

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN ROBINSON

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

KATHRYN TRACY RIZZI

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with John Allen Robinson on February 25, 2016, in Colts Neck, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here today.

John Robinson: You're welcome, Shaun.

SI: To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

JR: I was born September 26, 1945, in Baltimore, Maryland.

SI: Okay.

JR: My father was on the USS *Missouri*. My mother was working in a war factory. She came from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, down to Maryland to be with a friend. My mom and dad met, fell in love and got married in Baltimore and I was born a year later, or two years later.

SI: What were their names, for the record?

JR: My father's name is John Lee Robinson. He passed away seven years ago in 2009. My mother is still living and her maiden name was Duddy. Her name is Mary Duddy, married name was Mary Robinson, same as my wife's.

SI: Starting with your father's side of the family, he was originally from South Carolina. What do you know about his side of the family history?

JR: My dad was raised on a farm, one of thirteen children. His mother's name was Fanny, Fanny Martin, Scotch-Irish. My grandfather's name was James Robinson. They had a couple hundred-acre farm. I believe they grew cotton, peanuts, had cows, pigs, hogs, chickens, a self-sustaining farm. I think my grandmother died, years later, on that same farm when I was a teenager.

SI: What about your mother's side of the family from Wilkes-Barre?

JR: Wilkes-Barre. My mom's mother was Lilian Christman, of German descent. They called it Pennsylvania Dutch, but it's really *Deutsch*, which is German. My grandfather was James Duddy, a hundred percent Irish, spoke with an Irish brogue. He sustained injuries in the First World War, serious injuries that prevented him from working on his return to the United States. My mother was one of six children, had a very unusual childhood actually. She was orphaned out at three years old with two of her other siblings, and then, returned, years later, as she entered high school to finish her high school with her mom and dad. Her stepmother, which wasn't legally her stepmother, Gertrude, I can't remember her last name, was actually the person that she visited in Maryland when she got a job after high school. Gertrude came from a fairly wealthy family that owned nursing homes in the Harveys Lake area [in Pennsylvania]. That's all I can recall of that.

SI: Was it because her mother passed away that she and her siblings were orphaned out?

JR: No. It's just that my grandfather wasn't working and it was the [Great] Depression and he felt he wasn't able to afford [it]. Two of the children were already old enough to have gone on their own, and then, three were orphaned out to the local orphanage. Actually, my mother's sister, who was three years older, and she didn't reunite until they were thirty and thirty-three years old; they didn't find each other. The youngest, who was a newborn, was the only one that was kept home and that was my Aunt Viola. She's still alive and lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. She's eighty-nine years old. I visited her this winter, actually.

SI: Your parents, it sounds like it was one of those marriages that never would have happened if not for the war.

JR: Without a doubt.

SI: Yes.

JR: My father would probably not have left the farm and my mother would not have left Pennsylvania if it were not for the war.

SI: What did your father tell you about his time in the service?

JR: My dad never divulged much about his time in the service. He said it was very frightening when the ship was attacked. That's really all he ever mentioned, that he wrote home often and couldn't wait for the war to be ended. In fact, it was, the treaty for the Second World War was signed on his ship, the USS *Missouri*. [Editor's Note: Japan formally surrendered on September 2, 1945, in a ceremony held onboard the USS *Missouri* (BB-63) in Tokyo Bay.]

SI: He was still onboard for the ceremony.

JR: I think he was out of the service at that time.

SI: Okay.

JR: He had just been discharged before that.

SI: You said your mother was working at a defense plant. Do you know what they were making?

JR: I don't know what they were making. I'm quite sure she was working in a Bendix factory. I don't know, some type of electronics, I can't recall.

SI: Did she ever talk about that experience, what the conditions were like or how she felt about her work?

JR: No, she enjoyed the work. It was long hours and hard work, but she felt she was doing something to help the country. She enjoyed her life after high school and living on her own.

SI: The war ends just before you were born. You are the oldest child. Where did they settle at that point? Did they come straight to New Jersey?

JR: No, they made a stop back to North Carolina for maybe six months and there was not much work in North Carolina. After the war, my dad took advantage of the GI Bill and went to school for carpentry and worked in a naval shipyard in Maryland for a year after I was born, or two, and then, decided to try his fortune in Pennsylvania, after making a stop back in North and South Carolina to see his family. We moved back to the Wilkes-Barre area. One of my uncles had moved down to the Jersey Shore, actually to West Belmar, and told my father that there was a lot of building going on, a lot of construction, and there was plenty of work for cabinetmaking and that's what my father [did]. That was his specialty, building homes and actually being a cabinetmaker. So, he raised our family. We did quite well. He owned Kimberly Kitchens or started Kimberly Kitchens and owned that for many years in Lakewood and, besides that, built a number of homes in the Spring Lake Heights area. [Editor's Note: In June 1944, Congress passed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, also known as the GI Bill of Rights, to provide educational assistance, readjustment allowances, and low-interest loans for housing for veterans.]

SI: Do you have any memories of growing up in Pennsylvania?

JR: No.

SI: No.

JR: No, very few.

SI: How old were you?

JR: I just knew that the houses there were very old and it was a very poor area. I was maybe three.

SI: Okay.

JR: I can recall a little bit [about] Maryland, when I was two. We owned a brownstone, a two-family brownstone, and I played with the little girl upstairs. Her name was Judy. My parents were very friendly with them. Then, Mom and Dad sold that house and moved on, moved to, after a brief stint in South Carolina, up to Wilkes-Barre, and then, after a year or so in Wilkes-Barre, down here to Monmouth County. Our first address was in Avon and, shortly thereafter, we moved to Spring Lake Heights. I started school in Spring Lake Heights, kindergarten, and went from kindergarten through eighth grade in Spring Lake Heights. In fact, my mother still lives in Spring Lake Heights. My mother will be ninety-two years old this year. She's probably lived there--if I was five when we moved there, she would have been about twenty-six and she's ninety-two, so, she's been there, what?--sixty-six years. [laughter]

SI: Wow. Growing up there, those early years there, what do you remember about the street you grew up on and the neighborhood? Can you describe what it was like?

JR: Spring Lake Heights, at that time, was half residential and half rural. Over the years of living there, the Homestead Development was built. Originally, that was all chicken coops and farmland and that became all houses. The population in Monmouth County and in Spring Lake Heights in particular greatly increased, but I can remember walking to school, no crime, everybody working hard. Families seemed to be happy. I had four siblings that all went through the Spring Lake Heights School System and Manasquan High School School System. We all liked school. We were all competitive students. We all strived to be first in our class. Our parents stressed education as the only way to get ahead. I was very active in sports. From the time I was six or seven years old, I played Little League. In grammar school, I played baseball, soccer, basketball, started in all three sports from sixth grade, seventh grade and eighth grade and did the same in high school, played three sports in high school for four years at Manasquan High School.

SI: What interested you the most in school?

JR: I was very competitive in math. I was very challenged by math, but I also enjoyed English, reading and writing. I liked all subjects and I happened to like all of my teachers. I was blessed with great teachers in my education, in my pre-college education. When I got to Rutgers, I was very, very well-prepared. I wasn't quite prepared for the workload as a premed student my first year. In those days, I think I had about twenty-one credits. You had to take a language, you had to take English, plus all the sciences, organic chemistry and physics and bio and calculus. It was very time-consuming, brutal. I enjoyed Rutgers. I enjoyed the friends I made there. I enjoyed the football games, the basketball games especially. Jimmy Valvano was playing at that time, Bobby Lloyd. They had very, very competitive teams. I don't know, my Rutgers experience was great. I had a couple good friends there, too. One good friend in particular from Manasquan High School was a class ahead of me and initiated me into Zeta Psi Fraternity. So, I had a nice fraternity experience. At that time, I think Rutgers was ten thousand men, no women. All the women were at Douglass [College]. I think they matriculated three thousand freshmen and, usually, a thousand flunked out after the freshman year. It was a very competitive school and very well-respected, and I know it still is today. You can go anyplace in the country, if you say you went to Rutgers, it's almost on the same level as Harvard and Princeton and Yale. It's a very revered school.

SI: I want to go back to growing up in Monmouth County. You mentioned that when you first lived there, it was pretty rural. Do you remember what you would do for fun in those years?

JR: Sure, spent a lot of time at the beach in the summertime, also some of the county parks, picnics. Things were done as a family in those days. There was very little television, very little distractions--of course, no Internet and no cell phones--and people talked to each other and communicated. That was a different era. It was a great era to grow up. You were able to walk every day to a friend's house without worrying about being kidnapped. Things like that didn't seem to exist in those days. It seemed to be a very safe haven. Monmouth County was a beautiful place to grow up, spent many days swimming at the beach and playing with friends as a young man, as a young child. As I got older, [I] helped Dad in his business and worked every chance I could to save money for college. College for me was a financially difficult time. I got

some student aid, but paid for most of it myself. After my freshman year and after I was called to active duty, the GI Bill really helped me get back into college and helped me financially.

SI: You told me before the interview how you got into the Navy. Can you tell me again?

JR: Sure. My dad had a friend at Lakehurst Naval Air Station that was a lieutenant commander. I can't recall his name. He said that it would be very beneficial for me to join the Naval Air Reserve at Lakehurst while I was going to Rutgers. So, in my senior year of high school--in fact, I looked at my Navy records--it was actually December 8th of 1963 that I joined the Naval Reserve at Lakehurst. They paid me, I can't recall, fifty dollars a month to attend one meeting a month, and then, I had to give them two weeks in the summertime. They told me that I would be a commissioned officer when I graduated from college and that they would help me pay for my college when I went to college. So, I signed up. It was a great experience, took a little bit of time away from the family and away from friends, but that was a great experience. I didn't realize that when I switched from Naval Air to the hospital--because I was a premed student at Rutgers, I switched into the corpsman field--that that made me eligible to be activated, because the Marine Corps does not have medics. They use naval corpsmen as their medics. After my freshman year, I got notice that I would be activated the following January. So, I didn't bother going back that September to Rutgers. I actually took a road trip to California with a couple of friends, took a trip across the country to see all the sights. We wound up in San Francisco, spent a month traveling the country and seeing how beautiful this country is. I came back and worked and saved some money to help Mom out and went in the service in January of 1966.

SI: When you worked, were you working at your father's company or were you working somewhere else?

JR: I worked a couple of jobs. I worked part-time for my dad and I worked in construction also. I was able to operate heavy construction equipment, backhoes and dump trucks and road graders and that kind of thing. They paid a lot more than my dad did, so, I worked full-time doing that, and then, part-time, I helped my dad on the weekends.

SI: What kind of stuff would you do for your father, not so much then, but earlier, when you were a teenager?

JR: Well, I helped him build cabinets. I actually made the frames for the cabinets. Back in those days, everything was handmade. I drilled the holes for the wooden dowels and put the frames together. Dad cut the doors and I screwed the doors on the cabinets. I actually helped stain the cabinets and varnish the cabinets and paint the cabinets and helped him install cabinets. Just about anything that needed to be done, I could do in cabinetmaking. It was a great experience. I still utilize it today as a homeowner. All my years of experience in homebuilding and cabinetmaking have come in handy.

SI: Did you work anywhere else as a teenager or just at Kimberly Kitchens?

JR: Well, actually, I was an avid swimmer. So, I had gotten my Red Cross certificate and, summer times in high school, I worked as a lifeguard at Breakwater Beach Club in Deal. For

about three summers, I was a lifeguard. That came in handy when I joined the service. They asked anybody if they had a Red Cross lifesaving certificate, at any base that I went to, and usually I was assigned to be a lifeguard at the pool. Rather than doing KP duty, kitchen duty, [laughter] or cleaning latrines, I was lifeguarding, made a few guys jealous, but that was quite an experience. Whatever base I was at, I was a lifeguard, a part-time lifeguard.

SI: At the time that you joined the Reserves, how did you feel about military service? Was it something you wanted to do or something you had to do to get through college? Did it have positive or negative connotations?

JR: I felt very patriotic. My grandfather had served in the service, my father, two of my uncles, and I felt like I was helping the country. I also felt like the country could help me pay for my college. So, I felt it was a winning situation for both sides. I was a very competitive athlete, so, I approached the service as an athletic endeavor. It challenged me physically and mentally to do my best and it taught some life lessons about punctuality and exercise and mental alertness and helping your fellow competitor, being a good sport. There were many life lessons learned from the military.

SI: What were the Reserve meetings like? Does anything stand out about those?

JR: The Reserve meetings were mostly drills, marching drills, and classroom, learning the ins and outs of the military. If you were a naval aviator, you took classes in naval aviation, whether it was refueling planes or [something else]. It was an educational experience. Then, there was a physical side, too, physical training and actually marching and learning the proper ways to maintain shoes and your uniform and dress and salute and all the basic characteristics of going with the service.

SI: When you decided on the corpsman track, was it because the Navy suggested that because you were now premed, or was it the other way around, that you decided to switch because you had taken on a premed major?

JR: I can't recall whether they asked me to switch or whether I asked to switch. When they learned that I was premed, I guess they offered me the opportunity to work in the hospital at Lakehurst and I took that opportunity, since I was studying premed. I did hearing examinations and blood tests. I also did height, weight, physicals when guys were coming in the service and blood pressure exams, that sort of thing, eye examinations, sight examinations. I was not in charge, but one of my functions was filling out all of the health requirements of an incoming soldier.

SI: I am just curious. When you were in that position, did you run into people who were trying to get themselves disqualified?

JR: No.

SI: No.

JR: Not at that time. Most of these people were there enlisting.

SI: Volunteers.

JR: Yes, they were volunteers enlisting, not people trying to avoid the draft.

SI: The Fall of 1964 was when you entered Rutgers.

JR: Yes.

SI: What were your first few days and weeks like on campus?

JR: Pretty hectic, a lot of classes, a lot of different classrooms to learn, besides buying books and getting settled and getting situated and getting yourself organized for these classes. You had to draw yourself a little map and see where the classrooms were, because I went to a one-school high school, had many classrooms, but they were all in one building. To go to Rutgers and have classes all over the campus and all over different campuses, some classes were at Douglass and some were at Piscataway and Livingston and some were on College Avenue. It was mass confusion for the first few days, until you got settled in and learned the ropes.

SI: Did they have any freshman hazing in those days? I know sporadically throughout the 1960s, they would try to reintroduce wearing dinks and things like that.

JR: Yes, wearing a beanie.

SI: Yes.

JR: They had freshmen wear a beanie. Yes, they did. I was in pretty good shape and pretty athletic and nobody seemed to bother me. I never wore the beanie. I had a very good friend of mine that was a sophomore at Zeta Psi and nobody bothered me there either. I went out for the football team as a walk-on and I think I was, like, eighth string. So, that only lasted about a week or two. I was with a good friend from high school, Pete Romein, and I think Pete dropped out after the first semester. He wasn't doing very well and he also went in the service. He has an unusual story, in that he became a psychologist after he went to Vietnam, upon his termination of his [service]. He was in the infantry. He went to the University of New Hampshire, studied psychology, became, not a psychiatrist, but a psychologist, and his specialty was post-traumatic stress syndrome. He just retired. He was one of my best buddies at Manasquan High School and at Rutgers for the first year that I was there. We reunited at our fiftieth anniversary high school reunion this past year and we've been in constant touch with one another. He's a great guy. He's now retired, but he had eight psychologists working under him in his practice. He made a career and he had post-traumatic stress syndrome himself. So, he was very interested in how to solve it and how to deal with it and actually studied it and tried to help soldiers of all ages get back into society, a great guy.

SI: Wow. You got involved in Zeta Psi. Was that before you left for the service in your freshman year?



JR: Yes, it was. That was in my freshman year.

SI: Right.

JR: I was very involved in Zeta Psi. I went in the service and it was three years, really, because I didn't go back in the fall. I went in the service in January, I got out in January. I didn't re-enter Rutgers until that following September. So, I went back in the Class of '71. In '71, there was a lot of antiwar protesters. I went back to Zeta Psi, which was--they were pretty athletic and pretty clean-cut when I was there as a freshman--the whole fraternity had pretty much changed to a lot of antiwar guys and long-haired guys and hippie-type of guys that I didn't associate with. Not that I wasn't friendly with them, but I just didn't associate with the antiwar sentiment at that time and kept my hair at a reasonable length, not a hippie length. So, I had some good buddies at Chi Psi that played football and I spent most of my partying time or social time at Chi Psi rather than the Zeta Psi that I had pledged as a freshman, which I guess is somewhat unusual. I never did go back and hook up with anybody from Zeta Psi, although I went through the whole pledge year.

SI: You pledged. Did you become a brother or did you leave before then?

JR: I left before then.

SI: Okay.

JR: Yes.

SI: What was involved in pledging in that era? What would you have to do? What was life in a fraternity house like?

JR: It seemed to be, you had a group of guys that really played sports together, studied together, helped each other. It was a really nice, clubby atmosphere, parties on the weekends. It just seemed like all your best buddies were gathered in one house. I embraced that, a lot of parties. They started Thursday night and ran through Sunday night, but not conducive to studying for me. I spent a lot of time at the library. I washed dishes to help pay for my fraternity expenses. I washed dishes every night. Actually, I had forgotten that. The guys were great. We had some great athletes in that house, a couple basketball players, a couple wrestlers. It was just a really fun experience. We'd have bands, dances, kegs of beer on the weekend. There were great times, fun times. I have no negative thoughts at all about campus life.

SI: Did you live in the house?

JR: Yes.

SI: Do you remember if the house had any problems with the administration, or would that be something you would not have been concerned with?

JR: I don't think they had any problems in those days. In that year that I was there, there were no problems.

SI: Okay.

JR: We had a housemother that lived there and there was always chaperones on the weekends for the parties, parents. There were always, I think, two or three couples, parents, that sat in for the parties, plus our housemother. We never had a run-in with the law or the administration, while I was there.

SI: You said you were a premed major. Did you make that decision as soon as you got there or was it later on?

JR: That was pretty much a decision before I went to Rutgers, that I wanted to become a doctor. That's what I applied for when I went there and that's the program that I got into.

SI: At that time, was the medical school still a part of Rutgers? It was part of it, then, got detached, and then, recently was put back together.

JR: I don't think the medical school was a part of Rutgers.

SI: Okay.

JR: In those days.

SI: Okay, they had a premed course.

JR: Correct.

SI: What did that consist of? Was that in Rutgers College?

JR: It was in Rutgers College.

SI: Okay.

JR: It was a BS [bachelor of science] in the biological sciences, biology, chemistry, organic chemistry, physics, calculus, all the sciences, and, plus, on top of the sciences, which was a tremendous workload, you were required to take English and a language. So, it was a very, very tough, eye-opening freshman year. You had to work very hard just to stay there, but it was a gratifying year and a fun year also. I think because we all worked so hard and studied so hard that we played hard, too, on the weekends.

SI: Were there any social activities outside of the fraternity?

JR: Well, there were pep rallies at the old gymnasium that was on College Avenue. Besides English and a language, we had to take gym also. Gym was a required subject. So, it was a full

load every day. There were many activities at school in those days, pep rallies, football games, basketball games, soccer. I mean, you could do as much as you wanted to do, twenty-four hours a day.

SI: Did you go out for any other teams besides football?

JR: No, no, I was too busy. [laughter]

SI: That is a heavy course load.

JR: Looking back, I wish I had, but I didn't.

SI: Do any professors from that first period at Rutgers stand out?

JR: I can't recall any names. I had a biology professor that wrote left-handed as he walked from one end of the blackboard to the other and wrote perfectly and wrote as fast as anybody could type and he was terrific. I can't recall his name. Nope, I can't recall any professor's name. Dr. Koch at Cook College is one of the professors that I had, when I came back from Vietnam, that I can recall. I had a friend in graduate school, when I went into graduate school after 1971, Lee Schneider, I met in graduate school. We played intramural basketball together. He was the linebacker on the football team and was Dean of Men [Dean of Students], I think, at Cook College for many years. Other than that, I can't recall names, places.

SI: Tell me about making the transition from Rutgers, being a college student, to now being on active duty. How did they notify you? Where did you have to go?

JR: I got a letter notifying me that I would be activated in January of '66 and that I was to report to Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, to a specific address at a certain time. So, I made my way to Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. I was there for a couple of weeks, waiting for orders, and they gave me orders to go to Great Lakes Naval Training Station. That was Hospital Corpsman's School in Waukegan, Illinois. I can't remember what month I went there. It was probably in February or late January of '66.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: Do you mind if I record this?

JR: No, go ahead.

SI: We were just looking over your records and you mentioned that you did very well on your GCT/ACI.

JR: ARI [General Classification Test/Arithmetic Test].

SI: The GCT/ARI Test, you got 144 out of 145.

JR: Right.

SI: That enabled you to go to two schools.

JR: Correct. I was actually brought in to the commander of Lakehurst, who was a captain at that time, and he told me it was the highest score he'd ever seen. Wherever I went, they usually would remark on the GCT/ARI, and I attribute that to my high school and Rutgers teaching. I had great teachers and I had a good memory.

SI: Did they ever approach you about going to Officer Candidate School?

JR: Yes, not while I was on active duty as a corpsman, but when I got released from the service and told them--I still had two years of Reserve time to serve. That was called Inactive Reserve. They told me when I completed Rutgers that they would give me officer's bars. In fact, they said I was entitled, because I had six years of service behind me, that I wouldn't even go in as an ensign, I would go in as a lieutenant JG [junior grade]. So, I was told that by the captain at Lakehurst. A captain is like a full colonel in the Marine Corps and the Army, but I never pursued it. I actually made E-5. I came out of the service E-4 in two years of active duty. In the service, you take a test and the higher you score on whatever test you take, the faster you get advanced. I would always finish near the very top in every test that I took, so that as soon as an opening would be available, if I had the proper time in rate, I would be advanced. I went up the ladder in the service as [fast] as you could humanly do it. In two years of active duty to finish as an E-4 is quite an accomplishment, but I did make, in July of '67, I made E-5. My discharge date was January 19th of '68 and they told me, if I re-upped for one year, that they would give me E-5, which I declined, because I was in the middle of fighting outside of Hue City when they made me that offer. I saw many people die and I just thought the faster I got out of Vietnam, the better my chances were to stay alive. So, I turned down E-5 and came home and went back to college. [Editor's Note: In Navy enlisted rates, E-5 is petty officer second class and E-4 is petty officer third class.]

SI: Let us work our way to that point.

JR: Okay.

SI: You went to Great Lakes from, I think you said, January to June of 1966.

JR: Well, looking at this [paperwork] right here, it looks like I went from March to June.

SI: March to June.

JR: Right, right.

SI: Tell me a little about the training at Great Lakes, what they taught you and what it was like for you.

JR: Great Lakes, we studied five days a week. It was like being in college, like a regular school. We had all lifesaving courses. We were taught anatomy, physiology, some pharmacy. I would say it probably relates to nursing school. In three months, we probably crammed everything that a two-year nursing program would cram in. We went to school all day and we did some training in the afternoons and some physical training early in the morning. That's one thing about the service. You get up in the morning and you train physically for an hour, half-hour to an hour, push-ups, sit-ups, leg raises, squat-thrusts, whatever. Then, there's breakfast, and then, you work until lunchtime. You have lunch and go right back to work. Then, [at] four-thirty or five o'clock, we were off and I choose every afternoon to study. Then, I usually went to the gym or, if I had duty, I had pool duty weekends and a couple evenings, lifeguarding. They had a big indoor pool. If nobody was in the pool, I used that opportunity to swim or to read. It was very much like a campus, a college campus, rigorous, strict, but a lot of fun also. A lot of great guys, I met a lot of great guys, and it was competitive. We were all competitive and each company was competitive with the next company, to see which company could get the highest grades. It was a group environment. We slept in one big, huge room, in bunk beds. We had a locker and all your worldly possessions were in one little locker. Again, it was hard, it was rigorous, but it was also fun. It was doing something different, seeing a different part of the world. The Great Lakes are beautiful. Waukegan's a beautiful town. Lake Shore Drive along the lakes is as pretty a place as I've ever seen. Chicago's a neat city. We went to ballgames in Chicago and Milwaukee. To me, the service was a great experience. Except for fighting combat and fighting for our lives in Vietnam, most of the time I spent in the service was a great time.

[RECORDING PAUSED]

SI: I wanted to ask, given how rigorous it was, was there a high wash-out rate?

JR: In the service?

SI: At Great Lakes.

JR: No. There was, I would say, maybe ten percent that couldn't hack it, and maybe they just didn't have the IQ or the intelligence. Most of the time, the guys that were on the bottom of the pile, we pulled up by the bootstraps and helped. So, even the guys that were borderline were helped by his peers. The bottom guys were pulled up, I would say, by the top guys. We helped each other and that's pretty much the way the service works. Especially in combat, your life depends on your fellow soldiers, so, you learned to help each other every day. There's competition, intense competition, but, yet, there's a comradery that is very rare in the rest of society.

SI: You are in training probably two years after the buildup begins in Vietnam, after the Gulf of Tonkin Incident in 1964. At that time, did you know much of what was happening in Vietnam?

JR: No, I just knew that there was a war starting and it was escalating. It seemed to be escalating every year. In fact, when I was sent over there, I think there was about the highest number of troops, five hundred thousand troops, Lyndon Johnson had sent over. I think a very small percentage of those troops were actually combat troops, but they'd built up a huge force in

Vietnam at that time. I know it was building. I guess it was started under Kennedy and escalated under Lyndon Johnson. [Editor's Note: After World War II, President Harry S. Truman's administration provided aid and military advisors to France to squash the Vietnamese fight for independence. Following French defeat and with the Cold War fueling anti-Communist policies in foreign relations, President Dwight D. Eisenhower supported President Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam with training and equipment against Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Vietminh of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north. About eight hundred US military personnel were stationed in Vietnam by the late 1950s. Under the Presidency of John F. Kennedy, American troops in Vietnam reached 16,700 by the end of 1963. In response to an alleged naval confrontation between American and North Vietnamese forces in the Gulf of Tonkin, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution on August 10, 1964, which authorized President Lyndon B. Johnson to wage war in Vietnam. Under Johnson, the numbers of American troops in Vietnam increased from 80,000 in July 1965 to 385,000 in 1966 and to the peak of 543,400 in 1969.]

SI: At this time, were you thinking that you would get stateside duty or that you would get sent to Vietnam? Were you being told that you would probably wind up in Vietnam?

JR: No. Actually, graduating first in my class had an advantage. They gave me a choice of bases to go to afterwards, hospitals, and the closest one to my house, my home here in New Jersey, was Portsmouth Naval Base in Portsmouth, Virginia, which is the sister city of Norfolk. I chose Portsmouth, Virginia. It was only a six-hour drive home. On the weekends, I was able to come home and visit family occasionally. After, oh, I don't know, six months or so at Portsmouth, I felt quite confident that, with less than a year to go in the service, that I wouldn't have to go to Vietnam. In fact, when I got to Portsmouth Naval Hospital, again, the fact that I had graduated first in my class and I had that high GCT/ARI score, the commanding officer of Portsmouth suggested that I go to one of the clinics in the hospital, rather than just be a corpsman, like a nurse on a hospital floor. He suggested I choose one of the clinics. I didn't know which clinic to choose and he said, "Well, urology is always a good department to work in." So, I wound up as a urology technician in the urology department and I worked like anybody else would work, nine to five. I learned a lot. I became a urology technician. I assisted six urologists in all of their medical procedures in the operating room, autoclaved their instruments, handed them their instruments. Sometimes, they would tell me to sew up the patient when they were finished. We were highly trained. I did X-rays when I wasn't assisting the doctors in the operating room. I did kidney X-rays and bladder X-rays, a procedure called an IVP, which is an intravenous pyelogram. I would do those procedures, and then, take those X-rays to the X-ray room. Those doctors would ask me to sit and help them read the X-rays, see if I saw anything that was out of the ordinary, a great group of guys. I very seldom had weekend duty. I was able to work nine to five and have evenings off and weekends off most of the time. So, I had a great experience in the service. With less than a year to go, I was pretty confident that I would not be called to Vietnam. Oh, I had another experience at Portsmouth. I was one of eight corpsmen called to set up a field emergency medical unit on a ship. We had three or four surgeons, a urologist, a surgeon, an EENT, eye, ear, nose and throat doctor, and we set up a surgical unit on a ship and landed in Vieques Island in Puerto Rico, where I was on a ship for a month with these doctors. They ran a mission and invaded Vieques Island and we set up a surgical unit on the beach. They made a film of how to set up a whole surgical operation on shore, on an amphibious

landing. I was on the LST *Raleigh* for thirty days. I was given some time off in Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico. I spent ten days, then, came back to Portsmouth and that's when I got orders to report, that I was being transferred to the Fleet Marine Force. I was given thirty days off. I came home for thirty days, and then, I had to report to Camp Lejeune [Marine Corps Base in North Carolina]. That was the Summer of '67, the beginning of the Summer of 1967, had combat training and field combat corpsman training at Camp Lejeune for a month, in the heat of the summer there, which really prepared us for Vietnam. I was a platoon leader down there. We worked very hard. We got in great shape. From Camp Lejeune, I was sent to San Diego, and then, the plane landed in Tokyo. I spent a couple days in Tokyo, and then, off to Okinawa. That was all commercial flight, and then, flew in, I don't know, a C-130, a small Air Force plane that was very uncomfortable, on, like, parachute seats. From Okinawa, it's about a seven or eight-hour flight to Da Nang, Vietnam. I landed in Da Nang July 1, 1967, spent one day in Da Nang, getting all my paperwork straightened out. They told me I was going to Delta Company with the First Marines and the First Marine Battalion. The next day, they drove me by jeep to outside a little town called Hoi An, H-O-I A-N. I reported to the First Platoon in Hoi An, in a place they called "the Mud Flats." Someone pointed to a dead Marine on the ground that was covered with a tarp and told me that I was replacing that person on the ground that was killed that day in a battle. So, right outside of Hoi An was very dangerous. We went on daily patrols and almost on a daily basis got sniper fire and incurred casualties and fought for our lives. From there, we were transferred to Dong Ha, which was further north. Our mission in Dong Ha was to clear an area around Quang Tri, so [that] they could build an airstrip, and we accomplished that mission. In-between, we were on so many missions, so many operations. We had a very strong captain. His name was (Gallagher?), Captain (Gallagher?). My lieutenant was Steve Lampo, who was also a strong ex-football player from the University of Missouri. We had a battle-hardened outfit that was called on to assist other outfits that were in trouble. We flew all over Vietnam, from the mountains to the plains to the ocean, rescuing other outfits and, of course, incurring casualties ourselves. I was on Operation SWIFT [September 4-15, 1967, in the Que Son Valley], Operation MEDINA [October 11-20, 1967, in the Hai Lang Forest], Operation TENNESSEE, Operation KENTUCKY [November 1, 1967 to February 28, 1969, Con Thien, Quang Tri Province], just to name a few. In one operation, it was actually an amphibious operation. We were on amphibious tanks and amphibious landing craft. We invaded this small island that was just infiltrated with VC, Vietcong, and our mission was to clear this island of the Vietcong. We incurred heavy casualties. It was like a John Wayne movie, where you had to dig in on the beach and we're taking sniper fire from the palm trees. I can remember one kid from Kentucky--and I can't remember his name--but he shot from the hip and picked, like, three guys out of the trees that were shooting at us. We got on line, a couple hundred guys, and we swept across this little island and either killed or captured every Vietcong that was on the island in a week. We sustained heavy casualties. I don't remember what that operation was called, but it was intense fighting. Usually, our outfit was in the jungle fighting, ninety percent of the time. We spent very little time on any bases, very little time in the rear area. We were all battle-hardened. A lot of stories I had buried in the back of my mind and forgotten, but I had letters that I sent home to my mother that I read last week and it kind of jostled my memory.

SI: I want to go back to when you joined the unit. That is a pretty rude awakening, pointing to someone and saying, "You are replacing him." What was that first day or two like, when you were integrating yourself into the unit?

JR: Well, from that first moment, I knew I'd be fighting for my life. I knew that when somebody's wounded or hit, they're usually in the open and you're called on to rescue that person and bring him to safety and tend to his wounds until you can call in a medevac [medical evacuation] chopper. So, from that very first moment of seeing that dead corpsman, I knew I was in for the battle of my life. I fought hard. I helped a lot of guys along my way, helped a lot of wounded guys, came very, very close a number of times--just the luck of the draw I'm here, I would say. I've tried not to waste too much time in my life. Combat definitely changed my personality from, I would say, carefree, happy-go-lucky--I was studious and serious when I had to be, but I would say my personality was mostly carefree and happy-go-lucky--and I became a lot more serious when I got home and thought quite a bit about the guys that didn't make it and just tried to dedicate myself to being a good person and doing the best I could possibly do in my life, being a good family guy and a hardworking guy, making the most of my time, this extra time, I was granted. I know my experience leaving Vietnam, we were on a commercial flight and we're all Marines that had battled for their lives, I guess. As we flew out, we were on a commercial flight with stewardesses. They all said, "Oh, geez, the last group of guys were all singing and dancing when they left and seemed a lot happier than you guys." I know that all of us on that plane were reflecting on all the friends that we had lost over there and all the seriously wounded friends that we had tended to and our reflections were a lot more serious, as combat veterans, than some of the guys that served in the rear areas and support. So, it was a very quiet, reflective flight out of Vietnam.

SI: Do you remember what was going on in your mind as you were leaving Okinawa and flying into Vietnam?

JR: Actually, I embraced almost every new base and every new experience like a sport. Every time you play a game, every time you play, whatever sport it is, baseball, football, basketball, you have opponents and you don't know what that game is going to bring, whether it's going to bring a win or a loss. You don't know whether you have--and I'm sure the greatest athletes in the world have the same thing--a little trepidation before each game, before each tournament. I play a lot of golf now. You have a little trepidation, that maybe you won't do your best, but, once you get in the heat of battle, you forget all that. You just put your head down and go like hell. I embraced Vietnam like a sport. I was going to go in there and do my best and put my head down and fight like hell, only this time, it wasn't a win or a loss, it was a life or a death. It becomes a lot more eye-opening and a lot more serious when you're fighting for your life every day, rather than fighting to win a game.

SI: Did you carry a weapon?

JR: Yes, I carried two weapons. I carried a forty-five [Colt .45 M1911 semiautomatic pistol] that I was issued and they asked me if I wanted an M-16 [semiautomatic rifle] and I carried an M-16 also. I carried an M-16 because carrying a forty-five made you an automatic target of a sniper. Carrying an M-16, you could just kind of blend in. If you just carried a forty-five, you were either the commanding officer or the platoon leader or the corpsman or the radioman or somebody that they would shoot at first. So, I carried both.



SI: I would imagine they did not give you the Red Cross insignia.

JR: No.

SI: No.

JR: No, that was probably the Second World War.

SI: Yes.

JR: Or something.

SI: Did you know right away that you would be carrying arms in combat? Did you know that in the States?

JR: Yes. We trained at Camp Lejeune to fire different weapons. In fact, when I was in Vietnam, I had occasion to fire an M79 grenade launcher when that guy was wounded, an M60 machine-gun when that guy was wounded, I fired. I fired the M-16, of course, and my forty-five. The forty-five was a very close-range weapon, not good for long range. That would only save you if you were attacked close up, wasn't a very accurate weapon, a very powerful weapon, but not very accurate.

SI: What were your living conditions like at the different bases you were at?

JR: I was only in one. Actually, in Hoi An, we had a mother base that we operated from, but spent a lot of time in the jungle or out in the field. Of course, when we were on operations, we just lived in the jungle full-time. Sometimes, we spent thirty straight days in the jungle, thick bamboo and intense heat. There were mountainous conditions. There were rivers to cross. When we were clearing out Quang Tri and they built some Quonset huts there, we were able to spend a couple weeks in almost livable conditions of a roof over our head and three meals a day, but that was probably, in the whole time I was in Vietnam, maybe two or three weeks of living nicely. Most of the time, it was jungle conditions of not shaving and not bathing and drinking whatever water we found and we'd purify it with water tablets that they gave us, water purification tablets. C rations, if we were in the middle of the jungle, they would drop a week's worth, which was twenty-one meals, and we could only carry seven meals on top of all the other weight that we had, flak jacket, ammunition, weapons, our water, our boots, the uniform. We were probably lugging forty, fifty pounds to begin with, so, there's no way you could carry twenty-one meals. We carried one meal a day for seven days and everybody lost weight. My lieutenant was a big football player. When he came over there, he was about 220 pounds and he was about 170 when he left. I was about 170 or 175 when I went over and I was about 130 pounds with a twenty-nine-inch waist when I came home, never did gain much weight back, [laughter] but just the way it was.

SI: Yes.

JR: Everybody lost weight.

SI: Do you remember other things that you would have to do that you learned in the field as you went, rather than you had been trained to do? You mentioned only carrying the rations you could. What were other things that you came up with in the field?

JR: Well, we took a piece of canvas and we would hack a couple pieces of bamboo if we had to carry somebody by stretcher back to a base or back to a landing area where we could get a chopper in. We'd make our own stretchers with bamboo. The mosquitos were so intense that we had insect repellent, which kept the mosquitos off our skin. You couldn't have one speck of skin without that mosquito repellent on it or there would be a thousand mosquitos on that one little spot, but the sound of the mosquitos around your head, even though they wouldn't land, kept you awake at night. You had to put a towel over your head, so [that] you could actually get whatever sleep you could possibly get. Sometimes, we'd march all day and all night, and then, fight a battle. You'd catch a few winks here and there, protect the guy next to you while he slept and he'd protect you while you slept. You were sleep deprived. You were hungry. You were tired and you were fighting for your life and, most of the times, in such intense heat you couldn't believe it. It seemed like it was 120 degrees. I don't know what the temperature was, but it was probably 110 or 115. You sweated. Sometimes, a lot of guys were out of water, if they perspired too much and drank all their water. You were in conditions where you were dying for a drink. There were other dangers that lurked. There were accidental discharges from somebody that was cleaning his weapon or insects, the insect bites, leeches, snakes. The living conditions, besides fighting in combat, were deplorable. In the monsoons, mud, you'd be up to your knees in mud. You would go weeks having wet feet. You would have fungus on your feet or what they called trench foot. You couldn't get dry. You couldn't get warm. You'd go from intense heat to you were so saturated, the least little breeze would freeze you to death. You'd be shivering at night. I could remember most of the time just sleeping under the stars or out in the rain. We'd take a poncho that was in our bag and make a makeshift tent to try to keep dry. Unless you've lived it or been through it, it's something that I've hardly ever talked to. About the first time I started telling stories was last week to Carol Fowler at the history museum [National Guard Militia Museum of New Jersey] in Sea Girt, but, other than that, the only other person is Pete Romein, my friend that was in Vietnam and is a post-traumatic stress expert. He and I have shared some stories, but all these stories have been inside me all these years. I've never told them to my children, my wife. Just a couple of guys, a Marine Corps friend of mine that's a retired colonel, I've told a few stories. I'm on the Planning Board here in Colts Neck and the Long-Range Planning Committee last week, it was a short meeting and I've been recognized in town as a combat veteran and a Bronze Star-winner, so, a couple of the guys on the Planning Board asked me to tell a couple stories. That was at last month's meeting and that was actually the first time I actually told a few stories about a couple close calls I had with death, a couple very coincidental things. I'm going to tell you a little story, Shaun, that I told them. I was fighting outside of Hue City in the beginning of January 1968. The Captain called my lieutenant and said that, "You've got to get," they called me Doc Robby, "you've got to get Doc Robby out of the jungle. His discharge date's in two weeks. He should've been out of Vietnam thirty days ago; he should've been out of Vietnam before his discharge date." The Lieutenant hung up. He told me that he had to get me to Quang Tri Air Strip, but he didn't know how to get me there. We were fighting outside of Hue City, right before the Tet Offensive, where most of my outfit was wiped out after I left. [Editor's Note: Named for the lunar new year, the Tet Offensive began

on January 30, 1968, when North Vietnamese forces and Vietcong launched a surprise offensive at points throughout South Vietnam. American and South Vietnamese forces counterattacked and fighting in some places continued through February. The battle in Hue between Marines and NVA lasted for more than three weeks and resulted in thousands killed and the city destroyed.] A lieutenant, the Chaplain, was nearby and said, "Oh, I have a jeep back in the village." There was a village a couple miles away. "We can take my jeep," it was called Highway 1, "down Highway 1 from Hue City." It wasn't a long trip, maybe twenty miles or so. You couldn't go very fast. Maybe it was an hour drive. On the way to Quang Tri Air Strip, we made it back to the village. I was a little hesitant to go with a chaplain who wasn't armed and to travel on Route 1, which was not a secure highway, by myself with just my M-16. I asked the Chaplain where he was from and he said he was from a little town in Ohio. He asked me where I was from and I said, "I'm from a little town in New Jersey. You probably have never heard of it, Spring Lake Heights." He said, "No, I don't know Spring Lake Heights, but I know Manasquan." I said, "How do you know Manasquan?" He said, "Well, my college roommate is Fritz Lockenmeyer and he's a teacher at Manasquan High School." I went to Manasquan High School and Fritz Lockenmeyer was my football, basketball and baseball coach my freshman year and a dear friend of mine. He also, when I was a freshman, made me captain of all three teams. So, we had mutual respect, Fritz Lockenmeyer and I. I came home and I told him the story about Chaplain (Lions?) giving me a ride to Quang Tri Air Strip, which, here, in the middle of combat, halfway around the world and you meet somebody that was your high school coach's college roommate, it was pretty coincidental. Well, the Planning Board boys, they want to know more stories, but maybe I have a few more to tell them. I don't know.

SI: I want to go back, but to stay with this for a second.

JR: Go ahead.

SI: Was this too painful to remember? Some veterans tell me that when they came back, nobody seemed to want to talk about it, so, they just buried their experiences. What is your take on why you did not talk for so long?

JR: I didn't talk for a long time because, unless you were there, it's hard to describe and maybe even hard to believe that a human can sustain himself or survive in those conditions. I came back to antiwar sentiment and I just thought to myself, "There's a lot more to me than being a Vietnam vet." I was proud of my service, I was proud I served, I was proud I won the Bronze Star, but I didn't want to be classified as a Vietnam vet, solely as a Vietnam vet. I considered myself an [academic], an athlete, someone involved in his town, in society. I just wanted to go back to my old life and get back to Rutgers as soon as I could and get on with a career and bury these experiences behind me and it didn't seem like anybody wanted to hear any stories anyway in those days. So, I just locked them in the back of my mind and looked forward and didn't look back for forty-some years. [laughter] That's kind of how I've adjusted or have been able to adjust to society. A lot of guys got stuck in Vietnam and got stuck in the Vietnam experience and were never able to escape. I saw that and I didn't want to become one of those guys. I know a lot of the guys, they ride motorcycles and they've got the Vietnam vet jacket on and the beards and the long hair. You know, that's one part of your life, but that doesn't define your entire life. It's just one year out of your life. That's how I've handled it.

SI: Okay. To go back, do you remember the first patrol or action you were part of? What was that like for you?

JR: Sure. I didn't know what to expect. It was a day, I think the day after seeing the dead corpsman laying on the ground, I saddled up. The Sergeant, who became a dear friend of mine, and radioman, we kind of formed the headquarters group, I guess it's called, the platoon leader and the corpsman and the radioman and lieutenant. Every patrol that went out, a corpsman goes with. So, there was never a patrol that I didn't go out on. You go out with trepidation and hoping for the best and usually expecting you're going to get shot at and hoping that you can win the game, you can get your enemy before he gets you. In many of the battles I was in, if it wasn't for our air support, I wouldn't be sitting here talking. We were just so outnumbered or caught in such a treacherous ambush that we wouldn't have survived if we couldn't have called in air strikes to get us freed out of the situation. Basically, we did something that I thought was quite foolish, almost on a daily basis, and it was called search-and-destroy. I thought it was more like "march through the jungle and search, but we would get destroyed," because we'd usually walk into an ambush or booby traps or whatever. This search-and-destroy didn't seem to accomplish very much, except getting a lot of guys wounded. That was my take on it. That seemed to be the way they operated back in those days, but, to me, it seemed to be not very effective. It would root out the enemy, I guess, or give his location, but at the expense of a lot of young guys being either wounded or killed.

SI: Before you went up to Dong Ha, that is when you were clearing out for the air strip.

JR: [Yes].

SI: The patrols in the first place, would you be sent out on helicopter or were you going out on foot?

JR: We went out of the Mud Flats in Hoi An, we would go out of the base on foot. It wasn't until we went on operations that we'd be flown out by helicopter and land in the middle of nowhere. The Lieutenant or the Captain would have a map and we'd go in a certain direction and engage the enemy or try to save Bravo Company or Alpha Company or one of the companies, Charlie Company, that was in trouble. The boys of Company C, that's Charlie Company, and we were actually Delta Company, they wrote a movie about *The Boys in Company C* [1978 film], but Delta Company actually saved the boys of Company C in that mountain and I was in that mountain. Company C was overrun. We'd go out by foot most of the time, when we were outside of Da Nang, and we'd go sometimes along the beach, the South China Sea, sometimes across rice paddies, sometimes on tree lines, all different terrain. There were friendlies there, too, what they call Vietnamese, civilian Vietnamese, and mixed in with the civilian Vietnamese were VC, Vietcong, hiding out. So, that was the most dangerous part. You could never tell who the enemy was. When we got up further north into Dong Ha and Quang Tri, that was called I Corps, there were no friendlies, so, anybody we engaged was an enemy. That was a whole different ballgame. You were fighting, but it seemed more fair to me, because when you saw somebody, it automatically was an enemy. They had cleaned out I Corps of all friendly civilians. The only people left up there were not friendly. We fought NVA [North Vietnamese Army], we

fought VC. We fought in the mountains, we fought in the jungles, we fought on beaches, we fought on riverbanks, just about any terrain you could possibly imagine, in every condition, from intense heat to torrential rain. [Editor's Note: From 1965 to 1972, US Marines operated in I Corps, the four northernmost provinces of South Vietnam.]

SI: When you were doing these patrols on foot out of Hoi An, when someone got wounded, would they be medevacked out by helicopter or would you have to bring them back?

JR: Ninety-nine percent of the time, we would medevac them out. If it was a non-life-threatening wound, we'd be able to take them back to the base, but I would say that was probably one percent of the time. Most of the time, it was a severe injury. We'd have to secure an LZ, a landing zone, and you got a group of guys in a circle and made sure the enemy was far enough away that they couldn't [attack] and made sure the LZ, the landing zone, was safe for the helicopter to land. You would pop a yellow smoke grenade and the chopper pilot would see that. He had a gunner on the back and he would swoop down. You'd toss the wounded guy in the helicopter and the helicopter would take off. You'd run back. You couldn't hear anything. You couldn't hear if you were being shot at, so, it was usually extremely dangerous to run out in the middle of a field with a helicopter landing. So, you got out of there as quickly as you could.

SI: With the equipment you had in the field, the supplies you had, what could you do for a wounded soldier or Marine?

JR: I could stop the bleeding. I could give him morphine for his pain. Basically, that's all I could do, but I did other things, too. I had foot lotion for guys that had foot fungus. I had a scalpel and medical equipment if guys had infections or serious boils or serious infections, I could lance them. I had antibiotic ointments and that type of thing to try to prevent infection. Conditions, with the perspiration and the heat, were so ripe for infection, the least little cut would get so infected over there. You'd really have to try to keep things clean. It was just trouble finding clean water, also. It was a struggle. Most of the time, I would stop the bleeding, wrap up the wound and try to get the guy on a helicopter as quickly as possible.

SI: Being with the Marines, they are a much smaller and closer unit than the Army. Would you know most of the people that you were on patrols with?

JR: Oh, sure.

SI: Yes.

JR: Oh, yes. It's like knowing your high school classmates.

SI: Yes.

JR: Or your grammar school classmates. There's supposed to be sixty guys in a platoon. Usually, we had forty or fifty, because there were so many wounded or going out or killed. Most of those guys became your best buddies, so, it was sad, when you became really close with somebody, it hurt ten times as bad to see them wounded or killed. You knew their life stories.

You knew their girlfriends or their wives or where they were from and how many brothers and sisters they had. You sat at night and told each other stories. You knew if they played sports or didn't play sports. You got to know the person. In the middle of this serious life-and-death stuff, we had some tremendous laughs and some tremendous stories the guys told about home and it became almost like a happy family that protected each other, great guys. I don't care if they were Hispanic, black, white, green or blue, I mean, we loved each other. Race, nationality, religion never entered the picture. I saw no discrimination when I was over there, none. There was still quite a bit here in the United States back in the early '60s and mid-'60s, but there was nothing in the Marine Corps.

SI: Do you remember the first time you had to fire your weapon?

JR: I think it was just a few days after I got there and we were pinned down with sniper fire. I tried to fire my weapon in the direction the sniper fire was coming from. Usually, the Sergeant or Lieutenant would give the orders to fire or not fire, but I became just like one of the foot soldiers. One of the first patrols, the radioman's name was (Kincaid?). He was from Cincinnati, Ohio, I think. He was a very handsome guy with a dark beard that the Vietnamese found fascinating, because they have no body hair, no facial hair. The little children used to come up and rub his heavy whiskers. I believe his family was in the pizza business in Cincinnati, in the Cincinnati area. We became very good friends and he was shot. He yelled to me, "Doc, I think I'm hit." We were under intense sniper fire and we were in the middle of an open field. I got behind this little berm, this little mound, and he was maybe twenty or thirty yards away from me. He said, "I think I'm hit." I said, "Well, crawl over here." We were in tall grass, maybe grass up to our knees, which was covering us. He said, "I can't move and I feel something trickling down my neck." I said, "All right, I'll be right there." So, I jumped up, made my way to him and pulled his radio off, gave the radio to one of the other young guys, who happened to be near him, and I saw three wounds, two in his back and one behind his ear. I thought maybe he had taken three bullets, but I was informed later, word got back to the Lieutenant, that the bullet grazed off his shoulder blade, it went in on the bottom of his shoulder blade, ricocheted off the shoulder blade, came out and lodged behind his ear. He was bleeding pretty heavily and I applied direct pressure on all the wounds. I got the bleeding to subside and bandaged him up. I can't remember if the Lieutenant or one of the other guys called in a chopper. He said, "Am I going to be okay?" I said, "Yes, you'll definitely be okay." I got one letter from him. He said he was okay, but he had a couple neurological problems. He said, "You told me I was going to be perfect, but I've got a couple problems," but he thanked me for saving his life. All these guys, now that I've been thinking about in the past couple of weeks, I'd sure like to try to find. As I look at my platoon, there's a picture of my platoon on that website, actually, my memory flashes back and I can remember almost every guy's name. I'm going to try to somehow maybe go on Facebook or something and start contacting these guys, because we're all getting older. I'm now going to be seventy-one and I was twenty-one, twenty-two over there. These guys were all eighteen, nineteen, twenty. They were all a little bit younger than me, except for the Lieutenant and the Captain. So, I think it's about time to start reuniting before it's too late. That was just one little story. That was one of my first patrols [when] (Kincaid?) got wounded, great guy. There was another guy, (Brady?), that was wounded, had the back of his arm blown off, and he was a good little athlete. I called a chopper in for him. Then, I got a little, minor wound on my

bicep taking him out to the chopper. Every day seemed like it was life or death. It was exciting and, yet, it was frightening at the same time.

SI: You said either injuries or people moving in and out left you with a forty-man platoon, when it was supposed to be sixty.

JR: Right.

SI: What was the lowest point that you can remember? Did it ever get down to thirty or less?

JR: Well, I saved these letters from my mother, all the letters I wrote to my mother in Vietnam. In one letter, I wrote home and said that, "Mom, we were in a battle yesterday. We were on an operation. Out of forty of us, thirty-five guys were wounded or killed and there's only five of us, five experienced guys, left. I'm at a point now where I'm teaching the sergeant and the lieutenant how to read a map and how to call in artillery and how to call in medevac choppers." Five experienced guys and thirty-five inexperienced guys, well, I felt pretty susceptible. It's amazing how fast you learn when it's life and death, and everybody was trained for the situation, too. It was on-the-job training, but they learned very quickly. Soon, that feeling of inexperienced guys, that faded within a week. When you were in Vietnam, you became experienced within a week. One guy I was supposed to call when I got home was from Passaic. His name was Carmine Novembre and that's when we were fighting outside of Hue City. He said, "Call me. I'm going to be home in March." I was coming home, it was the middle or end of January of '68. When I called, I got his young wife on the phone and Carmine didn't make it. He didn't make it home. That's one of the few times I cried. I had a dear friend die in my arms. That's the guy that I tried to save on my citation from the President. That guy was wounded. We were stationed at Portsmouth together. We went to Vietnam together. He went to Alpha Company and I went to Delta Company. He was on a patrol in Con Thien, outside of Con Thien, near the DMZ [demilitarized zone]. He was shot by a fifty-caliber machine-gun through the legs. He was trying to save another Marine. When they told me there was a wounded corpsman in the middle of the field, I just ran, picked him up and threw him over my shoulder and brought him back. I had a feeling it was him and it was. I tried to save him. He had put a tourniquet around his own legs, but he was unconscious when I got to him and he had lost so much blood that it was a futile attempt to try to save him. He took his last breath in my arms. I wrote to his dad. He was from Southern California. His name was Mike Thirkettle. Mike, in 1964, was the All-Around National Rodeo Champion. He raised quarter horses with his mom and dad in Southern California and I can't think of the name of the town [Whittier?]. His dad wrote me a beautiful letter. Unfortunately, I can't find that letter. I'd love to be able to find that letter. His dad was a state senator at the time and quoted [Abraham] Lincoln and Aristotle and it was just beautifully written. He said that I was one of the only people that ever told him the circumstances of his son's death and he thanked me greatly for it. I was told by our lieutenant that he was put up for a Medal of Honor or the Navy Cross and he was knocked down to a Silver Star. I was put up for a Silver Star and my commendation was knocked down to a Bronze Star with a Combat "V" for valor. So, I've tried to avoid emotional situations concerning Vietnam. I went to the Vietnam Memorial once. It's one thing to visit the Memorial, but, when you actually see your friends' names up on that Memorial, it's just like a tidal wave of emotion that hits you, that these guys lost their lives, right in the prime of their lives and never got a chance to finish their lives and

you think about what great guys they were. So, that was a little too emotional for me. Most of my life, I've tried to corral my emotions and not cry and be tough and that's kind of how I've handled myself. [Editor's Note: The DMZ, demilitarized zone, was the border between North and South Vietnam along the Seventeenth Parallel. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, chronologically lists over 58,000 Americans who died in Vietnam.]

SI: It is always an incredible thing how you can compartmentalize your feelings and continue to do this difficult job while things are happening to the people around you and the people you know. Was that a conscious thing or was that a result of your training and your temperament?

JR: I think I really attribute it to playing sports, that you might have a job in life or you might have schooling and sports or extracurricular [activities] and you're either going to win or lose. You can have a devastating loss and you have to learn to put that behind you and get on with your life. You can't dwell on losses. I kind of use that experience of being athletic to my Vietnam experience. I had a devastating experience and I just try to put it in the back of my mind and go forward and not look back. Occasionally, you look back. I had my ears damaged over there with a grenade that exploded within feet of me on a little trail that I had walked over three times. The Sergeant walked behind me and tripped this grenade and he took the brunt in his rear-end. I was right in front of him. He took the full blast, but the force and the sound of the concussion deafened me and created this ringing in my ears that I've had all these years. When I'm in daily life with other sounds, the wind, talking to people, activity going on, cars going past, whatever, it never bothers me, but, every night, I put my head on the pillow and close my eyes, it's there. It's just a reminder of what it came from and where it was. So, I can repress all my feelings or I can try to repress them as much as I can, but probably every night of my life, the last thought when I go to bed is something about Vietnam, because of this ringing in my ears that I have. You know what? I'd never told anybody, but somebody told me that had the same thing, he said, "Is it like tree frogs?" Yes, it's like jungle noises. It's like crickets and tree frogs and that's what I hear. It's very strange. It hasn't affected me, but it does affect my sleep sometimes. I've learned to live with it and deal with it and make the best of it or just get on with my life and live through it, suck it up, because a lot of guys didn't have the opportunity that I had.

SI: You had been premed at Rutgers and interested in studying medicine. Did your experiences in Vietnam change your views towards medicine and practicing on people?

JR: After seeing heads blown off and arms blown off and people blown to smithereens and picking up little pieces of people and the smell of blood gushing out of somebody and the smell of a bullet wound and shrapnel and seeing all the things that I saw, when I came back, I changed my goal. I came back and I said, "I think I'm going to study business." I went to change my major and went to business school--not because I didn't think I could handle it. It's just because it's so intense that maybe I wanted to repress what I had seen and not be reminded of it for the rest of my life. I wanted more of a nine-to-five life with a family and be able to enjoy life a little bit on weekends. I know most doctor friends that I have, they go seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, they're on call and they're always thinking about a patient. It's a very, very difficult field. You have to respect anybody that becomes a doctor. It's a very, very difficult profession. So, I came back, I changed my goals, changed my field and haven't looked back.



SI: You were there from July to January. In that time, did they give you any rest-and-relaxation time?

JR: Well, they were supposed to. You were supposed to leave for a couple of weeks or thirty days, but because most of the time, one of the other corpsmen were wounded, I was the only corpsman, I couldn't leave. So, I never left the country, I never had R&R in the time I was there. I should've. I didn't press the issue, because I didn't want to leave my First Platoon without a corpsman. So, I never got R&R.

SI: It sounds like it was not like some other positions, where you were on a patrol, and then, you can go back and have a drink at night. It sounds like you were constantly going and out in the jungle.

JR: Pretty much.

SI: Yes.

JR: Pretty much constant, a constant struggle for survival, not too much down time.

SI: Would they have anything for you?

JR: One time, we were outside of Con Thien and they brought up, dropped us, some Thanksgiving turkey or something, if I can recall, not a full Thanksgiving dinner, but part of it. We're out in the middle of nowhere. They dropped us some nice food. Occasionally, before we'd go out on a big operation, we'd go back to a base someplace, get rested up, eat for a couple of days and get all our rations ready. Then, they'd put us on helicopters, Hueys [Bell UH-1], and, "Pew," off we'd go someplace to fight another battle and who knows how long we'd be gone. So, we did get a chance to relax for a few days or have an occasional beer, but it was not very often, can probably count on one hand the number of days that was.

SI: You were literally taken out of the country a couple of days before the Tet Offensive started or maybe a week or so.

JR: Right.

SI: Was there any indication that something was coming?

JR: No, no.

SI: Okay.

JR: No. They said they had some VC or some sniper fire in Hue City and they sent us down to do some patrolling around Hue City and see what we could find. I don't know; nobody expected that huge Tet Offensive, I don't think. I don't think anybody had preconceived that that was going to happen.

SI: Did you actually go into Hue at all or were you just on the outskirts?

JR: We were just on the outskirts of Hue.

SI: Okay.

JR: [I] never actually went right into the city itself, the old city. I was near the train tracks, which led right into the city. The city was--I would say we were within a mile or two of the city, but never went into Hue City itself that I can recall.

SI: In the types of patrols you were doing, would you have to go into villages often?

JR: Yes, we'd go through villages. When we were down outside of Da Nang, we'd go through villages. The little children would come up and they'd want C rations or money or something, usually begging for something. The Vietnamese that we saw were very peasant-like, simple. They seemed to be very happy, though. They seemed to be a happy race of people, family-oriented and pleasant and mostly agrarian, rice-growers. They had an oxen to plow the fields and that was the only machinery they needed. They were self-sustaining, most of the villagers that we saw. They chewed on something called betel nut and it made their teeth red. I guess somebody said it was slightly hallucinogenic and I guess that was their escape from society. Some of the older men would seem to sit around the fire, squat and talk and chew on betel nuts; seemed to be a very peace-loving people, actually.

SI: Would you just be passing through the villages or would you search any huts?

JR: Most of the time, we just passed through villages. If we took sniper fire from a village, yes, we would search. We'd go hut to hut searching. That was usually during a battle. When we got intense fire, we would clear the civilians out, and then, search hut to hut. One time, we were outside of a village and somebody saw a hole in the ground. There was some smoke coming up out of the hole. We found a tunnel and we went down. It was like a little underground command post. There were maps and benches. They had water boiling and the fire was still going. There was a hole in the ground up above and we went into this whole underground complex. That was outside of one village someplace. That was obviously very sophisticated, either Vietcong or NVA, probably NVA soldiers, that were occupying that fort or command that was underground; had some very, very, very unfortunate things happen on patrol. We're going up a hillside. There were some little grass [huts], we called them hooches, and it was a little village. There was an old man crying. There were two young women that were dead and he was wailing and crying over these women. There were four or five little children there that were also dead. I tried to find out what happened. I guess the scout that was with us, that was in the front of the patrol, heard some noise down underground and yelled for them to, "Come out, come out." Nobody came out and he popped a grenade into this--I don't know what you'd call it, a little cave, I guess--and killed this man's, I guess they were his, he looked like a grandfather, I guess they were his grandchildren and his two daughters. That was terrible to see that. I think our scout was killed a few days later, after that happened. Anyway, I don't know how he felt about it. I never talked to him about it, but just a very unfortunate thing to see innocent people killed. A couple times, I saw civilians that were hit with shrapnel, especially down in the Da Nang area, hit with maybe

misdirected firearms fire or a jet strike. I had little children brought to me that I would throw a patch or a bandage on or direct them to a hospital. I can't recall too much contact with civilian population because, for the last part of my time in Vietnam, I was in that I Corps area with no friendlies. I can remember landing in Da Nang. The people in Da Nang were sophisticated. They seemed sophisticated. The women were very beautiful. They were probably a mixture of French and Vietnamese and educated and dressed nicely. Outside of Da Nang, the Vietnamese were mostly farmers, peasants, strong stock, short and stocky and strong and hardworking. It seemed like a very peace-loving and kind and nice people.

SI: Did you and your fellow veterans talk about the war itself and how the war was going?

JR: We thought that it was kind of crazy that we were over there fighting for our lives on the ground with weapons when we're fighting a country, North Vietnam, and we had the most powerful Army, Navy and Marine Corps in the world and why we fought with one arm behind our back still perplexes me. There were so many young guys killed and we certainly didn't go at Vietnam with full force, at North Vietnam. That has always perplexed me. I don't know whether Johnson and Ho Chi Minh had some kind of [laughter] one-armed truce behind their back. It still baffles me to this day, to wonder why they would send 500,000 kids to Vietnam, 50,000 probably fought in combat, and it didn't seem like we tried to win the war. It seemed like we just tried to keep the VC or the NVA out of there or kill whichever ones happened to be in the country and try to secure that country, but it never seemed like, to me, that we tried to win the war, because, if you [try to] win the war, you go after the country you're fighting with full force, like we did in the Second World War. We went after Japan with full force and forced them to surrender. That war might still be going on, but Vietnam wasn't the case. You're the first person to ask that question of me. [laughter] A couple of my friends that I fought with over there thought the same thing. Here we are fighting and our country just drops an occasional bomb, but nothing really to cause us to win the war. I guess public opinion was against really going after innocent civilians in North Vietnam. That's my only guess.

SI: During your time in combat, how would you say your morale held up after doing this day after day?

JR: I would say that the guys I served with had great morale, had a positive outlook, were courageous, were always looking after each other. You would protect your fellow Marine to the death. That kept us pretty well occupied. Occasionally, when you had a dear friend killed or severely wounded, it would make you so bitter, but not bitter at your own country or the Marine Corps--it would make you bitter at the enemy. It would give you more of an intensity to fight the enemy with full force. That's the only thing I can recall. Most of the time, morale in the Marine Corps was great. They talked about drugs in Vietnam. A couple times, we found, that it must have been produced by the Vietnamese, like fifty-pound burlap satchels of marijuana and, whenever we did, we just burned whatever we found. We just burned it. I saw no drug use. Whenever we were in a base, the guys drank beer, but that was about it. There was no hard liquor, there was no drug abuse, there was no marijuana. You had to stay alert. In my outfit, you had to stay alert or your life was in danger, even more danger. So, most of the guys were very clean, as clean as you could be in a jungle, but I mean clean of drugs and alcohol.

SI: Did you have any cases of combat getting to Marines or corpsmen and they had mental issues in the field?

JR: No.

SI: Okay.

JR: I never had anybody that--I had one Marine that, a big guy, too, his name was Youngblood. We were taking heavy, heavy sniper fire. We had to cross this field and the field was maybe, I don't know, a couple hundred yards across to get to another tree line. I was at next to the last guy and behind me was Youngblood. I made it to the other side. You'd wait. We'd all try to cover the person that was crossing the field. I made it to the other side. Lieutenant Lampo called out a roll call and there was no Youngblood. They asked me, "Where's Youngblood?" I said, "Well, he was supposed to be behind me, but he's not here." Lieutenant Lampo said, "Doc, would you mind going back to get him?" I said, "No, not at all." I went back. He was cowered behind a tree and he was afraid to run across the field. I said, "Youngblood, you can't stay here. You'll definitely be killed. You have to run." So, I grabbed him by the arm and ran him across the field. That was the only time I ever saw somebody actually freeze up and he was a big, strong guy, too.

SI: You mentioned the operation on the island.

JR: [Yes].

SI: Do you remember approximately when that was?

JR: It was early on in my tour in Vietnam, but I can't remember the month, the date. I can't remember the island's name.

SI: Was it a small island?

JR: Yes, a very small island.

SI: Yes.

JR: It was, like, out in a river.

SI: Okay.

JR: It wasn't an island off the coast. We went on a road--jeez, I have another story that just flashed into my head. I was on a tank with about three or four, five other guys on top of the tank, riding down this road to get to the point where we were going to cross the river to get to this island. The guy next to me had an accidental discharge and killed the guy to the left of him, actually shot him in the head, and he felt terrible. I guess he had fallen asleep and didn't have his safety on and the gun discharged. We had to stop. The Captain called in a medevac chopper just to take this poor guy back, but he was killed instantly. I can't recall if the guy that had the

accident continued on or whether he left also. I can't recall what happened afterwards, but I can sure recall the devastation he felt when his weapon discharged and killed somebody innocently. Then, we got to the end of this road that crossed the river and onto this island and there was a small beach that we landed on, on the other side, on this island. That's all I can remember. It was a small enough island that we could almost be ten yards apart and just march across the entire island. We swept the island. I can remember one other thing that had happened. During the battle to get up and off the beach, somebody on one end of our line had been captured, had actually been captured. In the middle of the night, they tortured him. The next day, we found him, lying face up--in the corner of a rice paddy, they always have, like, a pool of water, dirty water, I guess they used to, I don't know, the villagers use it to drink or whatever--but we found him in this pool. That was pretty devastating. The VC paid for that. There wasn't one thing left alive on that island when we left there. I'd like to research my [commanding officers] somehow. Captain (Gallagher?), Lieutenant Lampo must have a record of where we were in Vietnam. I can just recall the major places, Dong Ha and Hoi An and Quang Tri and Con Thien, but I know we were on the Ho Chi Minh Trail out near Laos and Cambodia. We were in the mountains. I'd like to get a map and trace the battles that we were in and the different operations we were on. I know our unit won many unit citations, Presidential Unit Citations, for the battles and the heroism for our outfit, our Delta Company, but I've never seen those or I've never been privileged. I think, at some point in the near future, I'm going to research that. [Editor's Note: Stephen F. Lampo (1941-1991) of Neosho, Missouri, won a Silver Star for his service in Hue on January 31, 1968.]

SI: Obviously, you were in a lot of combat. A lot of the things we already talked about are pretty incredible. What was most vivid to you when you came back and stuck with you, the most vivid memories?

JR: Well, there are two things. The one foremost is, the one thing I can't forget is, my best friend dying in my arms. That was devastating. Secondly, the day I left Vietnam, we get a paper called the *Stars and Stripes* and I was reading that paper as we were taking off. I was looking down at the country of Vietnam, the godforsaken place that it was, and, as we were taking off, I opened my *Stars and Stripes* and I saw that my other dear friend, Ralph David Hale III, that graduated from Great Lakes Naval Hospital with me, was killed in Vietnam. Those two memories are so vivid for me. It's like they just happened. They've never left me. I can remember being the hottest I've ever been and the coldest I've ever been, saw more mosquitos than I've ever seen in my lifetime. I saw insects that I've never seen in my lifetime, stick bugs that looked like a branch and they were about a foot long with legs walking, snakes, leeches, dysentery, awful water. I mean, it was just life-and-death situations, really. I don't know. Yet, you had friends and you were going through the same thing with people that you respected and you became best friends with, that you would give your life up for, and it made it tolerable. Every night, you laid down and you look up at the stars and the moon and you think that's the same stars and the moon your mother's looking at halfway around the world, or your brothers and sisters are looking at, and you just looked forward to the day that you'd be home.

SI: You were obviously writing to your mother. Were you writing to other people?

JR: I had a girlfriend at the time that I wrote to. I wrote to my brothers and sisters. Basically, that's it, didn't have much time to write. There'd be weeks and a month or months when I didn't write [much], maybe only six or seven or eight letters that are there. They're all the letters that I wrote and, [in] a lot of those letters, I would say, "Mom, I just got back from Operation SWIFT. We had so many injured, a couple guys killed." I tried not to frighten her too much with details, so, most of the letters are somewhat innocuous. A couple reference that thirty-five out of forty guys were wounded or left. In another one, I told her about the Sergeant stepping on a grenade right behind me. I don't know. They're just mostly, "I miss you," and, "Thanks for everything," "Can't wait to get home."

SI: How important was it to have that contact with home?

JR: It was extremely important. You still felt connected. It was your connection to your life back home. I can't imagine if you didn't have something to go back to. I would imagine that some of these guys that don't have much of a home front when they get back home are the guys that create some of these problems you see, the guys that don't adjust very well back into society. When you carry an M-16 every day and everybody has an M-16, you don't see any arguments, or very few. You don't see any fistfights. Everybody's on equal ground. Everybody has a weapon and it became an adjustment, actually, [at] home to walk around without an M-16 in your hand. It seemed really strange and it seemed really strange to sleep inside a house and not sleep out looking up at the stars. So many things were an adjustment, not hearing bombs go off and mortars come in and bullets whizzing past your ear. It was an adjustment. It was a few months to adjust back to civilian life for me. When you walk every day, all day, all night, all day, you're walking, you become in such great shape. I came home and I wouldn't be able to sleep. I'd get up in the middle of the night and I'd maybe run five miles or something, and then, come home exhausted, fall into bed and go to sleep. That's how I adjusted. I exhausted myself, throughout my lifetime, [laughter] immersed myself in whatever I was doing, became involved in the Planning Board, the Lions Club, the Fair Committee, the Long Range Planning Committee, the Republican Club, raising a family, coaching. I kept myself busy and that's kept my mind occupied and made me enjoy life and kept my mind off of those deep, dark recesses that are in there. A retired colonel friend of mine wants me to speak to returning vets, Iraq, Afghanistan, how to acclimate back to civilian life or how to get acclimated from combat. I would say, "Just do as much as you can do, exhaust yourself and try to put it behind you. Try to look forward and not look back. Can't change the past."

SI: You said you came back in January. How quickly did they take you off active duty and put you in the Inactive Reserve?

JR: I flew into San Diego on a commercial flight, got off the plane. I had to report to Long Beach. I went up to somebody in the airport and asked [for] directions and they said, "There's a bus right outside that goes to Long Beach," no fanfare, no parade, nobody around, no "thank yous," no balloons, took my little duffle bag and got on a bus to Long Beach. Long Beach, they mustered me out. I was in Long Beach for a day. They gave me a ticket out of LAX, Los Angeles Airport, the red-eye special to Philadelphia. I was in Los Angeles Airport. I had a midnight flight. I was in the airport [at] about eleven o'clock at night and a group of six-foot-five

to six-foot-ten guys walked in, all dressed in sport coats, blue blazers and gray pants, nice ties. I said, "What basketball team are you guys?" They said, "We're the Detroit Pistons."

SI: Wow.

JR: They said, "You coming from Vietnam? You look awfully tan and awfully thin." I said, "Yes, I am." They said, "Buy this boy a drink, on us. Buy this boy a beer." I couldn't buy a beer. They were so nice to me. I got on the plane. I was one of a very few people on the plane. The stewardesses all sat with me and they wanted to hear stories of Vietnam. They told me to come up to first class, because there was nobody on the plane. I was so exhausted. It seemed like I'd been awake for a week coming home. I woke up with all the armrests up, laying across the first class seat with pillows under my head and a blanket over me, with a little stewardess tapping me on the shoulder, "Wake up. You're home." Mom and Dad picked me up at the airport and walked right past me, didn't even recognize me. I'd lost forty-five pounds and I was as dark as an Indian, but there were lots of hugs and lots of hugs at home from my brother and sisters. I couldn't wait to get back to college, to reapply. My friends called. I actually started playing sports right away when I got home. I joined a couple basketball leagues. I was in probably the most terrific shape of my entire lifetime, with a twenty-nine-inch waist. I went to get fitted for a suit and the clothier said, "Oh, my God, this is the first time I've measured a guy with a twenty-nine-inch waist in years." So, back to society; it wasn't until about thirty or forty years later that Vietnam veterans started being recognized. They built the Vietnam Memorial. Our town started recognizing the Vietnam vets, TV shows. You feel like you can actually talk about it now without being embarrassed about it or having it be some kind of stigma. I'm very proud of my service and very proud of what I accomplished in the service and it's nice to be able to tell my story. It's nice that people are interested in hearing my story.

SI: Do you feel like you have faced any prejudice as a Vietnam veteran, either at Rutgers or when you went out to apply for jobs?

JR: No.

SI: No.

JR: None whatsoever. First of all, I went back as a student. I didn't wear any military outfits or didn't carry anything that would identify me as military. I was a Rutgers student like everybody else. There was no prejudice. I didn't side with the antiwar protesters, although I could understand their feelings and their sentiment. I just came back to Rutgers and went about my business and enjoyed the sports programs they had. I enjoyed watching the football and basketball teams.

SI: Did you live on campus?

JR: I had an apartment with another guy in Highland Park, right off campus. They were called the Executive Apartments, so, I lived right off campus, applied for the GI Bill. I can't remember how much it was, four or five hundred dollars a month, but it paid my rent and made college affordable for me. I loved school. I look back, I did a lot better the second time around than I

did the first time. I made dean's list quite a few times. I did pretty well in my grades, graduated, went to grad school for a year, a year-and-a-half, for a master's in agricultural economics. I never finished my thesis, which I'm sorry I didn't, but I finished all the coursework and did very well. My professor and advisor had gotten sick, so, I had no mentor to guide me with the thesis. At that time, I had gotten married and had a young child and that became the most important thing to me and I went to work and never looked back.

SI: What was your undergraduate major?

JR: Agricultural economics.

SI: Okay, that was also your undergraduate major.

JR: Yes.

SI: Do any professors stand out from the second time around?

JR: Dr. Koch was one of my really great professors. I had transportation economics, he was really good, too. I can't think of his name, Dr. (Haines?), maybe. I can't recall, very little. I was pretty much working full-time on the weekends and studying hard and getting my degree, and then, I got married after I graduated. Of course, I was, like, three years older than most of the guys that were graduating and most of the guys that I started with were gone. So, I was less social, went to less parties and really, basically, just studied, worked and went to college.

SI: It sounds like you would not really know if somebody else was a veteran, but did you meet other veterans? Did you socialize with other veterans at Rutgers?

JR: No.

SI: Okay.

JR: I had no knowledge of anybody else that shared my situation. There was no organization or club of Vietnam vets or any veterans, that I can recall. The only thing that was even associated with veterans would be the ROTC programs and they were always under attack at that time by the antiwar demonstrators. When I came back, it was a little chaotic, I would say. The times were chaotic. Nixon was President. Johnson decided not to run again [for reelection in 1968]. Then, Nixon ran under the premise of ending the war, but it took him more than four years to end the war. He wasn't a very popular President. I don't know. It seemed that demonstrations and college students speaking out, when I first left college, they had no credence, but, when I went back to college, politicians and the country seemed to be listening to the people that were demonstrating. You had also the same equal rights demonstrations going on with Dr. Martin Luther King. People were listening to these demonstrators. Society was changing, changed rapidly. My father, before he passed away, God bless him, said--and he's from the Deep South with not a prejudiced bone in his body--said, "Son, I believe we're going to have a black President," [laughter] and we do. So, he was a prophet. Back when I was a young man, that didn't seem like it would ever happen.



SI: You left the master's program in 1972 or 1973.

JR: '72, I think.

SI: 1972, okay.

JR: Yes.

SI: What was your first move into the job market?

JR: Well, I was hired by US Homes as assistant director of marketing and they wanted to relocate me to Florida, to New Port Richey. I had a young wife at the time and a child that was just born and my wife did not want to move. At the same time, her father owned a pretty good-sized company, needed help in Newark, and that company's called Mueller Supply. I went to work for Mueller Supply and I'm still there. I'm about to retire from there, probably the end of this year, but, after forty-some years, I'm the President of Mueller Supply. We're a wholesale florist supplier and deliverer of floral supplies and gift supplies all over the State of New Jersey and into New York City. We have a wholesale cut flower division also. It's done me well and I've enjoyed my work. I've worked hard, but accomplished a lot and fed my family and provided nicely for our family. Hopefully, I'll have a healthy, lengthy, prosperous retirement. That's what I'm looking forward to.

SI: Staying with one company for forty years is becoming more and more rare.

JR: Without a doubt.

SI: Yes. What are your observations over that time of what you found most interesting in your career and how the company and maybe your field changed and evolved?

JR: Well, our field had explosive growth when I first got there. I would say a company that was doing a couple million a year has blossomed up to about fifteen million a year. We couldn't work enough hours or work hard enough. Business was tremendous in the '70s and '80s. Even when the price of oil was going through the roof and the interest rates were sky high, business was still great and growing. After the Internet came around and people are shopping more and more on computers and less and less on telephone or through distributors, our business has leveled out and it's actually gone down a little bit. We have more intense competition through mass markets, like Costco and Sam's Club and supermarkets. We supply a couple of supermarkets, but it seems to me, I've seen business go from the mom-and-pop stores to the big-box stores. The Walmarts and Sam's Clubs and Costcos have gobbled up tremendous market share, and the Home Depots, have left little room for the smaller distributorships like mine and my competitors also. I've had a number of competitors go out of business. I guess, unless you joined forces with the Costco or Sam's Club or Walmart, the days of the single distributorship are probably numbered. That's my main observation.

SI: You also became very active in your communities, first Spring Lake Heights, and then, here in Colts Neck. You even ran for office in Spring Lake Heights.

JR: Yes. I came home, I made friends quickly with neighbors and they encouraged me. I had a nice career at Manasquan High School and Rutgers and I had a good service record. I had lived in town most of my life and they encouraged me to run for office. I ran with a guy named Mike Robertson. We both lost the election. I was only thirty or thirty-one years old at the time, maybe thirty-one. I lost to the incumbent mayor, Frank Adams. It was pretty encouraging, because Mike Robertson, who was the past mayor's son, and he was a young guy also, he'd lost by hundreds of votes and I only lost by five votes. So, I was encouraged by the county politicians, that told me that Abraham Lincoln lost his first election, to keep involved. I didn't get too much involved in politics, except for the Republican Club. Here in Colts Neck, I'm in quite a few committees. I'm on the Planning Board Committee for the last ten years. I've been chairman. This year, I'm vice chairman. I'm on the Long-Range Planning Committee, which helps write and adjust our town laws and by-laws. I'm in the Lions Club. We raise money for the less fortunate. I'm on the Colts Neck Fair Committee. We run a county fair every year here in Colts Neck. I try to stay involved. I love my neighbors. I love this town, been here for thirty-two years. It's going to be tough to leave. My wife and I have just become empty-nesters. We're in a different time now, a different phase of our lives. We don't know what our next step is going to be, but we're excited about it and we're looking forward to it.

SI: You are on the Planning Board and Long-Range Planning Committee. What have been the biggest challenges you have seen in those capacities?

JR: Well, not too many challenges in the Long-Range Planning Committee, but the challenge has really been on the Planning Board, with developers wanting to come in and subdivide farms and properties. We've seen this town grow and we've seen the farmland diminish. It's a funny thing. My thesis was [on] the effect of the Farmland Preservation Act in keeping, retaining farms. That was going to be my thesis. I had it half-written and never finished it, but I'd like to see what the effects of that law are. We do have Farmland preservation in Colts Neck that's helped keep a lot of open space and keep a lot of farms as farms. Because we're a rural town and everybody pumps their own water and we have wells and septic systems, we don't have sewers, we're more environmentally sensitive than maybe other towns. We've tried to keep this rural feeling, not just for aesthetics, but for the environment also. We drink the water and we all have to share the resources here. So, we've tried to keep as much open space and farmland as we possibly, legally can. That's been the one big challenge on the Planning Board Committee. We've tried to keep out high-density housing and we've had fights, not fights, but we've been battling COAH, which is the [Council on] Affordable Housing. They want to put high-density housing in Colts Neck and it's just really not environmentally feasible. That's been our major challenge. [Editor's Note: The Council on Affordable Housing (COAH) administers New Jersey's Fair Housing Act.]

SI: I want to ask a few more questions about Vietnam, if that is all right.

JR: Sure.

SI: You said you used the M-16. What did you think of the M-16? It does not have the greatest reputation in the Marine Corps.

JR: Does not have a great reputation. When it's working, it's a tremendous weapon, high-velocity muzzle. I don't think that weapon was really meant for the conditions of Vietnam, the dust, the dirt, the mud. That weapon, if it's kept clean, is perfect. There were so many instances where that weapon either jammed or didn't fire in those conditions. So many times, we would have maybe twenty-five percent or fifty percent of our weapons that were non-functional. We'd be cleaning weapons in the middle of a firefight, in a battle. It was just a constant struggle. I think they made improvements while we were there. They kept saying they did and they changed out our weapons, but we found that we had a lot of misfires and a lot of no-fires from that weapon. It was a challenge, although a great weapon, automatic, single-shot, high-velocity, long-range, very accurate, devastating weapon--when it worked.

SI: You mentioned the story, before we started recording, about a helicopter crashing when you were trying to get somebody out.

JR: Oh, yes. I can't remember the name of that wounded Marine. I was taking him out and that was intense fighting. We had fought all night and it was dark. The guy had an arm wound; I think it was an arm or a shoulder wound, but it was an upper body wound. I was taking him out to the LZ to put him on the medevac chopper. The chopper was only about maybe twenty feet up or fifteen feet above my head and it was shot down. It fell out of the sky like a rock. I had to grab this guy. We ran for our lives and it just missed us. One of the pieces of the propeller skimmed my forehead, gave me a lump on the forehead. I was concerned that I might have a concussion, but I had to call in another medevac chopper, and then, tend to the four guys that were in the chopper that crashed. The pilot was shook up. I don't know if he sustained back injuries. The co-pilot was okay and the gunner was okay, just shook up. They took a hell of a crash. This thing really hit the ground and bounced. Well, we called in another couple of choppers to evacuate those guys. We left that chopper on the ground. I don't know what ever became of the chopper. That was just left in the middle of the jungle someplace. From there, I actually got on a chopper and went back to Da Nang to have my forehead looked at and I hardly remember what happened for two or three days. They told me I had a high fever and I was almost in a coma. I woke up maybe two days later and they said that there was nothing wrong with my forehead and there were no fractures, but I had a FUO, a fever of unknown origin. So, when I got that fever cured, I went back to my unit and that was it.

SI: Is there anything else about your time in Vietnam that we skipped over and that you want to share?

JR: Probably a story for every day that I was there. [laughter]

SI: I can imagine that a lot of it probably runs together.

JR: Yes, after all this time. I think we've hit most of the important points. We talked about Mike Thirkettle dying in my arms, (Kincaid?) being wounded.

SI: Yes.

JR: (Brady?) being shot in the arm. How about "The Boston Kid," (Barry Gaston?), being shot in the eye, just grazed his eye. He thought he had his eye taken out. I don't think we talked about that.

SI: I think you did mention someone who had three holes that you thought were bullet holes.

JR: No.

SI: That was someone else.

JR: He had the one [bullet] graze his eye.

SI: Okay.

JR: Grazed the corner of his eye and the bridge of his nose and he thought he had his eye taken out. After I applied direct pressure, I found that his eye was fine and the bullet had creased the bridge of his nose and the corner of his eyelid. That's (Barry Gaston?) from Boston, Massachusetts. I had another great friend over there, Leo Casisio, we called him "The Cisco Kid," an Italian kid from Boston, also. He had three Purple Hearts. At one time over there, he said, "Here, Doc, you deserve a Purple Heart. You've been wounded a couple times. Take one of mine." He gave me his Purple Heart. After forty-eight years, it got lost in the shuffle someplace. I don't have that Purple Heart anymore, but that Purple Heart was presented to me by Corporal Leo Casisio, one of my good friends over there.

SI: Wow.

JR: I look back, it was an experience I'm very proud of. It was something that I wouldn't want to do again. It was only with good fortune that I'm sitting here giving this interview. That's how I embrace it. I feel like I've always--not that one person has more luck than another person--but I've always felt that good fortune was on my side, for one reason or another. I don't know what that reason is, but I've always felt that I've been fairly lucky in life, have a great wife, three beautiful kids, a wonderful mother, had a great dad, nice siblings. That's about all you can ask for, the respect of my peers, the respect of my neighbors. I've been given everything, I've been blessed with everything, that I think a person can want.

SI: I was thinking of that photo that you showed me from the paper.

JR: [Yes].

SI: There is a chaplain there. How often would you be near chaplains or have chaplains with you?

JR: Not very often.

SI: Okay.

JR: It was a rare experience. When that happened, when that incident happened, we were in the field waiting for helicopters to land to take us into battle and there was a chaplain there that was saying good-bye to us. There was a young man riding in a jeep down the highway and that jeep hit a landmine. I rushed to his aid, patched his legs up and he was severely wounded. The Chaplain rushed over with me and helped me carry him to a medevac chopper. He grabbed my hand. That picture was taken without my knowledge by a UPI [United Press International] photographer and that was on the front page of *The Daily News*, they tell me, *The New York Post*, *The New York Times*. It was in my local paper down here, *The Asbury Park Press*, and my mother and father both sent me a picture of that paper, with the young man holding my hand. I told him that I was praying for him and that he would be okay. I was informed that he didn't make it. So, that's one of the scenes of war that you experience. You've seen some of the other ones on that website, right, the Delta Company website. [Editor's Note: The web address of Delta Company of the First Battalion, First Marine Regiment is delta-1-1.com.]

SI: Yes.

JR: They kind of tell it all. [laughter] If somebody ever says to me, "Were you in Agent Orange?" you can look at those trees--there's not a leaf on a tree anywhere. When we were up in I Corps, much of that area was defoliated. I was never actually under that Agent Orange when they sprayed it, but I certainly went through fields and jungles that were devastated by it. [Editor's Note: The chemical defoliant Agent Orange, which the United States used in Vietnam to clear jungles, causes a number of serious health problems in humans, including cancer.]

SI: Has that impacted your life afterwards?

JR: I've been lucky. I've been healthy, yes. I've been very healthy my entire lifetime, so, I've been very fortunate. I work at it a little bit. I still do my Marine Corps exercises.

SI: Oh.

JR: I do my sit-ups and push-ups. That kind of stays with you, to keep yourself in shape, one of the training rituals they give you. If you're smart, you don't ignore it. You just keep up with it.

SI: You mentioned it was strange not to have weapons when you came back. I have heard from other veterans that they would sleep with a knife under their pillow. Did you do anything like that?

JR: Yes, I had, the same thing, a KA-BAR [knife] and a bayonet that I kept in my bedroom at hand's length, and a baseball bat. You always feel like if something happened, if you had to encounter an intruder, you wouldn't want to do it barehanded, especially if the intruder had a weapon. So, I've always felt the necessity to be able to defend myself.

SI: Is there anything else about your life that you would like to add to the record?

JR: Nothing that I can think of, Shaun, except this is a great country. Somebody said something to me the other day that really hit home, that freedom is never free. Somebody's paid for it. So, I think it's a great way to look at it. Memorial Day has also been a very special day for me every year. I make sure I never miss our Memorial Day celebration here in town.

SI: Thank you very much. I appreciate you sharing these experiences and spending so much time with me. Thank you.

JR: You're quite welcome, Shaun.

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Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi 5/25/16

Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 4/26/17