

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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TRANSCRIPT BY

FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Molly Graham: This being an oral history interview with Jim Velcheck on February 15, 2016 in Piscataway, New Jersey. The interviewer is Molly Graham. Let's pick up where we left off last time. Did you arrive in Vietnam in October of 1967?

James Velcheck: Yes. It should be in there. October 27th is my recollection. It was just after Operation Medina, although the company was out on something in the field. What it was, I'm not sure. I don't remember exactly whether it was the end of Medina or something after Medina. The first sergeant said he wanted to send us right out because the company was short-handed, the six or eight replacements who all came in with me, but that they didn't know where they were. They were out of touch, so they couldn't send us out. That's when they put us up overnight in that long low building and the sappers got in the wire at Dong Ha Air Base next door and blew up bladders of jet fuel. It was like the world was exploding around us. We looked at each other in the flashes of light with this stricken look on our faces. You could tell the same thought was going through everybody's head: "What did we get ourselves into here?" "The company is lost some place and the world is exploding around us." When I first got to Vietnam the company rear at Quang Tri.

MG: That is quite an initiation.

JV: Yes, yes.

MG: Was that when you were assigned to Delta Company?

JV: Right. Yes, Delta Company, First Battalion, First Regiment, First Division. D Company 1-1-1. Just the 1-1 is enough to identify it because although the battalion is a generic term--there are first battalions in every regiment--the regiment is a unique term. There's only one First Marine Regiment in the Marine Corps. In the First Division, you have the First Regiment, the Fifth Regiment, the Seventh Regiment and the Eleventh Regiment. In the Second Marine Division, you have the Second Regiment, Sixth Regiment, Eighth Regiment and either Tenth or Twelfth, I forget which. The double-digit ones--the Tenth, the Eleventh, the Twelfth--those are all artillery regiments attached to the various divisions. Sometimes, things move around or temporarily assigned. In Vietnam, you had the First Division and you had the Third Division, and our battalion was oftentimes attached for various activities to leadership of the Third Division. So, it gets complicated. There are a lot of Marines who never understood the organization, but I have a pretty good handle on it.

MG: When you went to Vietnam, how much longer did you have in your enlistment?

JV: Well, I was a two-year enlistee. And yes, I didn't even think they would send me. At the end of the cruise--I might have mentioned this before--they asked for volunteers to go to Vietnam. We'd been training for a year. Everybody was all gung-ho. So, yes, we all put our names on the list. But I remember secretly thinking that by the time we got off the cruise and had 30-day leave, and by the time I would get to Vietnam, I would only have six months left in the Marine Corps. I had been training for well over a year. I didn't think they would send me. No, not six months left. I had ten months left. That's what it was. I had ten months left by the time I--and I didn't think they would send me, but they did of course, and I subsequently learned

that they sent people with as little as six months left in their enlistment. By the time I finished my tour, I remember a captain giving me the reenlistment speech in Da Nang before I left. But it was half-hearted because we were about to enter the downward slide on numbers there. So, they weren't as desperate as they were. I told them I would stay in for a guaranteed Med cruise. To his credit, he said they couldn't guarantee it. Whereas, when I first went in, I shared foxholes with a lot of guys who were aviation guaranteed. So, they'd guarantee whatever you wanted, but whether you ended up with it or not, you most likely ended up in Vietnam on the ground.

MG: How did they find that company you were due to replace?

JV: I don't remember all the details, but it was just a temporary loss, out of contact. In a day or two, they came back and I joined the squad. The squad that I was in--my MOS being light weapons, I was part of weapons platoon. The weapons platoon was composed of three squads, each squad composed of two machine gun teams of several people each. The sixty-millimeter mortars, although they were part of the weapons platoon, they weren't really part of a squad. See, First Squad operated with First Platoon of grunts, of riflemen. Second Squad operated with Second Platoon. Third Squad operated with Third Platoon of infantrymen. I was part of Second Squad, so I was with Second Platoon. Each squad that operated with the platoons had two machinegun teams and one rocket team. When I first got there, the rocket team meant that the 3.5-inch rocket launcher was our weapon. Later on, at some point, we transitioned out of the 3.5 and into the LAAW [Light Anti-Armor Weapon], the disposable one-shot rocket launcher, the thing Rambo shoots helicopters out of the air with. The sixty-millimeter mortars, although they were part of the company weapons platoon, they didn't split up and go with platoons, they stayed with company headquarters. They belonged basically to the company commander who had charge of how the mortars were used. The platoons, they were led by the platoon commander, a lieutenant typically. He directed the machinegun and rocket use.

MG: Who was that guy for you?

JV: Lieutenant Rowe, who now owns a spread, several hundred acres, in West Virginia, and that's where I went in August to have a mini reunion with several of the guys. He ended up retiring from the Marine Corps as a lieutenant colonel and went on to work with the USAID [United States Agency for International Development] and/or state department. He was around the world in security, building construction security, for the embassies around the world. He had a pretty interesting career.

MG: What was your first operation in Vietnam?

JV: Let me take a quick look through this paperwork here.

MG: You said last time that you had eleven operations in total.

JV: Something like that. There's two pages here. Did I give you a copy of this stuff before? There's two pages here. Should be two pages. I only see one of them. Look at this. 10 November '67. That must be when I got there. That's earlier than what I thought. It says, "10 November '67. Participated in combat operations against Communist forces in the Republic of

South Vietnam.” November. I’m sorry. It’s no fun getting old. The date of this entry was 10 November ’67. But this is my overall tour in Vietnam on this line--24 October. So, it’s 24 not 27--to 8 August. So, I arrived in country on the 24th of October and I left on the 8th of August. My first operation, which says started 24 October to 30 October, was Operation Granite. If you were to go put these operation names into a Google search you would find information about all of these operations. Also in the command chronologies, there would be something about them. Then, 4 November to 10 November, I participated in search and destroy operations on Operation Lancaster, Quang Tri province. Both of these were Quang Tri Province. Then, Operations Kentucky I, II and III from 11 November to 16 November. Then Con Thien from 20 November to 23 December. That’s when we were at Yankee Station Con Thien and that’s where Trujillo got killed. I think I told that story before. I had found something out when I went to visit with the Lieutenant. We talked about that. I’ve gotten three different versions of what we got hit with that day. I always thought it was large artillery because it made one hell of a bang, the several rounds that came in. Someplace else, and I forget where--whether it was somebody else’s recollection or in the command chronology, I don’t remember, but it said mortars. Lieutenant Rowe, when I talk to him about it, he said no, it was 122 millimeter rockets that we got hit with that day. So, there’s different official versions, different recollections. You have to take everything with a grain of salt. I’m sure that you realize that in the work that you do, that things are not set in stone just because somebody either recalls it a certain way or even if a semi-official or official document puts it one way. I found out at our reunion that the other dramatic incident on 689--there’s still quite a bit of confusion about that.

MG: The bunker?

JV: The bunker, yes. I may have told you about that before where the official recollection, the official command chronology talks about one bunker being blown with a LAAW and six NVA troops being killed there--six or eight, whatever it was. It turns out that there must have been two because I have information from two different units that blew bunkers with the LAAW. Just because it’s in the official record doesn’t mean that it’s necessarily the way it was. Then we’ve got Operation Neosho, Operation Osceola. There is a second page to this. I just made these copies this morning and maybe it didn’t feed the second page or maybe I didn’t put the second page in. ... I have lots of information about Arlington Cemetery because I want to be buried in Arlington. My purple heart makes me eligible. Not just any veteran can be buried in Arlington. The minimum that you need is a purple heart. Is that the other page? Yes. Okay. That is the other page. Operation Hue City. Operation Ford. A second entry for Operation Hue City for whatever reason. Operation Pegasus. Operation Scotland II. Then, Operation Lancaster II. [Telephone rings.]

[Tape paused.]

JV: That’s it. That was named operations. There are other things. The one about Con Thien. That was not apparently a named operation. “Participated in security operations while serving at the fortress of Con Thien in the Republic of South Vietnam.” So, I was out in the field. “In the bush” we called it. That’s where Trujillo got killed. So, there was action and yet, it wasn’t part of a named operation. Named operations--one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight--and then, Kentucky I, II, and III. Is that three operations or was it one operation? The notation about

Lancaster. It said way back here in November, "Participated in search and destroy operations on Operation Lancaster" in November, but then the last notation here is, "In July, Lancaster II," eight months or more later. What's the number? Who knows. Depends on how you count it.

MG: Are each of those operations distinct in your mind?

JV: No. No. Not really. What's distinct in my mind is the time at Yankee Station Con Thien. That's in there. On Hill 689 in July, that would have been Scotland, although I don't even know if we knew we were on something called an Operation Scotland at that time. It says Operation Scotland II from 15 April to 12 July. That was 689, plus the other hills that I was on up there: 881 South, 558 I think--although I don't really remember being there, but supposedly we were there. I do remember 881 and I do remember 689, particularly 689. Hue City. Basically, during Hue City, I was on bridge duty between Phu Bai and Hue. We didn't have too much in the way of action there. We had very little. Not like what other elements were having in Hue City. That was a major battle. It was the one urban battle of the Vietnam War. Other than that, there wasn't much going on urban. It was all rice paddy and forest jungle type stuff. But this was urban. Basically, we hadn't been training urban warfare. So, it was learn as you go for the troops who were doing the Hue City stuff.

MG: I thought I read you were doing more training while in Vietnam. Was that the case?

JV: Did you? On the job training. I don't recollect any specific training.

MG: When did you go to Australia?

JV: When? I don't know that that's noted in here anyplace. It was relatively late in the tour, but I don't offhand remember where I was or when it was that I went there. It was during what we would consider winter months up here--no summer months. It must have been summer months here and it was winter months down there. Did I tell you the story about how I remember the *New York Daily News*, the tabloid-size newspaper? On page two, during the winter, they would have--and I didn't remember that it was during the winter--but they would have a full height narrow picture of a different--each week or whatever--girl wearing a bikini on the beach in Sydney. I remembered that and I said, "I want to go to Sydney to see girls on the beach in bikinis." It was summer in Vietnam, so it must have been June or something that I went. It was winter in Australia and nobody was on the beach, let alone bikinis.

MG: That was when your suitcase containing all your letters home was stolen.

JV: Yes. [Telephone rings.]

[Tape paused.]

JV: I don't know if you want a copy of that. You certainly have--

MG: I have a copy.

JV: Did I give you that before?

MG: Yes.

JV: You talk about training. There is training on there. Does it say anything about--?

MG: That's what I was curious about. I saw guerilla and marine rifle squad training.

JV: I think if you read that, it gives more information about that same training. I think it says Fort Sherman Green Beret Jungle Training School in Panama. Is that what it says?

MG: It was at Fort Sherman, yes. The other training was in Washington, DC.

JV: Washington, DC? MCI, Washington, DC.

MG: Do you remember that?

JV: I have no clue what MCI might stand for. Marine Corps must be MC. Marine Corps Institute or something like that. But it didn't take place in Washington, DC. I never trained in Washington, DC. But that might be where these were developed. Operations against guerilla units. The training might have been developed by the Marine Corps Institute in Washington, DC. Tactics of marine rifle squad might have been developed in Washington, DC. That was probably the training that was going on in Camp Lejeune, leading up to the cruise, because that's what I was doing in Camp Lejeune. This one is all my scores and such and what I was doing in various times and places when I was evaluated.

MG: Like a report card.

JV: Yes. This one is better than my school report card from when I was a kid.

MG: Did you celebrate the Marine Corps birthday in any way, when you arrived?

JV: Yes. In 1966, November 10th in '66, I would have been in Parris Island. September, October. Or just transitioned into Lejeune for advanced infantry training. There's two parts to boot camp. There's Parris Island part and then there's the advanced part where you go up to Lejeune. Camp Geiger is the part of Lejeune where you do the advanced infantry training. Everybody gets some of that, but infantrymen, 03s, get more of that. If you're going to be a typist or something else--cook or something--you still get some because every Marine is a rifleman. So, November 10th I would have been there. I have no recollection of Marine Corps birthday celebration there. Might have been something, but you don't get much in the way of celebratory stuff in boot camp. But in Vietnam, the following November 10th of '67, that I do remember. We were out in the field, and according to this, I was on Operation Granite. Now, if I wasn't looking at this and you asked me what I was doing on Marine Corps birthday in 1967, I would say we were out in the bush doing something and I remember helicopters bringing in our hot meal and our piece of birthday cake because that's how Marines celebrate the birthday, with a meal and cake. Now it's a much more formal ceremony. I'm not out in the bush. But even in

the bush, Marines do celebrate with meal and cake. Now, there's a whole formal ceremony around the cutting of the cake and the serving of the pieces. Oldest marine, youngest marine--passing of the cake, symbolize passing of legacy, the whole thing. But I do have recollection of that snapshot in my mind of helicopter, meal, cake. Turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy. That sort of thing.

MG: Were there other rituals like that in Vietnam?

JV: The Marine Corps birthday is the one thing where there's real ritual and celebration around. Part of that, is the Marine Corps ball. Is where you do it, at Marine Corps ball when you're not out in the bush. Of course, we weren't going to have a ball out in the bush. [laughter] I've been to some Marine Corps balls a couple of times, only in very recent years. We didn't go this year, but the last couple of years, I went. Before that, I had never been to a Marine Corps ball. It's okay. But as far as back then, I don't remember any other kind of ceremonial things.

MG: What if someone was going home or newly arrived?

JV: When they left, they pretty much disappeared. Said goodbye. I don't actually remember anybody's leaving, but I know people left. I know people arrived. Around arriving, I do remember, of course, my own arrival. I do remember Trujillo's arrival. I remember Bunch's arrival--the guy that got killed--my assistant gunner that got killed on 689. His was a transfer from a different unit. So, it wasn't a new arrival in country, but Trujillo, Gary Trujillo from [Colorado] I think, I do remember. He's the one that the squad--the other guys, not so much me--he had a bit of a voice, a singing voice, so they made him sing the songs that were newly popular back in "the world." The two--I may have mentioned this--that I remember were "The Letter" by the Box Tops and one by the Brooklyn Bridge that I can't remember the actual name of. [It was called] "The Worst That Could Happen." I remember some of it, but I'm not going to sing it for you because I don't want to break your recorder.

MG: [laughter] Were you doing joint operations with the Army or have contact with other branches?

JV: Well, we had support from Air Force and Marine and Naval Air. I know there were Army units on some of our activities because I remember seeing them. At night, we had everything on our back. We would carry a poncho. We didn't have sleeping bags or anything. We had an entrenching tool, the folding kind of shovel. At night, we'd dig a hole and what sleep we got was in the hole. The food we had was C-rations. We either had some still in our packs from resupply of the previous day or days or helicopters would come before dark and drop off cases of C-rations and/or ammo or whatever else we might have needed. But I remember the Army, when we operated with them--and I don't remember how often it was or whether it was just once--but there's a recollection in my mind of helicopters dropping off their containers of hot chow and their sleeping bags and tents and all that kind of stuff. The helicopters would come back again in the morning and pick all that stuff up. So, they didn't carry whatever they needed with them. They got things brought to them at night. I do remember that. We always made fun of the Army and the Air Force and the Navy, and we still do.

MG: You mentioned bridge duty. Can you say more about that? Was that an opportunity to interact with any villagers?

JV: Oh, yes. We interacted with the villagers. We were there, as I recall, about a month. The command chronologies would have the details of when we got there and when we left. Our company, and maybe some of the other companies--some of the companies ended up in Hue City, of our battalion 1-1, on the actual operation in Hue City. Our company, there was one platoon on this bridge, one platoon on another bridge between Phu Bai and Hue, for security purposes to protect the bridges presumably. At each of those was a village. They'd grow up around the bridge. Each of those village had its contingent of militia, PFs, popular forces. So, we interacted with those Vietnamese security troops. We interacted, to a degree, with civilians. The different religions determined the level of interactions. The Buddhists or whatever are the ones who didn't interact with us. But there were Catholics or Christians or whatever, who did interact with us. The village chief had some of us to his house for dinner one evening I remember, where we sat around on the floor around a low round table and his wife served us individual bowls of sticky rice and plunked a bigger bowl of what was purported to be chicken in the middle of the table. You may have this story in there already because I remember telling it, but it's a short story. In that bowl of chicken was chicken head, chicken feet, grease and, as I recall, no meat. So that was our meal. I have a bunch of pictures that I may or may not have shown you from the bridge time.

MG: I don't know if I have seen those. How did the chicken taste?

JV: We put a little bit of grease on our rice and ate the rice. It tasted like sticky rice with grease on it.

MG: Whose family did you eat with?

JV: The village chief.

MG: Was he Christian?

JV: I don't know. Since he interacted with us, I would guess he wasn't Buddhist, but I don't have any recollection of that.

MG: Do you remember what you talked about over dinner?

JV: I don't have any recollection of that either. The only picture and memory in my mind is that table with the rice and the grease and the feet and head. [laughter] We were appreciative of our C-rations after that meal. Now, some of the other guys, I think, had more interaction with civilians, with the chief, than I did. As I recall, there was some discussion at this reunion in August. I don't remember what the discussion was exactly, but somebody was saying something about our time at the bridge and interactions with civilians. I don't remember. That's a slideshow showing mostly the bridge, I believe. Did it go all the way through? There was a bunch of them.

MG: Yes.

JV: Did it go all the way through? Yes. ...

[Tape Paused]

JV: This is the railroad bridge back here. This is the tower, the concrete tower up by the road where we had our headquarters. That's me. They would have these sticks with water cans on them. This is Scruggs, my assistant gunner who shot himself in the foot. This is mama-san with betel teeth, black teeth. That's me at the road bridge with a convoy going by. This is one who posed for me. She was Christian or Catholic. This was over in the marketplace. This one. This is the mother of one of those two little girls who were so friendly toward us. This was someone who posed. She's either a young mother or an older sister. I don't remember. Those are bags of rice. As I recall, they had a Louisiana stamp on them. We would hide behind the bunker and jump out and take pictures of those who were Buddhist who didn't want their picture taken. These were the two little girls who were so friendly. Here's one of our fighting holes in the railroad bridge. This one posed for me. This one didn't. She was a snooty bitch who lived in a fancy house behind us. There's one of the PFs with his M1 carbine. This is a couple of the guys and me from our platoon. They were grunts, riflemen. Yes, I guess it does go pretty quickly.

MG: How did they feel about the American Marines?

JV: The Vietnamese?

MG: Yes.

JV: Well, you can see there was some friendly interaction there. They put up with us. To a degree, they were friendly enough. War was a fact of life for them. It was basically all they ever knew.

MG: The command chronology mentioned some of the issues and diseases you would encounter in the field, such as malaria and also venereal disease.

JV: I don't remember any of that with the actual populace, with the civilians. But there were, in certain areas, brothels, I guess you could call them. That was where most of that activity--it was a more professional business relationship rather than casual, in my recollection.

MG: What does it mean that she had "betel teeth?"

JV: You never heard of that? Okay. It's something that's particularly relevant to Southeast Asia, but I think in Asia, in general, different parts of Asia, but particularly Vietnam, the adults, particularly the older ones, would chew something called betel nut. It's a red berry. The juice from it turns their teeth black. I think that there is some preservative nature to it. I think it's good for the teeth. I think. If you did a Google search on betel nut, I'm sure you'd find all kinds of information about it. I believe it's B-E-E-T-L-E. Maybe. She had teeth, but they were black, so you can't see them.

MG: You might have already said this, but talk more about your gear and what you carried on you.

JV: Yes. We'd carry a pack. In that pack, we'd have C-rations and maybe some clothing items, a poncho, sometimes maybe a shelter half. What that means is that you had two-man pup tents. Each man carried a half of the tent and then you'd put them together. I don't remember on operations whether we actually ever had those or not, but I do know that we did use those at Quang Tri. When we were in the rear area in Quang Tri, we were living in those kinds of hooches that were basically tents. You like the way I can go to that [picture] just like that?

MG: Smooth.

JV: Now this was a rear area. This was Quang Tri. We were there for a period of time. That was when I first got to Vietnam. That's where we were on this--October, got to Quang Tri. We were there for a period of time, but I don't know how long. I was just shaving there. What got cut off on this is there's a basin in front of me where I had just finished shaving.

MG: You kept a mustache.

JV: Yes. Is it a mustache there? Towards the end, I had the mustache.

MG: How much wear and tear was there on your gear?

JV: It does look like a mustache might be there. Yes. Boots would wear out. Socks. We couldn't get keep underwear on. I know on Hill 689 we didn't have any underwear. So, you'd just wear shirt, trousers and--my father would send me socks. I remember getting socks in my weekly packages he would send. Every Saturday, he'd mail me a package. He'd number them. That's why I know that there was a guy in the rear area who was stealing mine. I know exactly who it was.

MG: How did your father know to number the packages?

JV: Because he was very precise in what he did. He didn't number them for my benefit--well, it was probably a tracking thing to make sure I got all of them. Not necessarily theft, but just because he didn't know if everything was going to be delivered to me. I just remember he numbered them.

MG: You said there was one time when you found yourself alone and you were approached--

JV: That was on Hill 689, yes. That was that bunker that ended up getting blown with the LAAW, the one that was in contention as to who did it. Did I tell you story last time?

MG: Yes.

JV: That was the battalion reunions discussion that I had in the beginning of September. That's right. We met last time when I first came back from that on September 1st. Yes. That was when I got abandoned in that bunker and ended up going straight out of it as the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] were coming towards me. That's what's supposed to be in that book from Mike Archer that's coming out. Like I say, I don't know what exactly is going to be in it. He never sent me an excerpt. I don't even know if I'm going to be in it. He never asked me for permission to put anything in it, but I sent him a bunch of stuff--the letter that I sent home after that with the redaction and all that in it. He never asked for my permission to put that in, but it sounded like he was going to. I would think that in order to do it legally he would need written permission to put it in. So, I have no clue what's going to be in this book, but I am looking forward to getting a copy of the book from him within this next month or so.

MG: I'm curious too. Did you encounter booby-traps during search and destroy operations?

JV: Yes. Somewhere I have pictures of a punji pit, a hole dug in the ground with some kind of lattice over it, where they would put fresh grass on it. When you stepped on it, your foot goes through. There would be something in the bottom that would put the stakes--wooden stakes, sharpened stakes--into your foot. That was why they redesigned our boots to have a metal plate in the bottom because the punji stakes were just vertical sharpened sticks in the ground that would go through the rubber of your boot and enter your foot. They would put feces on them and such to make you get infected. It was nasty. Then, when they put the metal plate in the bottom of the boot, then what they did was they changed the design of the punji pit itself and the stakes so that your foot went down in between these stakes and the boards with sharpened things in it, so that they'd come up and get you at the ankle through the canvas of the boot. Yes. War is hell.

MG: You bring up infections. I meant to ask earlier about malaria. Did you ever get sick while you were in Vietnam?

JV: We took malaria pills and, I believe, salt tablets back in the days when salt tablets were commonly recommended to take in hot, sweaty conditions. I can't find that picture of the punji pit. As far as sickness goes, I remember once having to leave the field because of a tooth issue. I remember when we were at the bridge, I had sore feet. One day, when the platoon or some members of some squad went out, doing something out in the field--may have even gone down to Hue City. I didn't go because I was having some kind of an issue with foot pain. I don't remember what the details were as to why my feet were bothering me, but I didn't go because of it. I remember, at one point, somebody coming back wounded in a boat. Whether it was that same thing or some different time, but it was all during that month or so while at the bridge. There was somebody wounded and coming back in a boat, which means they wouldn't have been down in Hue City. It would have been something local.

MG: How often did you encounter sniper fire?

JV: Occasionally. I know while we were at Quang Tri, we were at Quang Tri in this area, this sandy area next to river. There would be occasional sniper fire come from that other side of the river. Nobody paid too much attention to it. I don't remember much in the way of sniper fire on

689. I remember on one operation, we were on one side of a river. It might have been Operation Ford where it was in a jungle, deserted village. It was a fairly wide river. I remember taking some fifty-caliber rounds from the other side of the river, but it was from a long way away, so it would count as sniper fire, rather than a firefight or engagement. Also, when we were--  
[telephone rings]

[Tape paused]

JV: There's the punji pit that I took a picture of at one point. Uncovered, obviously. That lattice of little light wood, reeds or something, would support some vegetation that matched the surrounding so that you'd step on it and then your foot would go through down to the stakes. I don't remember what the stakes under there looked like exactly. I may or may not have ever showed you this picture. This is when we were at Yankee Station. That's Con Thien Hill itself. That little puff of smoke in the middle is an artillery round landing, an enemy artillery round landing on the base at Con Thien Hill. Everybody was dug-in in bunkers and underground, similar to the Khe Sanh siege, where you had a fair amount of incoming, so you needed to protect yourself from it, to the degree that you could. I also have a picture that I'm looking for now of sniper fire. I don't see it right offhand. We were in a cemetery. In a cemetery, there were burial mounds. It should be in this bunch, but I don't see it. Those burial mounds--I remember I took a picture when we were taking some sniper fire. I don't know where it is. Maybe I'll eventually find it, but I don't see it. That's the only real sniper fire--well, you might also say that when a couple of guys got hit, there was a--yes, that would qualify. There was a sniper who was shooting at us from several hundred yards away. One guy got shot in the thigh, I think it was, and another guy got shot here and his leg was bent. It was like he had a second knee. His leg bent twice. Broke the bone. Somebody spotted where this sniper was shooting from. It was at the base of a tree. I think that might have been in an abandoned village. Base of a tree. We had LAAWs at the time. They told me the target and I put a LAAW rocket right at the base of that tree. Now, I never saw the sniper. Nobody knows if the sniper was still there or not. It was within a couple minutes after he had last fired, but he never shot again after that. So, they told me that I might have gotten him. but we didn't go over there.

MG: Would that have been your first--?

JV: My first and only kill? Yes, because I never have any recollection of ever having actually killed anybody. I've done some shooting, but I can't say that I ever fired a shot and saw somebody fall as a result of it. Never saw much in the way of--the only time I can recall ever seeing an enemy troop in person was that night on Hill 689 when those three were running down the trench line towards me. one or two of them in the trench and one or two of them on top of the trench coming towards me. That's the only time that I can ever actually say that I saw the enemy.

MG: What happened?

JV: Well, they were the ones that when I came back the next morning were dead there at that blown bunker. So, they died. I brought home a rifle that one of them had been carrying that I

ended up selling to pay for formula and diapers when the kids started to be born. The cigarette lighter that I had brought home, that I think I showed you a picture of.

MG: I am not sure.

JV: Okay. I loaned it at one point to the Vietnam Memorial in New Jersey when they were having a zippo display. They had sent out an email asking if anybody had a zippo that they wanted to loan. I responded, "Well, I don't have a zippo, but I have this North Vietnamese lighter." You can see on one of these pictures that he had carved his name on the inside barrel of the cigarette lighter. H-O-A, I think. Hoa. He was one of the three who died at that bunker, who were presumably the three who had come towards me that night, that drove me out of the bunker. So, I loaned it to them. It was a very good cigarette lighter. I still have it someplace. Wind proof. You would light it and it would stay lit. It was very primitive as you can see. [laughter] The friend who was here for dinner Saturday night who had the jambalaya, who thought it was wonderful, not particularly hot, she just had some for lunch and she said it made her nose run. [laughter]

MG: Where and how did you celebrate Christmas that year?

JV: I probably told you this story before and maybe showed you the picture, but my father sent a Christmas tree. We were at Yankee Station up until December 23rd. Then we left to go north. So, Christmas itself, I was up north someplace. We were celebrating Christmas before that with the tree. The Christmas tree is there and then there's a couple other pictures that are slide-showing. Another one with the tree of our whole squad gathered around it. I don't know what happened with the tree. Presumably, it got disposed of at some point when I couldn't carry it. That was the kind of thing my father did. He would try to provide whatever I wanted or needed that he could provide. Christmas tree with decorations being one thing he could provide. I would ask for things like dry socks and food items. He would send me cans of rice pudding and cans of chicken and whatever he could find that he could send to me. I told him I missed McDonald's hamburgers, and of course, he couldn't send me a McDonald's hamburger. I told him I missed flush toilets, so he took a picture of our toilet in the bathroom and sent me a picture of it. [laughter]

MG: Were you able to communicate with your family or anyone back home?

JV: Yes. I may or may not have told you that story. Twice I was able to call home while I was in the service and away--once in Vietnam and once on the Caribbean cruise. The Caribbean cruise was first. We were in the Dutch West Indies. You've got Aruba and Curacao. We were in Curacao. Did I tell you that story?

MG: Yes.

JV: "I'm in Caracas." "No, you're not. You're in Curacao." The other time was from Vietnam, from Phu Bai, I believe. Going from radio to landline, the person on the receiving end at the telephone at home is receiving a call from wherever it hits the landline. So, it was in Hawaii. My mother gets a call from me saying it's coming from Hawaii. It's a three-minute call at most

because they limited you because there was a line of guys trying to make these calls. It took me the first minute or minute and a half to convince her that I wasn't wounded in a hospital in Hawaii, that I was still in Vietnam. That's all I remember about that. It was called MARS [Military Auxiliary Radio System], M-A-R-S. What exactly those letters stood for--an acronym--I don't really know, but you could probably find information about that in a Google search also. You might want to shut that off. I'm going to run out to the vehicle for a minute because there's something I wanted to show you that I have out in the jeep.

[Tape Paused]

JV: Did I show you this book before?

MG: I think you did.

JV: I finished it. You can certainly borrow it if you want. I had mentioned it at, I think, our last get-together sappers, the term sapper. There is a whole section in here talking about sappers, who they are and what they do. Apparently, they're mentioned on a whole bunch of different pages. Read that while I go to the bathroom.

[Tape paused]

JV: There's quite a bit of information about them there.

MG: This is interesting.

JV: That's an example of how good that book is. It really is.

MG: Would you mind if I borrowed this?

JV: I don't mind, as long as you make sure you return it to me.

MG: I know where you live. Was it sappers that got in the perimeter at Hill 689?

JV: Maybe. I don't know. They're a specialized kind of unit. Whether there were sappers as part of that or just enemy troops, I don't know. But there was one I remembered killed, who we could swear was Chinese. He looked Chinese. There are differences between Asians. You get to recognize some of the differences. For some reason, we thought this guy was a Chinese, whether it was just facial recognition or if it was documents or uniform--I don't remember the details. There's information in there about how many Chinese were there in Vietnam. I may have told you about the Chinese pilot who was flying. When I was working in China twenty-five years ago, one of the guys I was working with was a pilot in China flying supplies into North Vietnam at the same time I was in South Vietnam.

MG: Did you compare stories?

JV: He didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Chinese. So, we didn't do any details, but we got along fine.

MG: This says there were about four-hundred thousand sappers in Vietnam.

JV: Is that what it said in there?

MG: Yes. That seems like a lot.

JV: Yes.

MG: Where were you during January and February of 1968, during Tet One? [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.]

JV: From 31 December to 28 January, I was on Operation Osceola in Quang Tri Province. Now, what that means and where exactly that was, I don't know. I don't know. Again, the command chronology would have some information about where the different companies were and where they were operating and all that.

MG: Were you aware of the Tet Offensive?

JV: I don't know. I don't have any recollection that we were aware of it, but we might have been. I don't know. 1967 and '68 was a long time--where were you in 1967?

MG: I wasn't even a twinkle in my mom's eye.

JV: We're talking almost fifty years ago. Recollections that I have--I have a lot of snapshots in my mind, little tidbits of information. Some of it just floats around loose that I can't--it's a picture I have of it, but I can't say where exactly that was. Having all these pictures does help. I can recollect a lot more than what some of the guys can because they don't have things to refer to. Yet, there are others who have even better recollection of stuff than I do, whether it's with or without pictures. There are some people who--but again, when you start comparing details of what you remember with what they remember about the same incidents, there's lots of differences. So, who knows?

MG: Did you take those pictures knowing these would be important moments to remember?

JV: If I had had a real understanding of that, I wouldn't have just taken the pictures. I would have kept a journal also.

MG: You did not do that?

JV: I didn't do that. I do have upstairs someplace all the letters that I had written home during the whole time I was in the service. My mother kept them all and gave them all to me some

years afterwards. It was in the early 80s when the Vietnam Memorial in Washington was being dedicated. That's when she gave me all the letters. I took them down to Washington by myself, spent the weekend in a YMCA in Alexandria and read all the letters I had written home.

MG: Were you aware of what was going on with the draft and all of events back home in 1968?

JV: There were the assassinations. There was Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. [Editor's Note: Civil Rights leader Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot on April 4, 1968, while preparing to lead a protest march in Memphis, Tennessee. Senator Robert Kennedy was shot on June 5, 1968, shortly after winning the California Democratic Presidential primary.] I know we got news of those kinds of things. I have a recollection of Kennedy's assassination anyway. How much we heard about demonstrations and stuff, that were definitely heating up at that time, I don't recall. I don't know. As a result, you might think that if I had heard, I'd resent some of that stuff, but I don't have any recollection of that kind of thing.

MG: Can you say again what the connection was between the Battle of Hill 689 and the Battle of Khe Sanh?

JV: The Battle of Khe Sanh, particularly the seventy-seven-day siege, that went from mid-January, just before the Tet Offensive or as the early part of the Tet Offensive, up until April- whatever. I arrived there after that. So, the siege was broken. Technically, when you talk about the heart of the Battle of Khe Sanh, you're talking about the siege. But if you step back and talk about it in more general terms, you're talking about all the action that took place in and around Khe Sanh. That includes everything up to and including the abandonment of Khe Sanh in the end of June, July of '68. Then the reestablishment of troops at Khe Sanh sometime later again. And going back the other way, there were the hill fights back in March, April of '67, when we were in that area and had lots of action on the hills--861, 881, 689. 689 was not a permanent facility until after the siege. The others were outposts during the siege and before the siege, but 689 wasn't until afterwards. The similarity was to Dien Bien Phu, where the French were defeated in 1954.

MG: What was your experience before Hill 689?

JV: We were on 881 for a while. Not too much action there, although we had some. Murphy got killed there. Murphy was this black guy, one of the ones who--I had a group of black friends there. You saw the village picture, where those couple of guys--they weren't Murphy. I don't have any pictures of Murphy. He got killed on 881. It was a tragedy when he got killed. David Murphy was his name. Didn't sound like a very back name, but he was. He was in a bomb crater up on the hill itself. The trench line goes around and then you got the hilltop. It was all bare dirt, but there were bomb craters there. He was in a bomb crater for some reason and a mortar round landed close to him. One small piece of shrapnel hit him, but it hit him in one of the worst possible places, right here and severed his carotid and he bled to death quite quickly, I believe, all by himself there in that bomb crater. We didn't find him until just after. 558 was another hill we were on, but I have no recollection of being on that one, but supposedly we were on that one. That was a quiet hill too. But 689 was the hill where we had all the action. Our whole battalion was up there.

MG: I read that Company D was there and the other companies would come in and out.

JV: Well, not in and out. They all came when we had all that problem right at the end.

MG: Let's talk about Hill 689. Could you give me a chronology? What stands out to you?

JV: NVA got in our perimeter three times, July 5th and July 7th and also at the end of June. It's not all clear in my mind. It's only been over this last year that I've really been studying the whole thing.

MG: Here is where the command chronology is useful. It says, "Company D had been subject to mortar fire, rifle grenades, sniper fire on the 5th. Elements of Company D came under intense mortar and AW attack, which resulted in heavy friendly casualties." That was on the 5th of July.

JV: Okay. On the 5th, we had the first encounter. On the 7th, was the second one, was really the big one. But there's still things that don't really make sense here. This says I was wounded in action on the 7th, but I think it was actually the 5th because that's the first time they got through the wire. That's when Bunch was killed. When you look in the book, he was killed on the 5th.

MG: What book?

JV: Shut it off.

[Tape Paused]

JV: What I'm referring to there is Hill 689, where I tried to go down and recover the body. That was Bunch.

MG: Were more people injured or killed recovering the body?

JV: That was that letter that I wrote home, where I talked about the casualties on 689 that my father blacked all that stuff out. Yes, we had lots of casualties. Have you ever seen that?

MG: No.

JV: That is a listing of all the names on the Vietnam Memorial.

MG: It's overwhelming how big this book is.

JV: It's like a Manhattan phone directory. There's 58,000 names in there.

MG: This is so sad. What was Bunch's last name?

JV: Bunch. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] It sounds like a nickname.

JV: Ralph Bunch, was it?

MG: Raymond.

JV: Raymond Bunch. He might be the one from California. Where does it say he's from?

MG: Ojai.

JV: Ojai, California. That's Bunch. Then, I don't remember where Trujillo was from. Another overwhelming thing is if you would go to look up David Murphy, there's multiple pages of Murphy in there. Common names, there's sometimes two, three, four pages of them.

MG: Trujillo was from Grand Junction, Colorado.

JV: Really? Gary Trujillo? When does it say?

MG: November 1967.

JV: Yes, that was him.

MG: You were on Hill 689 for six weeks.

JV: Something like that, yes.

MG: So, what is life like for six weeks there?

JV: Very little water. That's where I grew my first beard. No changes of clothes. It was a mini Khe Sanh experience where they lived in their bunkers. In Khe Sanh, we lived in our bunker on 689. Of course, in Khe Sanh itself was much worse because they took incoming every day, lots of it. We had incoming, but it was only--as I recall, my recollection is that the first several weeks we were there, there was no real problems, no action, nothing much in the way of incoming. The weather was good, but then the last couple three weeks we were there, is when we started having all these problems. Khe Sanh was being abandoned. I don't remember activities of breaking up bunkers and abandoning 689, but presumably that's what we were doing. The weather wasn't good. It was foggy and cloudy. The enemy stepped up their activities. I don't remember how much of that might be detailed in that command chronology that you're looking at, but we couldn't appear on the hill. We'd have to stay in bunkers and trench line that connected the bunkers because when they saw us, you might call it sniper fire, I don't know, but it wasn't rifle. I don't remember any rifle sniper fire. But when they would see somebody, they'd pop a mortar round at them. That was Larry Gregory, I think it was, who was the guy who one time a helicopter landed with cold beer. Did I tell you this story?

MG: I read about it in your other interview. [Editor's note: This other interview was conducted by the Middlesex County Heritage Commission.]

JV: Enough for one can per person. Larry Gregory was the guy from our group who went down to the LZ to pick it up. He had six or eight cans of beer in a burlap empty sandbag. Rather than take the extra seconds to run in the trench line, he ran along top of the trench line. He heard a mortar tube pop. He jumped down in the trench, but left the bag up above. The round landed and a piece of shrapnel punctured one of the cans. He picked up the bag--that was his can. Some of the guys who didn't drink sold their can to others for ten or twenty dollars, as I recall. Now, they also supposedly brought us ice cream one time on 689. Some of the guys have a recollection of that. I think it's written up someplace, but I don't have any recollection of ice cream on 689. I don't think it was in there. I think it was in another thing that I have written about 689.

MG: What night was it that Bunch was killed?

JV: Well, it would have the date of his death in here. What did it say? That's what made me go get it, because we were talking about the dates. I think it says July 5th.

MG: Yes.

JV: That was the incident about me going down the hill and trying to recover his body when I was wounded. That's why I think the official record that says I was wounded in action - not evacuated. That's what the WIANE means. Not evacuated because it was just a scratch.

MG: What happened?

JV: Well, I was down there putting a rope--it was fairly steep. I had a rope. We were going to tie it around his body and then haul him up. I got down there and not knowing that the NVA must have been just below there, and rather than give their position away by shooting me with a rifle, which they probably could have easily done, they had radios also. They must have whispered, called in for a mortar round to target me. I heard the tube pop and thought it was a mortar round that was going to go up on top of the hill as the rest of them did. But then, [laughter] you have a half a second, if that, where you suddenly hear *whoosh* and I heard it, *whoosh*. I had just time to roll away. It came down, I don't know how close, but it must have been quite close on the other side of his body. Whether his body absorbed some of the shrapnel from it, I don't recall, but it was close. Sometime later, up on the hill, the corpsman noticed that underneath my flak jacket was bare skin, and there was a tiny shard of metal sticking out of my back that I never felt. Never felt. So that was my Purple Heart. It's no big terrible wound. I don't ever portray it as such, but it would get me into Arlington, so I would take advantage of it to get into Arlington if my wife and I ever come to an understanding about whether we're going to be in Arlington or not. It's also gets me category three at the VA [Veterans Administration], which gets me preferred treatment at the VA--free hearing aids and glasses and no copays for tests and doctor visits. I've been at the VA ten times or more, probably more, over this last year. I have a CPAP [continuous positive airway pressure] breathing machine they give me free. I have a prescription--well, the prescriptions cost me eight dollars a month for my blood pressure

prescriptions. I get glasses--these are VA glasses--free. Eye exam's free. Doctor visits, my primary and specialists and all that, free.

MG: You were still on Hill 689 two days later when the fifteen NVA were killed.

JV: Yes. The 7th, they got through again. That was the big one. That's when everybody was there. After the 5th is when the rest of the battalion started arriving. The whole thing with the guy who was lost on 881, Mike Archer's friend and all that, they were the last company to arrive--B, Bravo Company. But we were all up there the night of the 7th.

MG: That was the night the bunker was blown up.

JV: That's the night the bunker got blown. Or bunkers got blown.

MG: Do you think it was one bunker or two bunkers?

JV: It was only just now recently that I've come to realize that it's bunkers. I have recently learned from General Ray Smith, the Platoon Commander of Alpha Company, that one of his Marines named Williams blew multiple bunkers with LAAWs and was killed that night.

MG: Were you medevac-ed off the hill at some point?

JV: No. NE, not evacuated. Medevac is only if you're wounded seriously and need treatment. A Band-Aid was my treatment from the 5th. But we left on the 12th, I think it was, of July. We all left. That was the last of the troops in that whole area for a while until they reestablished some degree of occupation of Khe Sanh itself. Whether they reoccupied hills or not, I don't know.

MG: Was part of the operation destroying buildings?

JV: There weren't buildings.

MG: Bunkers and trenches.

JV: Yes, but I have no recollection of that. Supposedly, that's what we were doing.

MG: The command chronology says, "There was a ballgame completed without incident" in July.

JV: A ballgame?

MG: That's what it says. "Significant events: ballgame completed without incident." I didn't know what that meant.

JV: I don't either. I don't have any recollection of seeing that. Ballgame? Let me see that. Nobody was playing any kind of ball out there. This time period, it's a little confusing. Where it says 1-1-1-8-0-0-H-2-1-1-2-4-0-0-H July '68.

MG: That is after your time.

JV: It's the 11th of July from 1800 hours to 2400 hours. That's from six o'clock in the evening until midnight on the 11th of July--this one is. Ballgame. Maybe there was some kind of a previous mention of some activity that was codenamed "Ballgame," but on the 11th of July, we weren't playing any kind of ball on Hill 689. So, no, I don't know what specifically that might refer to.

MG: I wanted to ask you about this date. Does this say July 20th?

JV: No, it should be eight o'clock in the evening on the 7th until six o'clock in the morning on the 8th. The 0-7 2000 to 0-8 0600. "Entire 689 hill complex surrounded by NVA with sixty and eighty-two millimeter mortars." Yes, this was the night--the enemy were sapper troops. So it does say they were sappers here.

MG: There's a comment that said they all had fresh clothes and haircuts.

JV: Why are fresh haircuts and new sneakers important? The condition of the enemy. It might refer to if they [had] overgrown hair and worn out shoes. It might be an indication their resupply was lacking. But the fact that they had new sneakers meant they were getting shoes. Fresh haircuts mean the troops were being taken care of. It's important just to those kinds of people who are keeping track of that kind of stuff. We didn't care.

MG: You were there that night when the hill was surrounded.

JV: Oh, yes. This was the night of the 7th to the 8th. This was the night the bunker was blown and when I was cut off from the--I don't know what this means where you wrote "D-I-F-F" with a question mark.

MG: You had already explained it

JV: When it said, "add five, add twenty-seven, add eleven," I don't know exactly what that means.

MG: I think it was the number of people wounded in action.

JV: Well, KIA [Killed in Action], WIAE [Wounded in Action - Evacuated], WIANE [Wounded in Action - Not Evacuated] and MIA [Missing in Action]--there were no MIAs. It's adding to a running total.

MG: Right. That part I knew, but I wasn't sure what some of those acronyms stood for.

JV: Yes. Killed in Action, Wounded in Action - Evacuated, Wounded in Action - Not Evacuated, and MIA, missing in action.

MG: What do these numbers refer to under “enemy contact”?

JV: Those are different dates and times. 0-7 is the 7th. 0745 hours. That’s in the morning. So, these were different times of the day on the 6th and the 7th that seems to be interspersed, where there was sporadic incoming, eighty-two millimeter rounds. From those, we add these additional numbers. Now, NBC that refers to Nuclear Biological Chemical. I don’t know why that would be one person added on there because I don’t know of the enemy ever using any chemical. So, I can’t tell you what that NBC is all about.

MG: This is where I got the information about the health status of some of the men.

JV: Yes. Heat exhaustion was something that--yes, this talks about the malaria pills. High incident of heat exhaustion. Yes.

MG: I didn’t know if you could decipher any of these--

JV: Yes, they’re not really well done. Again, the date and time may correspond with some of the notations in the date and time of action that was taking place, but it’s not very explanatory. I really can’t add anything to it.

MG: It made no sense to me.

JV: No, it doesn’t make much sense to me either.

MG: This is something else you had given me. It is a posthumous Silver Star awarded to--

JV: Howard Williams.

MG: Did you know him? Are you the company that was pinned down that the article refers to?

JV: He was from Company A. So, I wouldn’t have known him. But apparently, it was--oh, okay--Howard Williams. This is the article out of the Khe Sanh veterans’ newspaper that talked about the guy who blew the bunker. I think this one was the guy who blew my bunker. Yes. This was my bunker. The other one was a lieutenant from Bravo Company who supposedly blew a bunker. [Telephone rings]

[Tape paused]

JV: Where were we?

MG: I wanted to ask about when you rescued Bunch. You lost some men in that operation. [Editor’s note: Mr. Velcheck’s corrections state “I never rescued anybody. Was attempting to recover his (Bunch’s) body.”]

JV: On Hill 689, yes, we lost--well, July 5th, we had lost some by then. Of course, between the 5th and the 7th is when we lost the most. We had had casualties before that. The one that sticks out in my mind, whose last name was Crockett--I don't remember what his first name was. He's in the book. He had been lying next to the trench line getting some sun and a mortar round landed on top of him. He died instantly. I'm sure there were others, but I can't recall right at the moment who they might have been.

MG: When you were telling the story about Bunch, I did not realize that other men were killed when you were injured.

JV: Actually, that was when the patrol had been ambushed at the bottom of the hill. There were a bunch of guys killed. That's when the one body was left out there that Bunch and others had gone down afterwards to try to recover. That was what the whole recovery operation was about, now that I think of it. It wasn't until the 7th or whatever--and it's in the command chronology--when it was then all over and the bodies were finally--the additional bodies that were left down there were finally all recovered. So, yes, there was a whole bunch of people killed during that time. In that letter--do you have the copy of the letter that I had sent home to my parents? I think I talked in there about percentage or something of our company that had--yes. "My company has been reduced to about fifty men. When we came here we had about one hundred and fifty. So that was particularly during that 5th to the 7th period when most of those casualties took place. Plus, the casualties from the other companies that were taken--Williams and others, a bunch of people, killed and wounded. That's why 689 was the worst action that I had been involved in throughout the whole time. Other actions were sporadic in between. That saying that combat is long periods of tedium and boredom and exhaustion interspersed with rare incidents of terror and mayhem--paraphrasing.

MG: Is this the experience that shaped you the most? You talked about how when you came home you carried that pistol with you always.

JV: Yes, I'm sure. Yes. I was used to being armed through the whole time, but I'm sure 689 had the biggest impact on me. Yes. Well, that, plus the Yankee Station, Trujillo--that's when my two assistant gunners were killed. One at Yankee Station and one on 689.

MG: In another interview, you called Hill 689 "a God-forsaken place."

JV: Well, it's what we're talking about--all the people that were killed and wounded there. The whole thing about how it all happened because of that one body having been left down there. If that one body hadn't been left, then all those subsequent people that got killed and wounded down there trying to recover wouldn't have happened. If that chaos hadn't occurred, then maybe we wouldn't have had them in the wire. Who knows. Marine Corps policy is that no one is left behind.

MG: When did you finally get off Hill 689?

JV: July 12th I believe it was, but that would be in here also. I think. Maybe not. Well, yes. It says, "Participated in search and destroy operations on Operation Scotland II, Quang Tri Province, RVN, 15 April to 12 July." So, 15 April is when we arrived in the whole area. 12 July then is when we left 689 and went from there, I believe, to Phu Bai. With that picture of me cleaned up in Phu Bai right after that.

MG: I thought that was in October.

JV: No. The picture of me cleaned up. This one.

MG: Yes.

JV: You got me on 689, filthy with the beard. Then you got me in Phu Bai--

MG: With the mustache.

JV: With the mustache and the hair. [laughter] I haven't changed a bit, right?

MG: Exactly. Is that when you finally went on R and R, after 689?

JV: No. I went home within a couple weeks after that. The R and R, like I say, I don't remember exactly when it was, whether it was in that early part on 689. The weather had to be warm, so I might have left 689 in the early days when there wasn't much action going on, late April, early June, when it was warm in the north, but start of winter in the south.

MG: How long were you in Phu Bai for?

JV: We were there a number of different times, in and out.

MG: After 689?

JV: I was there up until it was time to leave. I don't remember anything in the way of action or real activities after 689. So, I left Vietnam according to this on 8 August. So, from 12 July when we left 689 to the 8th of August, I don't have any recollection of anything going on. There's nothing in my record of anything having gone on. Well, no, it does--I'm sorry. Erase that. It does say from 14 July to 8 August, participated in search and destroy operations on Operation Lancaster II, Quang Tri Province, but I don't have any recollection of what that means. Did I actually go out and participate in operation and where exactly was it and what were we doing? No recollection. Yes. I don't know. Again, the command chronologies--I think I sent you--did I send you an email attachment? The July one?

MG: Yes.

JV: I think I also sent you a link to the site where you can get all of them from all the units, all the Marine Corps units in Vietnam.

MG: Yes.

JV: Did you go to that site and look at that?

MG: I did.

JV: Okay. That may serve you when you interview some other Vietnam Marine Corps Veterans who may not have known anything about these command chronologies. You might be able to give them information about what they did, and where they were and the other stuff that's in the command chronologies.

MG: Yes. It was very useful to have a timeline of activities. In your other interview, you told a story about lending someone fifty dollars and he went AWOL.

JV: Yes. I was just thinking about that. It was in those days at Phu Bai where our rear was when I was waiting to go home. I had my date to leave and guy borrowed fifty dollars from me. He was going on R and R. I don't remember where to. I don't remember his name. I don't remember anything else about it, except that he didn't come back when he was supposed to. Whether he had contacted and said he was delayed for some reason or he just disappeared, I don't know, but I do remember that I ended up staying there longer than what I should have. The normal procedure was something like: this is your date that you're due to fly out from Da Nang. The procedure would be to travel by airplane, presumably, from Dong Ha, Quang Tri to Da Nang a day or two before that. Well, I waited until--either that morning I was due to leave Vietnam or just a day before, but the First Sergeant was pushing me to get out there. I said, "But this guy's got my fifty bucks, and I want to wait until he gets back." Well, it came to the point where I couldn't wait any longer. I don't know whatever happened, but I remember telling the first sergeant, the one who was telling me to get out of there, "If and when he ever comes back, collect my fifty dollars from him and buy beer for the company." Whether that ever happened or not, I don't know. I think that that First Sergeant was First Sergeant Imbrenda. I had met him in subsequent reunions. He had a heart transplant. I'm sure he's dead by now. But twelve, fifteen years ago, I met him at a reunion. I don't remember whether I--I must have asked him about that, but I don't remember. I do remember asking him about Purple Heart Medal because I was given by the First Sergeant a Purple Heart Medal. He said, "Yeah, I had some Purple Heart Medals and I handed them out. So, you must be one that I gave one to." Well, that's the Purple Heart Medal that was stolen out of this house when some slime-ball broke in years ago and stole a few things, and my Purple Heart Medal was one thing that he stole. After that, I did apply to get my medals and since in my record it was listed as not having been presented to me, along with my other stuff, they sent me a Purple Heart Medal. So, I have one. [laughter]

MG: You were on a civilian aircraft--

JV: Yes, with stewardesses and everybody cheered as the wheels came up off the runway in Da Nang.

MG: What was that feeling like?

JV: You can imagine. [laughter] We cheered. We wouldn't be cheering if we were sad about leaving Vietnam. Nobody was sad about leaving Vietnam.

MG: What stops did you make coming home? Hawaii or Guam?

JV: We didn't stop in Hawaii on the way back. I remember one time landing on Guam and it looked like we were going to set down in the ocean because you didn't see land until just before the wheels touched. Whether that was on my way over or on the way back I don't remember. I do know that we went to Okinawa both going over and coming back. Coming back, I was in Okinawa for a couple days. I had carried with me on the plane that rifle that I picked up on Hill 689. I got ownership papers and export papers and all the official documentation I needed in Da Nang on that rifle so that it was legal. I can't imagine it today. I carried, over my shoulder, a rifle on a civilian airplane and had it at my seat with me on the plane. In Okinawa, that was the Third Division Headquarters. First Division Headquarters was in Vietnam and they processed the change to make it legal to bring these kinds of war trophies home. Whereas, it hadn't been legal before that. I got to Okinawa and Third Division had not yet finished processing that change. They took the rifle away from me and said they'll ship it to me when they finish processing the change. I said to myself, "Yeah, sure you will." Sure enough, a few weeks after I got home, the rifle was sent to me. Now, I also remember during those couple days in Vietnam. I was a corporal, two stripes. See on the front of my hat there the double chevrons with crossed rifles of a corporal. We would wear them on utility lapels. I remember taking off my corporal chevrons and putting on sergeant chevrons, which was totally against the law. I don't remember the exact reason or reasons that I did it, but it might have had to do with--you might have had to have been a sergeant in order for them to have sent the rifle to you. That's one possibility. The other possibility is in order to go to the sergeant's mess hall you had to be a sergeant. That was another possibility. Another possibility was the club. You may have had to have been a sergeant to go into the enlisted club. But I do remember impersonating a sergeant. For one or more of those three reasons, would have been the likely reason for doing it. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] I hope the statute of limitations has expired.

JV: I'm sure it has. I never got caught or anything, but I remember doing it.

MG: Do you remember when you arrived in San Francisco?

JV: I was in San Francisco for about two weeks. If I left Vietnam on the 8th of August and spent a couple of days in Okinawa, it would have been around the 10th or 11th or something like that of August. I remember it took me two weeks to get out. I was on Treasure Island Naval Base in San Francisco Bay for about two weeks. Then I got home. I got out somewhere around--and it's in that paperwork someplace--as I recall about the 27th or something like that of August of '68. So, from the 10th or 11th until the 27th would be roughly two weeks or so. That's the time that I spent in San Francisco. We would clean up the barracks in the morning and by noon have liberty and go off and do whatever we were doing in San Francisco. I remember it being cold in San Francisco Bay on Treasure Island. I had to buy a coat, a heavy coat in the middle of August. I also remember everything was topless in San Francisco. Topless shoe shine girls.

Topless girls dancing in cages outside of bars. It was crazy. Downtown topless shoe shine girls. Those were the good old days.

MG: Did you feel like the United States had changed while you were in Vietnam? Did things feel different?

JV: I remember, I think, at the airport--where and when I don't remember, but there might have been some booing, but that was the only thing negative thing that I ever came home to. A lot of guys, when they got home, there was lots of problems with negativity. I didn't encounter any of that when I got home. One of the guys who lives in Vermont, he would go to the American Legion after he came home and get in first fights with the older veterans, the World War II and Korea veterans because there was a lot of animosity, not just among American society toward Vietnam veterans, but the older veterans from the "good" wars, the "real" wars, especially World War II--this was only twenty years after World War II, so those guys were still relatively young--about our war being not a good war, a bad war. We were all baby killers and incompetent. We lost our war. I do remember twenty-five years ago when I was in China of all places, encountering an American there who I spent a little time with, I think at a bar there in Beijing. I told him about the problems with the American Legion and VFW members disrespecting us. He got insulted at that. He got mad at me. He was a little older than me, but he may not have been a World War II or Korea veteran--I don't remember. But then, I ran into him again on another trip over there. He said, "You were right. I looked into it. I apologize." He says, "You guys were mistreated by other veterans when you came home." Again, like I said, me myself, I really didn't encounter it, but a lot of people did. It's a fact.

MG: How did you get to New Jersey from California?

JV: For some reason, I remember not being in a real rush to get home. My first thought was that somehow, I would take my time getting home. You would think that I would want to get home right away. ... I flew home. They had given me a couple hundred dollars for airfare, but I flew standby. As I recall--I don't know why this number sticks in my head, but I think it was like, seventy-seven dollars to fly home. I ended up pocketing the money from what they gave me to come home. I flew home. The plane landed in Chicago and I had a layover, change planes. It was the night of the Democrat Convention in Chicago, where there were the riots, the 1968 Democrat Convention. [Editor's Note: The 1968 Democratic National Convention was held from August 26 to August 29 in Chicago, Illinois. In the streets of Chicago, thousands of anti-war protestors clashed with police.] Republican Party and Democratic Party. But it's not; it's the Democrat Party. There was the Democrat Convention in Chicago that night. I knew nothing about it because I never left the airport. But that's the night I was on my way home. I came into JFK Airport. My father came to pick me up. They lost my sea bag, all my stuff in the big sea bag. Army called it duffel bag. Navy, Marine Corps call it sea bag. Then, that got delivered a couple days later. They found it and delivered it to us. I don't remember details about my homecoming, except people were happy that I was home. I remember my cousin and I were sitting on the couch in the living room within a couple days after I got home. I said, "There's somebody on the front porch." It was a friend from across the street who was coming over to say hello. Nobody else heard him, but I heard him on the front porch. My senses were still heightened. I also remember the family had a picnic party for me to welcome me home

sometime after, with a bunch of family and friends. Then, I was home for a while, went back to work at American Cyanamid, I think, was [the one I went] back to, factory work. I was there before I went in the Marine Corps and I was there after I came home. During one of those, I worked in the factory doing production work during one of those. I think it was after Vietnam I worked in the control lab doing testing with chemical type stuff. Then, in September of '69 I went off to Tusculum College for my first year of college.

MG: Where is that?

JV: Greeneville, Tennessee. The oldest Presbyterian college in the country. There were about four hundred students, as I recall, in the Mountains of East Tennessee. I may have told you this, I don't know, but I asked the dean one time why there was so many of us from New Jersey, New York, Delaware. He said because during the Depression that's the part of the country where people had money to send their kids to school, so that's where they got their students from. Still, through word of mouth and they still recruited in that area, that's why probably half of the students were from that area. Some were locals and some were from other areas. That was why there was so many of us there. I knew somebody who had gone there. That's why I had applied there. That's why I was there, because of word of mouth.

MG: What was the program you were in? What did you study?

JV: Well, my college career--I went to half a dozen different colleges before I finally put together a degree. Each college was a different major. I don't remember what it was down there, but when I transferred up to Montclair State, and they told me what I would have to take as courses for that major, whatever it was, I said, "Well, I had a sociology course. How about if I transfer and make it a sociology major?" They said, "Okay." That was a much easier curriculum for that. Then, each time I go to a different college, the major would change. When I finally graduated in 1997, from Cook College, Rutgers University, my degree was in International Environmental Studies.

MG: When were you in New Orleans and ended up in jail?

JV: That was the year that I spent in Tusculum. Parents' weekend, I think it was, my roommate and I didn't have anybody coming to attend parents' weekend, so we thought we'd leave town. Coincidentally, it was Mardi Gras, so we said, "Let's go to Mardi Gras." From Tennessee down to New Orleans, it was some hundreds of miles, but it wasn't a real bad trip. I had a Volkswagen. I had bought a brand new Volkswagen with the money that I accumulated not spending money in Vietnam. I paid cash for the Volkswagen. \$1,995 was [the] total price for the Volkswagen. There was no sales tax in those days. So, I had, as I recall, three thousand dollars' cash. Al Grobe, the butcher that I had worked part-time for before going in the service and after coming back from the service, told me, "Jim, you got three thousand dollars. Buy a house." I said, "Al, what am I going to do with a house? I need a car." So, I paid \$1,995 for the car. Five hundred dollars for life insurance--I converted my military insurance into regular life insurance. Five hundred dollars for car insurance. So, that was \$2,995. Left me five dollars left over. I filled the gas tank for three bucks--thirty cents a gallon, ten gallon tank. Had two dollars left over. I bought a six pack of beer that I recall was going for about a dollar-sixty at the time,

which left me forty cents leftover, out of my three thousand dollars. I've told the story a number of times. This is why I remember the details of it. But we drove down to New Orleans in my Volkswagen. We had sleeping bags with us. A week before we went, we accumulated a bunch of boxes of cereal from the school cafeteria, individual boxes of cereal, which was going to be our main sustenance while we were away because we had less than twenty dollars each between us in cash. We didn't have credit cards or anything. Hey, gas at thirty cents a gallon and a Volkswagen that got good mileage, and we figured we'd sleep in the sleeping bags. We didn't have hotels. We'd eat the cereal. [laughter] Well, we get down there and there are a number of different types of police. There's levee cops and parish cops and town cops. They were all telling people without accommodations to go sleep out along Lake Pontchartrain. Find a place out there, pull over and sleep. Well, I don't know if that was an organized deception or if these cops were innocently telling people that, but they came around with police busses one morning and arrested about two hundred of us, who were sleeping around a lake in various places, for vagrancy. Threw us in the drunk tank in the New Orleans jail house. They took away our belts and all--well, no, they just threw us in the drunk tank. One by one, over a period of hours, they called us all out and they booked us. They had a booking counter, where they had several clerks behind the counter. They would call people out. Me being the older of the two of us and the one with the car, I had about all of our money, which was maybe twenty bucks or thirty bucks. It wasn't enough to bail both of us out. The bail was fifteen dollars each. Or twenty dollars or twenty five dollars. Anyway, we didn't have enough money to bail either one of us out. Let's see if I remember this correctly. They called him out first, my roommate, Bob Bembridge, booked him. Took his belt away so he wouldn't hang himself and put him upstairs with the criminals upstairs in a cell. Then, they called me out. I didn't have enough money for bail either, but the guy next to me, who was about to deal with another clerk, he pulls out a roll of traveler's checks. I said to him, "Are you going to stick around for the hearing, the trial date in one or two days?" He said, "Yeah. I'm going to be here. I'm going to bail myself out, but I'm going to come to that." Because you didn't have to. You could just give them your bail money and split. I said, "Can I borrow fifteen bucks from you? I'll pay you back that day." He said, "Yeah, okay." So, I bailed myself out. I went, called home. My father worked; my mother was a stay-at-home housewife. She said, "Hi, Jim. Calling from Tennessee? How's things in Tennessee?" "I don't know. I'm not in Tennessee. I'm in jail in New Orleans. I need bail money to get my roommate out." [laughter] Well, when my father came home from work she told him and he went to Western Union and wired down some money. So, that night, I went and bailed my roommate out. I had been out all day. So, he wasn't real happy to know that I had been out all day. What I hadn't realized was they reduced the amount of bail, so that I could have bailed him. They reduced it to ten dollars or something sometime during that day, but I didn't know. So, we ran into a couple more people from school. They had hooked up with a couple of local girls. We all slept on the floor at these girls' house for a night or two, and then appeared for the court thing. I got money back from what I had spent in bail. The fine was five dollars, or some outrageous small amount. The city just wanted to get some income from us people who were cheating them from any income by sleeping and not paying room tax and all that kind of stuff. They got a few bucks from each of us. That was my one time in jail.

MG: Did you make it to the Mardi Gras celebrations?

JV: Oh, yes. That was the year Al Hirt got his lip busted--Al Hirt the trumpet player. Somebody threw a brick at him when he was on one of the parade floats and busted his lip.

MG: Oh my gosh.

JV: Yes. I remember, as we were driving home, listening to the radio--we're driving back to Tennessee--hearing reports after Mardi Gras. They set a record for the tonnage of trash collected from the gutters because everybody was walking around. You could be drunk in the French Quarter--that's where all the action took place--as long as you kept moving. They were selling bottles of Ripple and Bali Hai, two cheap wines. That's what people were drinking, that plus canned beer. You finish your bottle and you throw it in the gutter. You finish your can of beer, you throw it in the gutter. That's what was done. It was public street drinking. I remember a cop--we stopped and sat on a stoop or something at one point. The cops made you keep moving. A cop gave me a hard time. "Get up. Get moving." You could be as drunk as you want, but don't go sleep out along a lake. [laughter]

MG: How long were you in school in Tennessee?

JV: One year there. Then I transferred, for whatever reason--I don't remember why--to Montclair State. I don't know why I didn't stay down there. Then, I met my wife that summer in between Tusculum and Montclair. We got married six months later.

MG: Was this in 1969 or 1970?

JV: That would have been 1970 because it was '69, '70 that I did Tusculum. May of '70 came back home. Went back to work at American Cyanamid for the summer and met my wife that summer on or around August 20th. By February 20th, we were married. So, I did the full year at Montclair. She did one semester and then quit, and was accepted the following September to go to Paterson State, but the day she got the acceptance from Paterson State, she got the word from the doctor that she was pregnant. That would have been in summer of '71. Because we were married February 20th of '71. Coming up forty-five years this coming Saturday.

MG: How did you meet your wife?

JV: [laughter] Has to do with the fact that there were so many of us at Tusculum from New Jersey. One of the guys, who was on my floor was also a freshman at Tusculum, lived on Fourth Street in Piscataway. This street, about two blocks that way (East). One day, I had gotten off work at Cyanamid, was in cut-off jeans and sandals and a t-shirt, and I was at his house. Now, I don't know if prior planning went into this, but what happened that day was we went from his house to his girlfriend's house, who lived in Fourth Street that way (West) between Walnut and Washington streets. We ended up at her house. After we were there for a little while, she said, "Let's go over to my girlfriend's house." This is where the planning might really have kicked in. I don't know. We ended up going to her girlfriend's house over on the other side of Piscataway, on Wade Street off Plainfield Avenue by River Road. Her girlfriend's parents and brother and sister had just left the day before to drive to Texas to take their son for the start of his freshmen year at Texas A&M. They were gone for a week or so. Well, that girlfriend was my wife, or

who became my wife. So, I met her right at her front door. We say it was August 20th because within just a day or two after that, on my birthday, August 22nd, they had a little party for me at the house. She was there by herself for that week. So, that was how we met and we've been together ever since. August 20, 1970 when we met. So the reason we met has roots back in the Depression, leading to so many from this area going to Tusculum.

MG: Did you stay in school that fall?

JV: She had done her freshmen year the same freshmen year as mine. She did it at Concordia College in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She was from Wisconsin and then they moved to Indiana and then moved to Piscataway. Her father worked with Rutgers. He got a job with Rutgers. That's how they ended up here. She did her first year at Concordia Lutheran College in Ann Arbor. For whatever reason, that next year she transferred to Concordia College, Bronxville, New York. That fall semester I was in Montclair, she was in Bronxville. So, I did a lot of commuting from Montclair to Bronxville, which wasn't all that far. Then we got married in February. So, she didn't go back for that Spring semester. She quit. We lived in Montclair, an attic apartment in Montclair. I finished out the year. We got married, went on our honeymoon on spring break to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, known as the honeymoon capital of the southeast. A little one room log cabin on the banks of the Little Pigeon River in Gatlinburg. Again, we didn't have much money. We didn't have much of anything. She had gotten a job as a telephone switchboard operator there in Montclair someplace. So, that was our early days. We moved from there--every year we moved to a different apartment. Then, it wasn't until 1975 that we moved here to this palace.

MG: When did she find out she was pregnant?

JV: It would have been just before the fall semester that she was going to go to Paterson State and I was going to work. I got a job. She was going to go to school. No, Darcy was born in January 1972, eleven months after we got married. She would have found she was pregnant by April or May of 1971.

MG: What was your job?

JV: It was the line of business that eventually took me to China, but it was a factory in Franklin Township that made copper foil for printed circuit boards. I was there until the mid-'80s I started as a machine operator and ended up as production manager, basically running the place. Then, it was through my contact there with a company in California that I ended up working in China back in 1990, 1991.

MG: What were you doing in China?

JV: It was a plant to manufacture copper foil. My job was to teach the Chinese how to make copper foil. That's a whole story in itself.

MG: Do you want to save that for next time?

JV: Yes. There's a lot there.

MG: Why don't we wrap up for today? We can talk more about family life, career and education next time.

JV: Okay.

MG: I will email you today with some possible dates for our next session.

JV: Okay. Let me know if you want to come to the anniversary party.

MG: I think we will. That would be really nice. I will check with John tonight. Let me know if I can bring anything.

JV: No. It says on the invitation we're not accepting gifts. It's going to be a pizza party with salads and appetizers, and beer, wine, soda and water.

MG: It sounds like so much fun. What a great occasion.

JV: We're throwing it for ourselves.

MG: Good.

JV: We considered waiting until our fiftieth, but hey, at our age, we don't buy green bananas anymore. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] Well, thank you so much for the time you spent with me today. I always enjoy coming here.

JV: Good.

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

Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/3/2018

Reviewed by Jim Velcheck 12/15/2018