough to get his picture taken. We got hit one time--now, I remembered it as being artillery rounds, several artillery rounds. But just recently, in August, when I was at the platoon commanders in West Virginia for that mini reunion with several of us from the platoon, we talked about this. He said no, it was Russian rockets that hit us that day, the big 122 millimeter rockets. I still have my doubt about that, but he was the platoon commander, so you think he should know. We were working on the bunker. Over a period of a minute or two, several of these artillery rounds or rockets came in. I don't recall any of them landing within the perimeter. We had permanent bunkers and trench lines. We took off running for our bunker. There were three of us: Fred Rains, I think it was Gary Trujillo--I think that was his first name--and me, who dove for the bunker. Rains went in first. Trujillo was right behind him, and I was right on Trujillo's heels, getting into this bunker. Just as the three of us piled into it, one of these artillery rounds or rockets, whatever they were, landed right in front of the bunker on the outside of the line, and shrapnel came in through the aperture, the fighting hole, the window in the bunker, where if you were being attacked we'd be shooting out of. One piece caught Rains in the cheek, and one piece hit Trujillo in his helmet behind his left ear and went right through his helmet. Made a big hole in his helmet and a correspondingly big hole in his head. I ended up with brain matter all over my uniform because I was practically in contact with him when he got hit. What I got from it was nothing. No shrapnel hit me at all, but it hit the other two guys who were first into the bunker. Being young and stupid again, I didn't realize he was dead. He probably died instantly. Of course, right after that, the action stopped. We called corpsmen. The corpsman came running over. Doc Malone from Alabama. I remember later on, saying to him--because they took Trujillo and Rains out. I guess a helicopter must have come in and taken them away. I don't remember that part, but I remember later on saying to Doc Malone, "Is Trujillo going to live?" Doc Malone says, "No, he's dead." So that was my first exposure to death in Vietnam.

MG: What kind of impact did such a close call have on you?

JV: Everybody was sad, moped around for a while, but then we got on with things. We did what we had to do. It was a close call, but I had any number of close calls in Vietnam. Given the difference in seconds or inches, I could have ended up dead. I had a mortar round land right close to me. I was in the foxhole and it landed right in front of it. If it had been a couple of feet, it would have been right in the hole with me. There was another time we were clearing off fields of fire. We were burning elephant grass. Apparently, there was a grenade laying there in the elephant grass. It exploded and it was only a few feet away from me. I got nothing from it. Bullets whistling over my head. Any number of times I could have ended up one of the dead, but for whatever reason--and there's always some survivor guilt. Why did I live and these other guys didn't? We all have some degree of PTSD, but to me, the difference is whether it has a negative impact--negatively affects living your life, your employment, your relationships with other people, screaming at night with nightmares. I don't have any of that. So, I don't think that

I'm negatively impacted by PTSD, but we all have it to some degree because we went through this.

MG: Did anybody start turning to religion in Vietnam?

JV: I don't know of anybody who was too particularly religious, but we all--well, there was one guy we called "Preacher." We probably all at one time or another said, "God, if you let me live through this, I'll come to church every day." [laughter] But I don't remember a whole lot of religious activity, although there were chaplains there. We would sometimes attend a service.

MG: Tell me a little more about the search and destroy operations you went on.

JV: A lot of moving through the countryside. Some contact with mines and booby-traps. There would be occasional sniper rounds. I was never in a real hot or intense firefight on any of these operations. The worst was on Hill 689, where there was a lot of action and a lot of casualties. Did I give you a copy of the letter that I had sent home from there? Yes. I don't know if I told you this when I came home from the reunion--on September first when we last met--but there's a book coming out, supposedly by the end of the year, from Michael Archer, who's an author I've been in touch with. I did describe to him and sent him a copy of that letter. This was just before the reunion. This was during the summer. He said, "Boy, it would be really interesting if we knew what was under these blacked out parts." I said, "Yes. Well, if you find a document specialist who can maybe remove what must be magic marker and get to the ink underneath we can find out what's under there." He said, "Well, I really don't have time because I'm in final editing on the book and I have to get it to the publisher." But I think what's going to be in that book is some of what I told him. I think I'll be in the book, although he hadn't said that definitively. I think that letter is going to make it to the book because he said he would have liked to have been able to quote what's actually hidden also in the book. After he had said that, I said, "Well, let me look into it and see if I can find out how I can remove this magic marker." So, I did a Google search on it. What I found out was what can remove magic marker is nail polish remover. So, I went and bought a cheap bottle of nail polish remover. This is back in August. I said, "Gee, once I find the original letter, I have to have a go at removing the magic marker." So far, I haven't had a chance to look for the original letter. [laughter]

MG: Let me know what you uncover. I was curious myself.

JV: Yes, I am too, obviously. [laughter] There was another part that he's interested in. That has to do with my bunker that was blown on Hill 689 that night. There was some confusion about that. He was saying it was somebody from Bravo Company who blew that bunker. I said, "Well, I was sure that the guys that I encountered as I was leaving that surrounded bunker were guys from Alpha Company." He said, "No, it was blown by Lieutenant Frank Aheru from Bravo Company." So, when I went to the reunion, I was asking guys from Alpha Company--and there were guys there who remembered the incident. They don't necessarily remember me having stumbled up to them and told them, "There's gooks in the bunker over there." At a previous reunion, I had found out that they told me that the guy who blew the bunker with a LAAW ended up subsequently getting killed. I think they said his name was Williams. I tried to find out something more about that to clear up this confusion with Michael Archer with the book. What I

found out was that it was more complicated than what I originally thought. It comes down to: apparently, there were two bunkers blown by LAAWs on that hill that night. Presumably, the one that this lieutenant from Bravo Company blew up was a different one from my bunker because what I found out was--and the guy that I talked to was reluctant to say it at first. But then he said, "Look, yes, the guy who blew your bunker with the LAAW and who sometime later got killed"--maybe it was that same night. I don't know. He said, "He's not the guy who got credit for blowing that bunker." He said, "There was another guy who took credit for blowing the bunker and ended up getting the Silver Star for it, but he never blew the bunker." So, I let it go at that. I just told Mike Archer, the author, that I've cleared up the confusion in the point that there were two bunkers blown that night, one by Alpha Company and one by Bravo Company. Whether that part's going to get into the book or not, I don't know, but the part about the controversy with somebody taking credit for it, that won't be because I never said that to the author. I don't know what I want to do with that. Maybe at the next reunion, which is going to be in Minneapolis--this was the first reunion I had been at in a few years. If I go to the one in Minneapolis, maybe I'll find these guys again and talk to them about it some more and ask if they want to try to correct the record by going to the Marine Corps and telling their part. Because a Silver Star, getting it when you don't deserve it, it's a big deal. I think the record should get straightened out. The one guy that I talked to, he introduced me to another guy. He said, "This guy will know more about it." I asked him about it. Didn't tell him anything about what the first guy had told me about the controversy. He said, "Oh, that bunker? That bunker was blown by Lieutenant Davis, who went on to become a general. I think that was complete fabrication. He just didn't want to get involved with it. But that's where that stood. I have since spoken to General Davis about this and he said Williams blew several bunkers with LAAWs that night and got killed doing it. He got a Silver Star posthumously for this.

MG: Is the book just about the Battle of Hill 689?

JV: Not entirely, but it is about the aftermath of Khe Sanh. Because Hill 689, that came as Khe Sanh was being abandoned. Supposedly, this book is about the abandonment of Khe Sanh. No, the book "The Long Goodbye" is about the search for the remains of Mike's friend Tom Mahoney who was killed as Bravo Company was leaving Hill 8815 to come to our aid on 689. 689 was part of that. The preliminary book that he wrote--let me see if I can put my hand right on it. Am I good or am I good?

MG: You're good.

JV: See now, this book was the--I think I showed you this one. This was the *Lions of Medina* with all the stuff written in here that the guys who were on the operation wrote for me. But this one is Michael Archer's first book about Khe Sanh. [Editor's Note: Mr. Velcheck is referring to Michael Archer's memoir *A Patch of Ground: Khe Sanh Remembered*, published in 2005.] This is about Khe Sanh itself.

MG: Can you talk more about Khe Sanh?

JV: Other than the Battle of Hue during Tet '68--January, February '68--Khe Sanh was the big deal of Vietnam. [Editor's Note: The Tet Offensive, a series of offensives conducted from

January 30, 1968, to March 28, 1968, by the Viet Cong against every major city in South Vietnam, is seen as the point when American public opinion began turning against the war. The Battle of Hue lasted until March 3, 1968.] How much do you know about Khe Sanh? Have other people told you about Khe Sanh? No? Wow. Do you know about Dien Bien Phu? It was thought that the North Vietnamese were looking at Khe Sanh as another Dien Bien Phu. [Editor's Note: In 1954, Vietnamese forces defeated French military forces at Dien Bien Phu, signifying the end of French colonial rule of Indochina. The Geneva Accords sought a temporary partition of Vietnam along the 17th Parallel and elections to unify the country under a single government, but the post-colonial era witnessed two nations forming, Communist North Vietnam and anti-communist, US-backed South Vietnam.] It was a base up in the middle of nowhere--[General William] Westmoreland had it there too--monitor and indict the Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was just to the west of that. [Editor's Note: The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a route used by the North Vietnamese to get supplies and men into South Vietnam that ran through Cambodia and Laos.] It was a critical location. That was where Westmoreland envisioned that there would be a huge battle. So that's why he had six thousand Marines there. He was looking forward to there being a big battle there where we could wipe out the NVA. Well, it never really developed into a huge battle. We did kill fifteen thousand or more NVA around there, but it was through mostly B52 strikes and such. The NVA would have liked to have taken out Khe Sanh. I think they intended to, but they were never able to do it. But thousands of rounds of artillery and rockets landed in Khe Sanh. It was the 26th Marines--Sid Patricio and the rest of the 26th--who were the primary ones who were there through the siege. There was one battalion there of 9th Marines and there was a smattering of Army-type people there also, but it was mostly the 26th Marines. I didn't get up there. The siege was seventy-seven days long. I didn't get up there until after the siege. Operation Pegasus was what broke the siege. Then I was on those hills around it, including 689. I was never in Khe Sanh. So, I can't tell you about the--but there have been tons of books written about Khe Sanh itself. This [*A Patch of Ground: Khe Sanh Remembered*] being just one of them. This [*Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh*] being pretty much the definitive book. Ray Stubbe--Stubbe, Stub, however you want to pronounce it--he was a chaplain who was with the 26th Marines during the siege. You're certainly welcome to borrow these books if you want, rather than having to buy or find them some other way. There's been tons of stuff written about Khe Sanh. The Marine Corps doesn't usually fight this way; hold up in a position and just sitting there. It's just not the Marine Corps way. So, there was a lot of controversy about it. Of course, everything associated with Vietnam was controversial.

MG: You had mentioned USO [United Service Organization] shows before.

JV: Yes. At some point, in Phu Bai maybe--there was the picture here of that USO show. It was not any of the big shows. There was no Bob Hope or anybody. I remember there being a Filipino group doing singing and dancing. There was that picture. Where was that picture? Was it one of these loose ones? This. This is where we were sitting at the USO show as I recall, though there's nothing written on the back of it. I don't remember much about it other than that it was a show that we spent a little bit of time sitting there in the audience appreciating.

MG: Talk more about how communication worked in the field. How were you getting updates and orders?

JV: While in Vietnam, we didn't get any written orders as such, like what we got when we would change duty stations and such. All of our orders came down through the chain of command. The Platoon commanders would get their information from the captain. The lieutenants would pass it on to platoon sergeant and squad leaders, who would then pass it on to us. So, we didn't really have anything to do with the higher level. Me being that down low, I had very little--I don't know that I was ever really in the company of the company commander because I don't really remember anything about him. I do remember Lieutenant Rowe our platoon commander because he was a low enough officer where you couldn't avoid him entirely, but we tried to avoid officers whenever we could, just to stay away from him. Otherwise, at the end of training, initial training, we would get orders for where we were going to go from there, which would have been for me Camp Lejeune with Golf 2-2, which just said something like, "Report to Camp Lejeune." I don't even know if the initial order said what company or if we didn't find that out until we got there. When we went to Vietnam--I guess I have these orders someplace. They're not right here, but I've got them someplace. I've got more stuff--telling me where to go. I guess for a next meeting I should make a note. Where's my pad? I can come up with copies of these orders. I'm still trying to organize from when the kids moved out this summer. Between so much stuff to do and the fact that for so long I really wasn't feeling well with the sleep issue and such--what else do I have to do? I've been doing some deer hunting. You would think in this warm weather--this past week was the firearm deer season week, the six-day buck season. It was terrible. Everybody I've talked to were not seeing deer. The consensus of opinion is that it's so warm that the deer are being active all night and doing what they need to do in the way of feeding and they're just sleeping all day. But I've got these four deer in the backyard that every other day they're in my backyard. It's amazing. Just amazing. That's one thing I'm doing. I'm trying to bag leaves. I've got seventeen leaf bags that have been out and picked up so far, but I've got another forty to do. I've got this bathroom project. There's always a ton of things to do. The upstairs is a mess and there's organizing all my stuff. My wife is a tolerant person; she really is. I have to give her that. Forty-five years come February.

MG: That's amazing.

JV: That's her. [Looking at a picture]

MG: She looks very happy.

JV: Well, she was happy because she was on the cruise. [laughter] Away from home and away from work.

MG: Why don't we take a break for today? We get organized for next time and pick up halfway through your tour in Vietnam.

JV: Okay.

MG: Does that sound alright?

JV: Yes, whatever. You're the boss.

MG: Well, I'll turn the recorder off for today. Thank you for all the time you have been spent with me. I really enjoy this.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/3/2018

Reviewed by Jim Velcheck 12/15/2018