RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES W. CHERNESKY

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. James W. Chernesky on December 12, 2008 in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Shaun Illingworth, Greg Flynn and also Jason Chernesky. Thank you both very much for coming in today, we appreciate it. To begin, could you tell us where and when you were born?

James W. Chernesky: I was born December 5th, 1945 in Somerset Hospital.

SI: What was your father's name?

JWC: Frank Chenersky.

SI: He was originally from Poland?

JWC: Originally, yes, he was born in Poland, 1899, and then he came over here, I believe, when he was roughly two years old and resided in, the family … resided in Forest City, Pennsylvania, and then moved to Manville around 1916.

SI: Did you grow up knowing his parents? Did you know them at all?

JWC: Just my dad's, my grandmother on my dad's side is the only grandparent that I remember. … She passed away in a nursing home, I guess when I was around twenty, early twenties.

SI: Did you get any idea of why the family immigrated to the US?

JWC: Not really. All I could think of is for work and freedom because the border where he was born was right on the Russian border at the time and they were going back and forth with the border changed from what I understood from a Polish priest that read his birth certificate, translated his birth certificate. It's written in Polish and Russian dialect. So I guess they just came for freedom of religion, work and whatever. I don't really know, … I was too young to really get any information from the grandparents.

SI: Do you know why the family relocated to Manville?

JWC: The same reason, would be work in Johns Manville. My grandpa ended up working in Johns Manville until he lost all his fingers in a press, he had his fingers cut off in a press.

SI: What about your mother and her name?

JWC: My mother's maiden name was Philomena Pilla and grandparents, her mom and dad were born in Naples, around Naples, and they came over to the United States, and I believe she was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, my mom, in 1904. … I remember her talking about living in New York too, Brooklyn, I believe, for a while. … Then they end up moving to Manville, when I'm not sure, early again because she met my dad in, I don't remember the date and the year they got married, I guess. Let's see, my brother, Bob, he would be eighty-three, so they must have gotten married, what, can you do your math real quick? 1920's?

Jason Chernesky: 1920's probably, yes, somewhere around there.

JWC: Bob was born in '29. So it must have been in the 1920's they got married in the Manville area.

SI: Did her father also work for Johns Manville?

JWC: No, her father, … he actually was a shoe maker, a cobbler back then. He made shoes in Italy, and as far as I know … they both passed away. He was gone, my grandfather died before I was born. I'm not sure if the grandma, I can't remember my grandmother on my mother's side. If she was still living, I was just an infant, so I don't really remember her.

SI: Do you know anything about the immigration history on that side or why they came?

JWC: No, I just imagine why most people came to the United States then, you know, for work and for a better life.

SI: Are you the youngest of your siblings?

JWC: Right, yes, I'm the youngest.

SI: How many siblings did you have?

JWC: There are five others beside myself. So, there's six of us altogether. There's four boys and two girls.

SI: You and your siblings were born over a span of twenty years?

JWC: … Yes, twenty years. My oldest brother who's deceased now, he was just about exactly twenty years older than me.

SI: What are some of your earliest memories of growing up in Manville?

JWC: Well, my dad died when I was seven in 1952, and we were living on Main Street of Manville at the time. Manville was, back in that time, was just coming out of being a part of Hillsboro, well they became incorporated actually in '29, but the town was still, a lot of areas in the town were still fields, and, you know, wide open. Now, of course, it's all built up. I grew up on Main Street, and it was just my mom, myself, my two sisters, and my one brother, Frank, the youngest of the older brothers, were living on Main Street. … I lived there for the first seven, eight, let's see, nine years old, I moved over to what they call Lost Valley, another section of Manville. … By then, my one sister was married, and the two older brothers had been married already from Main Street, and there was just myself, my brother Frank, and my older sister Maryann, the three of us. Then we lived there for a year, then we moved over to another part of Manville in Weston, and it was still myself, I was ten years old at that time, myself, my sister Maryann, and my brother Frank. … At that time, I can't remember the exact date, my sister, after we moved over to Weston, my sister Maryann got married shortly after. So it was just

really me and my older brother, Frank. … Then my sister, my one sister got divorced and she moved in with us for a while, and back and forth, and then she moved out with the kids. But anyhow, by then I'm going to jump over to, I grew up, like I said, the western part of Manville, at that time, was a lot of fields. We had ball fields like all over the area, which is now all homes. So I grew up with a lot of outside activity. We lived by the river, did a lot of fishing and swimming in the river, hunting. You could walk right down the street with an unloaded shotgun without being in a case, nobody, you know, back then, there was no laws on. It was a nice area to grow up as a kid. You know, it was wide open, and basically outdoors. I was an outdoors person. … All my buddies, the same thing, we just, you know, like I said, down the river, doing all kinds of different stuff, riding bikes and everything was wide open back then.

SI: Was there any kind of organized activity like Boy Scouts available?

JWC: Yes, there was Boy Scouts in the town. I wasn't big on organized stuff too much. I belonged to the Boy Scouts for about a month, I got thrown out of there so that didn't last long. I belong to the CYO, they had boxing, they had a boxing club, and the CYO--Catholic Youth Organization--basketball team, played basketball. Let's see what else we did. That's mostly what we did growing up. Of course, I went through the Manville School System, and the grammar school is no longer there. All the grammar schools, … over the years are all gone now. All the different newer schools, then Manville High School, then I ended up going to Manville High. … Then, through those years, just before I got drafted, we have a little ice cream store, we used to call [it] Martha's, across the tracks and we used to hang around there. There's a bunch of us that hung around there, and I don't know how many exactly, I'm just going say ten of us. I can't really count. There's quite a few guys that hung around there, all around same age and grew up pretty much in blue-collar families, you know, working-class people.

SI: Did most people work for Johns Manville?

JWC: A good portion back then, not all you know. Of course you had carpenters and everything else, but a good portion of them worked for Johns Manville, pretty much booming, still going pretty strong before all the asbestos problems. Then I grew up there with the guys I grew up hanging around Martha's when the Vietnam War broke out. There was, again, Larry, Danny, Hank, me, Sonny. I would say, within a year's span, from '65 to '66, with the draft, there must have been six or eight of us drafted within that year's span because of the, you know, conflict in Vietnam then, escalated. So, that kind of broke up the whole store gang, and some went to Korea, some went to Germany, different areas, and myself and my buddy, Gary, actually well they didn't hang around the store but I knew them, you know, we all grew up in Manville. Myself, Gary Brown, Mike Martineau, Tony Terazino and Danny Fierst, we all went the same time, got drafted the same day and ended up going to the same outfit.

SI: We were curious about that after reading your report. Was that just by chance or was there a buddy program?

JWC: Just chance, just the draft, yes. Yes, I was, the other guys, there was two of us actually, myself and Tony Terazino, we were the older of the five or six of us that all ended up going to Fort Riley, Kansas for training. We were the two, the older ones, the other guys were maybe a

year and a half or so younger. We were twenty already. That's because we had deferments then for being the last boy, the last child, at home with the mother. He was in the same situation I was in with my dad being deceased so we had put a deferment in. … Of course, we went in front of the draft board and they just said, "No, you have to go, it doesn't make any difference," and we got "Class A" allotments. When we went in, the government gave us Class A allotments which they send money, they match the money they send to your parents.

JC: What was it like growing up in Manville with the factory there? Can you elaborate?

JWC: Yes, if you want me to elaborate on asbestos. [laughter] … It was "Asbestos City." They made a song, "Asbestos City," about Manville and, of course, we grew up with asbestos. There was asbestos, at that time, they released it in the air. There were no restrictions on pollution and whatever, not like there is today. The banks of the one creek, Royce Brook, we fished on was asbestos banks. We just sat on the asbestos and fished. The ice skating pond, we called it "Stinky Pond" because … in dumps was all asbestos and we just sat on that and ice skated. … Then, after I went into my own construction business, this is already in the early '70s, we were allowed to use the JM dump, which they still were dumping asbestos in. … We used to go in there once a week on a Saturday, we had a permit, and we used to go in there to dump our construction material off. … You just threw it in the asbestos and the dust just blew it right back in your face, the wind just blew the dust right back into your face. The town was asbestos. … There's people that I know, hearsay, again, I can't say, they can say it's proof, that died from asbestos, not even working there, but their parents worked and supposedly it was carried home from the clothes on the parents who worked in JM and they handled the clothes and one thing led to another. Again that's hearsay, I don't know how factual it is.

SI: Do you think it contributed to your father's death?

JWC: No, not at all. No, no, but dad only ended up working towards the end of his life, he worked in JM research before he passed away. He passed away from arteriosclerosis, clogged artery, and it wasn't asbestos related. The only asbestos I would imagine he'd come in contact with is living in Manville and his dad working at one time in JM, but I don't believe that was part of that.

SI: Having lost your father at seven, how difficult was it to keep the family going after that?

JWC: Well, it was really difficult. My mother, which I didn't get into yet, but by the time, and like I said, I tried to get a deferment, but they didn't want to hear that, so they sent money home to my mother. … She was, at the time, my brother Frank I believe was the only one there. My other sister had moved out with the children, and my brother Frank was the only one, so my mom had basically lost the house. So my brother Frank, before he got married, he had to take the house over, so my mother would have a place to live because she had no money at all. So, he took the house over, and then in the meantime, he ended up getting married, and then he moved out and he had a house up in North Jersey. … He's raising a family, and actually, he was married just before I got drafted. He had two little ones, he ended up having five kids, but he only had two [then] and so then when I went overseas, it was pretty hard on everybody, the whole family. They were raising a family, everybody was, they had children except my older brother who was

the only one that didn't have any children, and, of course, he was long gone. He'd been out of that, so that's why my mother, with the hardship, she wanted to try to keep me out to keep the place going for her to live, but it didn't work that way. … I eventually ended up getting drafted.

SI: Had she gone to work after your father passed away?

JWC: No, no. She never, my mom worked only for, as far as I could remember, she never worked as far as [I know]. I'm sorry, as far as I could remember, she never worked. What I was told by her and my older brothers and sisters that she did work at one time, I guess before having the children, you know. She had the children pretty closely, the first ones, before having the children, she worked in sewing factories, stuff like that, you know, textile type thing. … That's as far as I know because my dad always made good money. My father was an insurance salesman for Prudential. That was his big thing during the Depression there. … He did alright as far as income, but then, when he passed away, she had nothing, he sold insurance, but she had, I don't know what happened, she ended up with nothing basically.

Greg Flynn: Your brothers had all served in the military?

JWC: The three of them, my oldest brother, Robert--Bob--he was in World War II in the Navy and my brother Joey, the next one after him was in the Navy during, right after World War II, during Korea, he got out in '52. He served in the Mediterranean, I think with the Sixth Fleet. Then my brother Frank served with the Air Force during Korea. He was on a cargo plane; he was a crewman on a cargo plane. Now, he got out when my dad died. He was in, I think, for two years, and when my father passed away, they gave him a discharge, hardship discharge, because my mother, you know, that was it.

GF: What were Robert and Joseph doing during their time in the military?

JWC: Robert, as far as I know, he was definitely on the LSTs, you know, the landing craft. What his job was, I think he told me, he didn't talk a lot about World War II, but, you know, I remember him saying he was on seven different invasions. … He was a fireman or fire control. I don't know the Navy, the terminologies too much about Navy, I don't know if that's control, fire control has something to do with, I think, firing the guns, something to do with that. And as far as I know, that's just about all he ever really said. He talked very little, and my brother Joey, the second one who was in the Mediterranean was on a plane tender. I remember that was a flat bottom ship cause he always complained [about] it. He almost flipped it in the Mediterranean in a storm, … rolling over so far it was just about ready to capsize, didn't ride good. Like I said, my brother Frank was cargo, he was on a crew of a cargo plane, and he used to go from his, I think his, he had real rough duty, Hawaii was his home base. [laughter] He loved it. Yes, he liked it because he had, I've seen pictures of it. He had a nice 1950 convertible Ford, you know, in Hawaii, laying by the pool, and he flew, they flew from Hawaii to Alaska to Japan. That was their designated areas of where they delivered cargo or picked up guys that got wounded or something. I think they did that too from Japan. Yes, his duty, out of all of them, was pretty, he had the best duty. They got together when I was getting drafted, all of them come over to the house, and they told me to, "Try to join the Navy or the Air Force," which was a joke back then. So I went, I joined the Navy, but I didn't get in the Navy. I joined and I went through all the

paperwork and they put me on a stack of folders, I guess about twenty folders so, and they called the draft board up right from Plainfield, the recruiter, and they told him I'm getting drafted so he said, "Can't touch you."

SI: Is that why you say it was a joke?

JWC: Yes, the waiting list was, the Navy was the smallest waiting list and that was ridiculous--months. The draft was big time in '66, there's a big draft. The Army had priority to draft.

SI: In some of the things I've read about Manville, it seems like it was a real melting pot of different ethnicities. It sounds like, based on the names of some of your friends, that there was a mix of different European groups.

JWC: It was, yes. It was ethnic, strong ethnic-type, Italian, Polish, you know, some Russian. Back [then] what I could remember a lot of, probably more Polish and Italian back growing up. … Now, of course, it's just everything, just a big mix, Hispanics, you know, and it wasn't too many blacks back then. It was kind of, we had a reputation, not that all of us were prejudiced or this and that, but for some reason Manville had a reputation of being pretty, what it, to get into the history of Manville, there was what we called projects. There was an area where the high school was built that was called the projects, which was basically very poor blacks and whites. They were built on an army barracks type [of building], actually looked like just what you see on television, the old Army barracks just built on pillars, and so on and so forth. These are people, poor whites, and that went all the way on until they knocked part of it down. When I went to seventh grade at the high school, it was brand new, a brand new high school, seventh and eighth grade and high school, and there was still part of the stand where the football field is today and they were still there. … Then it seemed like there was a lot of blacks at the time, I forgot to mention, a lot of the blacks worked at the creosote plant. We had a creosote plant for railroad ties, that was a big hub there for the railroads and they did all the creosotes with the tar pits and everything. A lot of blacks worked there besides JM. … Then, for some reason, they pushed them out. That was it, … everything was gone and the blacks kind of relocated [to] Somerville, wherever, Plainfield, in the nearby areas because there was still a lot of factory work.

SI: Was that all before you went to Vietnam?

JWC: Yes, that was while I was still, we were going to school when I was in, not too much in, I don't think there was any left when I got into high school, but seventh and eighth grade, we had, you know, we were integrated. … A lot of good friends on the ball teams, you know, a lot of good friends, blacks. We never thought nothing of it, really. It wasn't like the South. We just grew up with them, but for some reason, like I said, after they knocked the projects down, blacks were very few if there was any in Manville at all. I don't know, I wouldn't even, there might have been. There was one bar on Camplain Road, Lee's, Lee's Tavern, that was a black bar and Tata's on Main Street was a black bar, and I guess the JM workers, the black guys, they kind of frequented these two bars. But it was still integrated, it was still mixed with whites. …

SI: It was not like there were black and white only areas.

JWC: No, no, as far as I remember, it pretty much, you know, was like I said, it wasn't that Southern-type attitude back in the fifties and the sixties. They were kind of, they all worked, a lot of whites worked with the blacks, they all worked together, but then after everything was bulldozed, that was it, what happened after that, and now it's changed over the years. A lot of Hispanics, and of course, there's blacks. … Not really a problem, not a problem area, not really.

JC: There is a friend of mine who came across this box of photos here at Rutgers with pictures of the old theater that used to be on Main Street in Manville. The snapshot was taken from the front looking out and it had almost fifty percent African-Americans and fifty percent white kids. I think that photo was from the 1940s. The racial dynamics changed since then.

SI: Knocking down this housing really changed the demographics of Manville.

JWC: And the theater that he's talking about, I lived two buildings from there. That's where I was born, not born there, but lived there from infancy until seven, eight. I was about nine years old when I moved to Lost Valley.

SI: Is there a reason why it was called Lost Valley?

JWC: [laughter] I don't really know. It was a valley which is the flood plain, that's the area that gets just wiped out every time there's a flood. Floyd, it was, every house was just about five-foot of water. It's a valley, and they just called it Lost Valley, and most of your Italians lived in Lost Valley. There's strong, you know, the Franzoso's, and the Marcicano's and the Genovese's, and there was all the ethnic groups seemed to, especially Italians for some reason, the valley was their, you know, just like in the big city where you'd have the ethnics breakdown into areas. That's the way Manville was too, more or less. [Editor's Note: Hurricane Floyd was a major hurricane that caused extensive flood damage to low-lying areas in New Jersey in 1999.]

SI: Ethnic groups would have their own areas in Manville, then.

JWC: Yes, it seemed like the Italians did for some reason what I could remember the valley was Italians, mostly Italians. … The Polish, I think, when I was growing up more or less, they were scattered a good part of the rest of the town. I'm sure there was some in the valley too, it wasn't completely Italians, you know, but there was a lot of Polish and Russian. My dad spoke, from what I understand, because being an insurance salesman, he spoke several, you know, he could understand and speak like Russian and Polish, and a little bit Hungarian. He used to be able to speak, you know, maybe not fluently, but he could communicate to do business.

GF: Were there any elements of Polish culture that remained in your household?

JWC: Oh, yes, yes the ethnic foods were, now see I come up with good cooking because being Polish and Italian, my mom was an excellent cook, Italian. … She learned to cook all the Polish dishes from my dad, so she knew how to cook Italian dishes and then she learned the Polish dishes just as good as any Polish, you know native Polish, could cook. … There were a lot of butchers. Back then, there was not so much your main A&Ps and this and that. We had the

butcher shops, the little stores on the corner, and they butchered raw meat and they made their own Kielbasas and their own sausages, this kind of homemade stuff, which was different too.

GF: On the survey, one of jobs you listed as having was as a butcher shop owner?

JWC: … My dad owned a butcher shop for a while. I know my brother, Joe, always complained because he had to work it. … He was young, he was really young, and he said he'd have to carry the quarter, hind, or whatever in for my dad to butcher, and the thing weighed as much as him. He used to hate to work in a butcher shop, you know, for my father, but I don't know if my dad paid him. I guess he didn't pay him much if he did, but just to help out. … That was before my time with the butcher shop.

SI: Growing up, as you became a teenager, did you have part-time jobs?

JWC: Growing up, I started working when I was ten. … Yes, I started working on a place called Yurchuck's Farm, it was a truck farm. … I got thrown off at ten because I wasn't old enough for working papers, I snuck in and I started picking beans and he got rid of me. He says he'll go to jail, I'm too young. So, after I hit twelve, I got my working papers, and I worked truck farming for, till I was seventeen, till I drove. … That was from, as I got older, when I first started working I was just a laborer, bean picker, tomato picker, picker. Then, as I got a little older, I put the years in on the farm, then I became you know, we would plant and harvest the whole, from planting season in April all the way till harvesting, which was really hard physical work. I was seventeen till I started driving.

SI: Would you do that before and after school?

JWC: Yes. Before, after school, weekends, and of course, summer, all summer, worked all summer, pretty much every day.

SI: Did they use mostly local labor or would they have migrant workers come in?

JWC: We used all the kids like from my neighborhood, used to pick us up on the back of a flatbed truck and ride with no rails or nothing on the truck. Yes, we used to just ride on the back of an open truck, down a main county road, forty miles an hour, you know. No seat belt, … just bounced around on the back of the truck. … Then he used to bring in, usually every year he brought in at least two, I would say, at least two migrant workers from Puerto Rico. He paid their way, and he had a block house for them to stay in the whole season. … Then they would go back to Puerto Rico. Sometimes, I don't remember if he got the same guys in year after year. A lot of times they changed. He might have gotten the same one in, you know, a couple of years, but they would change. I did that till, and I had a paper route at the time. … I did odd jobs, then once I got out, I did work at the auction loading boxes off and selling watermelons.

SI: What auction are you to talking about?

JWC: Packer's Market. I don't know if you're familiar, … it was on 206 there.

JC: It was sort of like a farmer's market. A lot of local farmers would go there and sell things.

JCW: Yes, there would be a lot of clothes in there, jewelry places. …

JC: The Pennsylvania Amish would come there and sell things.

JWC: … After I graduated, before I got drafted, I did some work for a landscaper, tree cutting and stuff like that, went into construction work when I was seventeen, Riccadonnas Home Improvements. That was my start at construction. Then I left there and went to the Manville Lumber Yard, Lumber Company. I worked there for two years, got drafted out of there, and did the two years active duty. I came back to the lumber company, and left there, and just kept going on. I went to Electrical Union, worked Electrical Union up and down the East Coast, then eventually got married … and went in my own business, and just worked construction the rest of my life with different people, and I had my own business.

SI: We will talk more about that later.

GF: In the early sixties, was Vietnam talked about at all?

JWC: No. We had an assembly, the only thing I remember about Vietnam while I was in high school, and this is going to be a little vague because I remember, I don't know if it was an Air Force Officer or Army Officer, we had an assembly, I was a junior or senior already, and came and talked to us, which would be '62 or '63, had a little talk about the military. … I guess Vietnam was just, we were there, I guess, advisors as far as I know. I don't know how many at that time but, and that basically, that was it. … Then, like I said, later, after I went to work, I graduated '63, and probably really didn't bother me until I guess around '65, '64, '65. Like I said, … there was a year difference in draft, some of my older buddies were starting to get drafted. Danny and Hank and Larry, they're a year or two older, they were starting to draft now, and then, like I said, then after that we all, then we knew. … Up until then, you know, we heard about Vietnam, it wasn't really, as far as I could remember, I got drafted early '66 in March of '66. Up until that time, I think there was only a couple of battles that were you know really, that's when it started, '65, it really started escalating. So, nobody was really aware of it till we got drafted, of course, and then we knew, we almost knew we were going to be, almost everybody got drafted. The first ten guys down in Newark, I told Jason this, my name being C, it's all alphabetical order at the time, and there was a whole bunch of us got drafted, brought into Newark for the final induction, physical, and the swearing in. So the first ten, I'm going to say ten or fifteen, whatever, the first ten guys that came down from having their physical done, were being sworn in. … Myself and Gary Brown being B and I'm C and a couple of other guys in between us and whatever, we're sitting here, and these other ten guys are up there getting sworn in by the Marines. They were drafted in the Marines, they didn't join, they were drafted, so they just took the first ten. So, if you're unlucky enough to have A or B. … Gary just missed it, his was Brown and I was Chernesky. So, you know, it wasn't too far off, you were going in the Marines, like it or not, so they were drafted.

JC: You said one of the kids in front of you started to cry.

JWC: Yes, one kid started crying. Most of us that got drafted didn't want to be. Obviously, we didn't want to go in the military or we would have joined, you know. A lot of guys joined were smart, my age, had joined. Some guys joined the Navy as reservists before the time came to get drafted. They were already, once you're sworn in, that's it, the draft can't touch you, you know, so a lot of these guys had joined right out of high school instead of waiting to be drafted which was smart. If you didn't want to, you know, being drafted, you don't have a choice of what's going to happen to you, really. … When you join the Army or any military, they give you a contract like a job, back then. You take your choice of, I'm going to use the three categories, three MOSs, that you want. … Again, there's always the catch where you have to be qualified on your test scores for those jobs, you know, related skills. … It's actually a contract and they can't break that contract if you qualify or you could get out. So that's one advantage if you join to stay out of the infantry. Infantry was like, you didn't want to be an infantry soldier, once you get drafted.

SI: That would be where they put you.

JWC: Pretty much, and you read all these statistics they, I just read more statistics that I got in from my VVA magazine. I didn't show Jay yet, the new statistics out about Vietnam veterans, and I should have brought it with me, the little statistic thing, but it's like our generation of males, my generation of males, it's only like 9.1 served, which I thought it would be higher than that, but it wasn't, about the whole time of the generation, of the whole Vietnam conflict. …

JWC: 9.7 percent of males?

SI: Served in the infantry or served in the military?

JWC: No, served in the military. … Oh no, not in the infantry.

SI: It would be a much smaller percentage for the infantry.

JWC: Smaller, yes.

SI: Going back to the scene of the first ten guys getting forced into the Marines, did you see anybody trying to do anything to screw up their physical, such as swallowing tin foil or something like that?

JWC: Okay, it's funny you said that because we had two outstanding screw ups. … We ended up going to what they call induction center, Fort Dix, before they ship you out to where you're going for training. This is like usually like a one week thing, in our case it was two weeks because we were going to Kansas, we had to stay a little longer. The induction center is where they induct you, then you go in, and they process you, you do your testing and all this stuff and they process you where you're going. Right off the start, we had one guy's name, … I ain't going to say his name, it was a German-type name, nothing against the German people, but not Erbacker. It's a crazy name and another guy, I forgot his name, but the two, they came from either Elizabeth or somewhere out in that area of Jersey, city guys, and they came and they just, they'd do everything they could to try to get out. Well, eventually, the one guy, the one that, I

think the German name, I'm going to say it's not Erbacker because I know a guy named Erbacker but that's not the name. Anyhow, he would just screw around, and they would wake us up five o'clock, four o'clock, in the morning, rouse us out to formation, you know, and a lot of these guys had no idea, getting up early and this stuff. … This guy was the only one laying in his bunk, we had this double bunk. Well, the drill sergeant come in, and everybody is up, everybody, most of the guys are scared, he's laying sound asleep. Well the drill sergeant went underneath the mattress and hit that mattress so hard the guy just flipped right out of the bed from the second high bed right on the floor, mattress and everything. I'll never forget that. He was in shock but it worked for him because he never went to Kansas with us. Whatever he did, he was a screw up, he was really a screw up. Well, I'm sure he's doing it on purpose too. And the other guy, he was kind of a screw up. He ended up, the other guy ended up going to Kansas with us, but I lost track of him. I don't know what happened, he wasn't in our company. I don't think he stayed in our company. If he did, I don't know whatever happened to him. But there were guys in our company in Kansas when we went over for training, Fort Riley, Kansas. There was a couple of guys that, one guy had a bad knee that limped around for eight months, and they made him go to training everyday. He never went overseas with us. … There was another one, again, I, the names are hard. One guy was from Texas and another somewhere else. He had something else wrong with him. There were some guys, but, you know, if it was legitimate, I don't know. I really don't know. I don't blame them, you know. I'm not saying that they, … because nobody really, the guys that I was with, my company, probably eighty percent of the company was, you know, was drafted and really didn't want to do what they had to do. But that's the way it is.

SI: Before we get into your military experience, you grew up in the heart of the Cold War era with the fear of the Russians and nuclear war. Do you remember thinking about that growing up?

JWC: Well, I guess we were raised patriotically as far as, you know, we weren't fanatical patriots about dying for your country, I don't really want to do that. … I mean, you did what you had to do. … All the guys I grew up with, everybody, they still had the Pledge of Allegiance and everything and, you know, we used to even say a prayer and everything. … When I was young, God Bless America, and you know. So, you kind of grew up with that. I think most of the guys that I was with were patriotic. Again, not fanatical patriotic, but, you know, you grew up with that.

SI: Do you remember thinking about Russia in particular or communism in general as a threat?

JWC: We had, during the Cold War, in our school, we had the air raid attacks, drills. We had the drills for air raid, for nuclear attacks, or air raid attacks. We had to run in the hall, and you know, put your head against the wall, kneel down, and cover your head away from the glass, and under the whatever, in case of nuclear attack or any kind of attack I guess. But never really dwelled on it, I don't think none of us ever did, none of the kids I grew up with. … Nobody really knew or heard much about Vietnam back in, not us at our age in '65, '64, never paid much attention to it.

JC: What about the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962? Did that sort of affect anyone growing up that you knew?

JWC: Well, I guess it would. We knew about the communists, of course. You know, they teach you about communists, but growing up, as far as dwelling on it, as far as it interfering with our growing up or our lifestyle or our psyche or whatever you want to call it, you know, I don't think it really bothered us. It's just not the way we were.

SI: Jason brought up the Cuban Missile Crisis. Do you remember anything specific about that period?

JWC: I remember the Missile Crisis but not like now. When I see it on the History Channel, I said, "Wow, that was really pretty close, you know, that could have been a real catastrophe if everything went off the way it could have happened," but back then, it really didn't bother me as much as it bothered me now of how close it came to being a real, you know, could have been a real disaster. … Back then it, I don't think, we were too involved in having fun and just living, you know.

GF: Do you remember the Kennedy assassination?

JWC: Yes, I remember exactly where I was working, what I was doing, everything. I was working in Rayville, … it was a two hundred year old farmhouse, Revolutionary War, refurbishing an old farmhouse. I was working for Riccadonnas Home Improvements, and I was scrapping twelve-inch baseboard, getting the old paint off it, when that happened. Then we quit work and went home. It came over the radio, we had the radio on, we had no TV. … We heard everybody stop, and, of course, listen for a while to find out what's going on, then we just quit working.

SI: Was your family Catholic or just sort of a Catholic background?

JWC: Catholic, Roman Catholic, yes.

SI: Did Kennedy's administration have any special significance to you?

JWC: No, not as far as religion, none. No, we weren't overly, we were religious, you know, I went through all the sacraments and growing up with the religious, what they call CCD now, CCD classes.

SI: Catechism.

JWC: Catechism, we call it catechism, you know all of that and went to church, you know, but we weren't overly religious. So, that didn't really, as far him being catholic, didn't affect us, you know, he was the President, probably affected us more.

GF: When your brothers came over to try and convince you that one time, did they actually understand what was going on in Vietnam or did they just want you not to go into the Army?

JWC: I don't know, because they didn't really, they probably knew more than I did, I'm sure. They're older, they probably watched more news than I did. I didn't really care about it too much then. I just, like I said, I went to work every day and party afterwards or whatever we did, you know, and didn't really pay attention to the news. I'm sure they did more than I did. So, I guess that's why they were concerned, you know. I was going to get drafted so, they tried to get me into something that wasn't in harm's way as much as, you know, the infantry.

SI: Did you have an idea before you started training that the infantry was one of the most dangerous places to be?

JWC: Well, we knew once we got into the [infantry]. Oh, yes, well, you knew just from television or whatever you've seen, just the living conditions as an infantry soldier is horrendous, you know.

JC: What about World War II veterans in town that may have been in the service, did you hear about the infantry conditions from them?

JWC: Well, yes, but I didn't really associate with too many World War II veterans until I joined the VFW, which was afterwards. I only, I had veterans all around where I grew up. Eddie Nawracat was wounded in World War II, and Mike Zeban was a Marine in World War II in the islands. Eddie was in Europe, and again, those two, I grew up with them, I was a little kid and they were my next door neighbors, but they didn't really talk to me about war until I was going overseas. Then, it was too late. [laughter]

SI: Just to touch on your education a little bit, you went to the public schools in Manville. What were your favorite subjects and what were your interests?

JWC: None. Lunch, gym, and study hall.

GF: Did you take any shop classes?

JWC: Yes, I had in freshman year. In freshman year, I had woodshop, and there was another year, I don't know what year it was, I had metal shop, which I didn't mind woodshop. You know, the only thing I didn't like about woodshop is finishing part of it. I hated finishing. I like to build stuff but I hate to finish it. We had a teacher that was fanatic on finishing, sanding, everything had to be really, you know, I hated that. I'll build it, and let somebody else sand it, but I was never a school person. I wasn't. My senior year, I think I took a book home once to study. I made it through just studying in study halls and this and that. … Once I tried it, I said, "I'm going to see if I can get a better grade in history." I was getting B's or something. So, I took, for the next grading period, I took, I studied a little bit, and I got a B. I said, "I could do that, so that's enough of that." [laughter] I managed to get through. … We hung around a bunch of guys that were, you know, really cut up. I started off as a freshman with college-type courses, you know, what we called back then, algebra or German. I had algebra and German, but, you know, a little harder type courses. Then I switched over to general, whatever you could take to get through, you know, I wasn't too good with that.

SI: When you graduated and started working for the home improvement company, did you think you would eventually make a career out of construction? Did you see that your life was going that way or did you just see it as a temporary thing?

JWC: No, I kind of like construction. You know, I was more of a physical, I wasn't too much of an inside, office-type person, you know. Maybe because I started working outside when I was so young, you know, I just, I at least liked to build, eventually built houses and, you know, renovations, and made a living from it. Didn't get rich, I made a living. …

JC: What did your parents tell you about the Great Depression or World War II?

JWC: Nothing really, they never mentioned it, maybe to my older siblings might have said something. … I was young at the time. I don't remember dwelling on any of that.

SI: What was the two-week period at Fort Dix like?

JWC: That was just, like I said, that was what they call induction and you go through a battery of testing for placement. … We were basically, a good part of us from that induction center--I don't know what the percentage is--but a lot of us ended up going to Kansas, Fort Riley, Kansas, because they were starting the Ninth Infantry Division. They reactivated it from after World War II. It was deactivated, I think, in '50 or something, and now they reactivated it. So they were starting the Ninth Infantry Division. So, we were, our battalion, was the first or one of the first battalions to reactivate the Ninth Infantry Division. So, that's what the big influence, the big draft, you know. A division is between fifteen, say, and twenty thousand men. So, it's a lot of people, you know, in all different MOS categories. MOS is a job, you know, the job.

SI: As part of reactivating the Ninth Division, did they put you through a regular basic training course?

JWC: Okay, we started, we did the basic training, the first eight, and then we went into our second eight, which is advanced infantry. First eight is basic infantry training, and the second eight is advanced infantry training. Now, when you get into advanced infantry training, some guys could go out to medic school, they go to NCO academy, could go to jungle training. That will come into effect after, into the advanced infantry training, and a lot of times even after that, like with the division. Replacements, most of your replacements have only sixteen weeks of training, the first eight and the second eight, but being a reactivated division, we ended up having eight months of training. We went through the two, first eight, second eight, then we had basic unit training and advanced unit training, and during that period, like after the second eight, that's when a lot of guys went to jungle training, medic training, NCO training, so on and so forth, different specialized training. … Then, at the end of the eight months, approximately eight months, we were a full division with all its components. We had a Cav unit, the Fifth Cav was attached to us, part of our division, and then we shipped out by ship convoy, except for the advance party. Advance party goes over, the other group goes over first to get the base camp and so on and so forth, tried to get it somewhat set up. … We shipped out by ship out of Oakland.

SI: What stands out about your few days in the military? Were there any challenges from the transition from civilian life to military life?

JWC: Yes, it's, of course it's different, obviously, unless you were in military school or something, then I guess you would be used to the discipline, but it didn't really bother me. A lot of the guys had a hard time adapting in basic training, being away from home, and I don't know. I can't really speak for how they felt, but I can see how some of the guys, you know, they missed home and the training was a little tough. The way I grew up it didn't really, I always said, "My mother was the strictest drill sergeant." [laughter] So, that didn't bother me too much, and I was always kind of physical, so the physical training didn't bother me. I was always on the physical side, work wise and sports and stuff. If you were physically unfit, which a lot of them were, it's difficult. It's not an easy, you know, if you're not in shape, it's, they get you in shape or you're in trouble. You know, you're going to go back and do another eight weeks. I think they put you back and they try again, another eight weeks, and if you can't do it after so much then they just give you a discharge.

SI: Did they keep those guys who were unfit in the same unit or did they send them to another platoon?

JWC: … No, they keep everybody in now. If I could remember when we were there, they kept most of the guys in with us. We had guys that were out of shape, but I can't remember if anybody ever went to a "fat" platoon or out of the outfit. It seemed like most of the guys made it, they struggled, but, you know, you get help from your buddies and, you know, whatever you could do to make it through. As cruel at times you think it is, like, well I shouldn't say cruel, as stupid as you think it is what they make you do, after you're all done, and as you get older and go through the system, you see that it was all done for a reason. It's pretty smart the way they do it. …

SI: Could you give me an example of something stupid or cruel they would make you do?

JWC: Well, I mean, just like inspections, or, you know, they'd fall you out. … When we first got there, it could be in the middle the night, they'd fall you out at three o'clock, two o'clock in the morning, everybody half-asleep. They fall you out, they don't make you go back in and you fall out with your footlocker or something, or your mattress, you know, like what are you doing this for, but it's all, it's really done for a reason, you know. They try to crack you, of course, you know, to see, the pressure, you know, like what I'm trying to get across to, like I said, if you're physically handicapped … as far as being out of shape, you know not a handicap "handicap," but you are handicapped if you are out of shape because that kind of stuff really whips you pretty quick, you know. Once you start getting tired, it just makes it harder and harder, and then your mind starts getting screwed up. … It's done for a reason, and, you know, when you get overseas, you're glad they did what they did, big difference.

SI: Those guys from the first eight weeks, you stayed with them as the division was put together?

JWC: Yes, with the division, you pretty much stay with the same guys, the same leaders. I can't say everyone stayed, but a good percentage of them stayed. Yes, we had the same company commander we went over with. Let's see, we had one, two, probably three of the lieutenants I could remember, a couple of lieutenants left, I don't know where they went, you know, there's always some switching around. Most of the sergeants were with us in training, there might have been a few there that didn't go.

SI: Did they serve as the drill instructors?

JWC: Yes, see back when we went in, drill sergeant school--the "Academy" they called it--had just started--so it would be prior … to the Drill Sergeant Academy--drill sergeants were basically, became drill sergeants by their MOS, which had to be infantry, you have to be infantry to be a drill sergeant. So, they would just have so many years as an infantry soldier, and then, just from time in grade, years of service, they would become drill sergeants with an infantry MOS, but you can't do that anymore. Now, you have to go to the Academy to get what they call your hat to become a drill sergeant; different now, they have a school.

SI: It sounds like they were strict in terms of physical training. Would it be like in the movies, where they would be verbally abusive and get in your face?

JWC: Yes, yes. You always had some that would abuse you verbally but like I said to me it was funny. The guys that we hung around, we had a clique that we hung around with, there must have been about ten or fifteen of us from New Jersey. Our company was made up from guys all over the country, all over. They were from Texas, Arizona, Oregon, you know, California, whatever, all over. So the guys, we were all basically New York, New Jersey, a couple of guys from Chicago, we all hung around together and we used to, you got to have a good sense of humor, you know. If you don't have a sense of humor, they'll crack you, they'll crack you quick. We used to laugh at all sorts of stuff, not out loud, but, you know, make a joke, you know, they make you do something. You know, we do stuff and … of course this drill sergeant used to get mad, they get aggravated, make you do pushups, or make you do something else but, okay, whatever, you know. You got to have a sense of humor. You got to be flexible or you just ain't going to do it.

GF: What would be some of the biggest differences between Kansas and New Jersey when you got down there? Had you been to any other places in the United States before you went there?

JWC: Not out there, no, just Georgia and that was about it, really hadn't been out that way. It was Eastern Kansas, it's rolling hills, it's not flat like you think. Western Kansas is flat, Eastern Kansas is rolling hills, the Fort Riley area, and it's dry. It's a drier climate, severe storms, real bad in the summer, thunderstorms. In fact, we were used as brushfire, we put brushfires out a lot of times with lightning storms, a lot of brushfires, and the lightning was really the worst lightning I ever seen, never seen lightening that bad. I've seen it blow a hole in the ground. We were on the maneuvers, we were coming up over a hill and just a black, it turned black during the day. It just got so dark, just big black clouds, and it start lightning, and we kept moving and we had rifles, helmets, the whole gear, you know, field maneuvers. We're going up on this little knoll, coming down, and there was, fortunately there were foxholes actually on top of the knoll,

and it start lightning. … This stuff was like cracking all around us, and it came down and blew, just missed, how it didn't hit anybody, I still don't know, with us standing up. It blew two holes in the ground--it actually blew. You could see the lightning come down, blow the holes, it was so loud, … like a big blast, so they made us all jump in the foxholes. We all laid in the foxholes till it passed over. It was a really bad, bad storm. Yes, that's the one thing I remember, Kansas had nasty storms.

SI: You said you have been down to Georgia?

JWC: Yes, I went down to just, when I got out of high school, I just went down for a couple of weeks. My buddy that I hung around with up at this store, he was from Lyons. Well, his parents were from Lyons, Georgia, so we went down there and stayed down with his relatives on an old farm, tobacco farm and whatever, just to visit.

SI: Aside from going to Georgia, had you ever been outside the Manville, Somerset County area?

JWC: I'm just trying to think. No, not really, you know, just the Jersey Shore. Yes, nothing out West or nothing really North neither I don't believe.

GF: When we were talking about the racial diversity in Manville, you said a couple of times that is was "not like in the South." I was just wondering if that was based on your trip to Georgia.

JWC: Yes, because I was down there. … I was down South in '63, '64, and it was really, where we were, it was real racist--bad, real bad. Yes, it was not a nice place at all. … It wasn't very nice for Northerners neither. … Yes, it was nasty. They didn't even like us when they seen the license plate on the car, you know. … My buddy's cousins were extremely racist. They carried pistols and they would shoot a black person, Afro-American, if he got in the way. They didn't really think nothing of it. It was just, I'm not making this up, you know, it was really bad. It was an old little town, they had a railroad track and literally the blacks are on one side, and the whites on the other, and they don't cross. It was, you know, really bad. See, that was kind of a shock to me and my buddy I went down with, this guy Mike Gill, to both of us, because, like I said, we weren't really raised that way, you know. Having the projects in town and going to school, like I said, a lot of them were friends of ours and all the sudden you see this, and what the heck's with this. Everything was, you know, colored this, colored that, the rest rooms and everything. … That was '63, so I guess that was after the movements already? …

JC: It was still going on?

JWC: … It was just like they never did anything as far as, you know, maybe because it wasn't in the city, you know.

JC: It was a very rural area.

JWC: Real rural, yes.

SI: Going to the Ninth Infantry Division which was comprised from people all over the United States, was the unit also racially diverse?

JWC: We didn't have a lot of blacks, really. Jason knows, he's seen the yearbook. I mean, you could count them, I could have brought the yearbook and you could actually [count]. NCOs we had, no, I guess the NCOs too, that was maybe fifty/fifty NCOs. Officers were all white, Caucasian, and we had a pretty good percentage of Hispanics, Mexican, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Rican. I think probably more Mexican-Americans and we had a couple of Puerto Ricans, and some of my close buddies were Mexican-American, real close. Let's see who else, and we had, you know, like I said, we had them from the Midwest, Oregon, Western states, Iowa, New Jersey, New York, Louisiana. I'm just trying to run through some of the states I remember some of the guys, I'm sure there were a lot of other states too.

SI: Did people tend to get along or did they stay in little regional groups?

JWC: Yes, you kind of, but we more or less, most of the company, we were pretty close, you know. Of course you're closer to your, the guys you're really immediate, you know, from your area and your platoon, you know. A lot of times, of course, you're closer to the guy in your platoon and squad than you're going be, you know, maybe in another platoon. You don't see them all the time, well, you're with them but you're not always in the same perimeter area, you know. You're still close, I can't remember all the names anymore, I look at the yearbook now, and it's hard to remember. I can remember some of them but, you know, like 180 maybe, 180 guys roughly.

SI: Most of the men were draftees, but did any of the NCOs and the officers have any previous training or combat experience in Korea or Vietnam?

JWC: Yes, actually our company commander, our captain, the company commander had eight years as an enlisted man before he went to OCS in college and became an officer. So, he had eight years as an enlisted man. They call them "mustangs" and we had, I think, two, three of our NCOs had Combat Infantryman's Badges [CIB] from Korea. So, they had seen one war as an infantry soldier and our platoon leader, second lieutenant was a West Pointer, Ranger, West Point Ranger. Our CO was a Ranger also. Let me see, the other officers, one was OCS, I don't remember the other one, they might have just been OCS, you know, Officer Candidate School, officers. … We had another African-American sergeant, we used to call him "Mumbles," little short black guy. We called him Mumbles because he [mumbled], nobody could understand him, so we called him Mumbles. He was a nice guy but he just, you know, when he talked to you, he [mumbled]. "What did he say?" "I don't know." I don't know what experience he had, he had to be, he was in the military for a while. He was an E6, so he had been around. I guess that's all I could remember. Oh, wait, our first sergeant, actually our first sergeant was, he was a Korean vet, he had the CIB. He was a quiet type, real quiet, nice guy, didn't say nothing. Very seldom would you hear, first sergeants kind of run the company, you know the company commander is like, I mean he's in charge but he's an officer, with the enlisted men so much, kind of like a figurehead type, like he's in charge but you know what I mean, like a company clerk runs the company, you know, the first sergeant really is the … head enlisted man. He was kind of quiet, laid back, but he was a good guy.

SI: Training with them for so long, did you feel that you got the benefit of their previous experiences?

JWC: Oh yes, definitely, big difference then. … The training we had, we had real extensive training compared to just eight and eight, you know. We had war games for the last how many months. Let's see, eight and eight is what, one, two, three, it's like four months say, we had war games. We had mock villages, "Vietnam Village," they trained us in Vietnam Village, river crossings. We had a huge river there, the Republican River I believe it is in Junction City. We used that for river crossing, raft building, train on rafts, all kind of training, almost like Ranger training. Yes, we had a lot of training.

SI: Did they use helicopters in the training at all?

JWC: They only used, we used them, they showed us, they came down, we didn't load them. All we did was dry, like dry fire, getting on and off them, what they call, I can remember they called "chalks." We used to call them chalks. I don't know if you ever had that before. You'd have groups of so many, say six, I think it was six, six per chopper, because they got a four man crew on a chopper. I'm going to say six, it might have been eight, but I think it was six. Four on the seat, one at each door, and you just practiced. You know, they'd say the choppers come down, you just run over, you get on them, and then they teach you when to get off and lay down. Just clear the chopper, you know, don't keep going, clear the chopper. Lay down till the choppers get up and go into the jungle or whatever, you know. With a perimeter for the next chalk coming in, that's, you know, if you're first chalk especially. … We did that training, that was … kind of like a dry run. We didn't really use choppers. I don't remember ever loading choppers and coming off in training. We did stuff with tanks, APCs, night escape, evasion, you know, like being captured, that type of thing. All the different courses, confidence course, infiltration courses, obstacle courses, and just about everything you think, … bayonet training you do all the time. Yes, it's a lot of training plus I ended up going to the NCO Academy, I was chosen to go for leadership.

SI: That was also at Fort Riley?

JWC: Yes, that was a two-week cram course for team leaders, you know, fire team leaders. So they sent you for some quick leadership training. At the same time the medics went and the jungle guys went, we all come back at the end, to the division.

SI: What type of things did they teach you to be a better leader?

JWC: Yes, they teach you how, you know, maneuvering and how to be a better leader, and discipline is like ten times over what it is in basic training for cleanliness, for uniform, for everything, just discipline is like super, super strict, you know. Everything is perfect, everything's got to be perfect. You can't have a thread, not one little tiny thread sticking out. Yes, they call it a rope, a little tiny thing you can't even see, they call it a rope. … I used to carry butane lighters and you just burn your buddies' ropes off, burn everybody's ropes off before inspection because you have inspection every day, complete inspection. Not just, I mean from

everywhere, barracks, everything. You don't walk on the floors, you took your boots off, everything is spit, spit and, spit shine, even the toilet that all the pipes underneath, you shine. … This is a barracks that's, you know, up in Custer Hill, those barracks, I don't even know how old they are, those buildings are going way back, … the turn of the century or something, I don't know. But there is all the old pipe work in there and everything just shines. That's all you do, just clean, study, clean, study. [laughter]

GF: Do you think that the training prepared you adequately for combat?

JWC: Oh, yes, definitely.

GF: Was there any area that you felt unprepared for in particular?

JWC: No, like I said, … it may seem stupid why they do stuff, but you can see after a while that it's really not stupid at all, you know. They play head games with you, and, of course, physically, you got to be physically fit. As an infantry soldier you're just in trouble, you're not going to make it, you're not going to make it physically. … If you don't make it when you're overseas, they can't take care of you, you know. If you're out in the jungle, you know, you can't, you need two guys to carry you. They don't do that, they're not going to risk a helicopter to come in to pull you out. That's not going happen so you're in trouble. You got to be in shape before you even get there. They just don't, you know, make the war go around you. It doesn't work that way. Physically fit is number one you got to be and then the rest of the stuff they do, it's just head games to get your head right. They get you to tolerate whatever pressure that, you know, hopefully that you come under that you could do to get through it.

SI: You mentioned that part of the training they used a mock Vietnamese village. Did they use other real world examples from what they actually facing in Vietnam at the time?

JWC: Yes, I'm trying to think of, we had one Sergeant, no two actually. There was a black sergeant and a Caucasian sergeant that both served, I believe. I know the black guy did, he was with the First Division, which was the division that went over before us and he came back to train us. … He told us some crazy stories, and he, of course, was in Vietnam and so was this other guy because they didn't go back over with us. They did their tour already, and they had so much time before they have to go back again, but anyhow, so they helped train us in the village. … The village was set up, you know, like booby traps, and what to look for, and I guess, from what knowledge they had up until that point. I guess it was good training, I mean, you know, as much as you could expect to get. Once you get into combat, everything is just not like training, you know. … It's very chaotic, but the training helps. Without that, you're really, you got to know where to go, what to do, somebody has to take charge. The biggest thing is leadership probably, somebody taking charge, you know, that's a must. …

SI: At the end of this eight months of training, how did the division prepare to go over to Vietnam?

JWC: What happens is they start loading, you get prepared, we had to, the only thing, I can't remember everything but I remember dyeing our t-shirts and underwear. Believe it or not, we

had to dye, we had all white. Now they don't, everything has changed, but we had to dye them. Now, of course they just give you, they don't have the whites now. I don't think, they just give you the colored, whatever it is, but we had to dye what we had. Then overseas, I believe, we DX-ed anything. We had the green, you know, the really green ones. … Everything is loaded on what they call conexes, you know, the big boxes that you see on ships, like metal containers like a tractor trailer. They call them conexes. All the gear and all that stuff is loaded on these, whatever. I don't know who does that traffic. … In the infantry, we didn't do that. … Just prior to going, we had two weeks leave, probably that was in November. Actually, I left on my birthday, so at the end of November, we had two weeks and we reported back December 5th, and then we shipped out by train, which I didn't know, I don't remember that because I was too whacked. [laughter] In fact, I asked Mike Naperano, I says, it was bugging me for years, I never asked anybody, I said, you know, "I remember going back to Kansas," I said, "How did we get to the boat? I don't remember going on the train." He said, "You were on the train, you were all whacked, you don't remember?" I said, "You're kidding," he says "Nope." He said, "You were gone." I said, "All that time?" He said, "Yes, you don't remember?" I said "No, I don't remember the train." He told me, "Yes, you were on the train, got to the ship, and then we boarded the ship and then left from Oakland, it was twenty-three days."

SI: Had you gone home during that leave?

JWC: Yes, yes everybody just went their way. … Yes, the family had a party, a little going away party because, like I said, there's three, four of us … from Manville. Well actually, five of us, but only four of us went overseas. For the four of us, my sisters had a party, for the four guys that were going overseas. … Danny stayed in the States. He was a medic and he had a brother overseas at the time in the Air Force so he didn't have to go. You didn't have to go if you had a relative, whatever, in a combat zone unless you volunteer. So, he stayed in Kansas, and the four of us went. A long boat ride. [laughter]

SI: What was that like?

JWC: Monotonous. You know, two thousand guys, you know, just the same thing. I had fire, what they call fire watch for sixteen days. Then I badmouthed to the sergeant who was in charge and we got to Okinawa. When we got to Okinawa, they let everybody off the ship. There's this little bar on top of a hill, I'll never forget. … They let the guys off just for the day, the ship went to refuel, and they let them go get drunk and whatever and come back. So, I got restricted to the ship because I told the sergeant of the guard, to go "F" themselves. … I was a bad boy so I had to stay on the ship, but then I watched everybody come back and I just laughed. It was hilarious. It has hilarious. I wish I had a movie. These guys were so loaded. They dove off the end of the dock. The MPs, this is the truth, the MPs, I'll never forget, the MPs are out there. My first sergeant comes down, they had the gangplank going up, some guys were going on it just wobbling, you know. These other guys, they're running. They ran right off the end of the dock. This dock goes out, it's a big ship, and the MPs were like panicking, you know, and so they went up to the first sergeant, the one I told you about, a quiet guy. … "Tom, you got to stop these guys, stop these guys, somebody's going get killed." He goes, "What do you want me to do?" They just dove right off the end of the dock. They're picking them out of the water, there was like no control. They didn't care, you know, what are you going do? Send me to Vietnam?

We're going, we're almost there. Can't do nothing, nothing you can do to them, what are you going to do? Arrest them?

SI: I forgot to ask, but in your training had they trained you with the M16 rifle?

JWC: 14--M14--and then before we left we were given the 16s and we had to qualify with them. We had to shoot, you know, qualify with them on the rifle range. We learned how to operate them, which was nothing, you know, the 14 is a different weapon but, you know, you're used to, pretty much used to weapons anyhow, so.

SI: What did you think about the change to the M16?

JWC: Well, the M16 was much lighter, of course, which was nice. … I don't remember jamming, like I seen stuff on the History Channel when they first came out, supposedly they had a lot of problems with them. We didn't have too much trouble, and I think they had straightened out all the malfunctions. There's something with the bolt was made, some kind of metal or something, they said they had trouble with it. You had to keep it clean, that's all. You know, you can't just fill it full of mud and expect it to shoot. You kept it clean.

SI: After you left Okinawa, where did the ship land?

JWC: We went right to Vung Tau, the seaport in South Vietnam, you might have heard the name, I'm sure. We landed there, they took us off on those big landing craft things. They had a band waiting for us, [laughter] the Ninth Division band. Every time we had a band, they had a band for us when we loaded the ship, they had a band for us when we got there. I don't know what's with the band, all these bands. The guys got nothing better to do than, you know, play in the band. … They loaded us on a convoy. It was like a pretty much good part of a day. We rode from Vung Tau to Bearcat, sandbags, you know, roads, hostile road, so, you know, so they had, Australians guarded a good portion of it with the APCs and personnel carriers and tanks and so on and so forth all the way up. …

JC: Did you want to say anything about the kids that were on the dock when you landed in Vung Tau?

JWC: Oh, yes, there was kids were like just begging, you know. Kids always beg, you know, for food and stuff, they beg for C rations and this girl was like, … I'll never forget, I still remember her, she had blonde hair. It's kind of a culture shock, you know, you're not used to that and you see all the little kids running around in all ripped up clothes and whatever and bare feet and, you know, just begging for food. … This little blonde, I guess an American, half-American, half-Vietnamese, was so cute. I'll never forget, you know, begging for food, it was like, just a culture shock. You're not used to seeing, you know, the living conditions, it's like here, you know. You look at this, and then, of course, when you get into the villages it's even, you know, just huts, and thatched roofs, and whatever.

SI: Did the climate difference affect you?

JWC: Yes, it's humid. We were there, when we landed, it was the dry season, just started the dry season, so it wasn't raining, but it's humidity, there's a lot of humidity, hot, very hot and get in the rice paddies, I mean it's like the water is almost boiling. The heat is like intense, you know, it's really, your helmet feels like your head is in an oven. Yes, it's really, real hot.

SI: That was all done in one afternoon, going to Bearcat?

JWC: Yes, it was, actually it was in the morning, I think we landed in the morning, January 1st, New Year's Day, yes, 1967. I think it was the morning we got off. … That was a good part of the day because they only drive whatever, I don't know, twenty miles an hour, thirty miles an hour, how fast they go I don't know. We weren't going, … it's a big convoy. When we got to Bearcat, we expected a base camp. Our base camp was just plowed out jungle with a berm, that was it. We thought we were going to tents and everything, and we had to put our own tents up, there was nothing. The only there was was a shitter. It was, you know, quite a ways away, and we had artillery shells as piss tubes, you know, with a screen over and a big sunk, rock sunk, you know. Could have brought pictures, I could have showed you. That's what you urinated in. That was it. They had a mess, I think they had the mess hall, they had a mess hall, and the CO, the first sergeant, I believe they had a structure. I forgot if it was a tent at the time or a wood frame with a tent over it, whatever, but theirs was ready, but ours, all our regular company area was nothing but, we just had squad sized tents. The bigger tents just go outside of two squads or whatever it was. … Then later on, we built, we built, actually we did have the engineers, all the engineers basically did was just plow the jungle. Get the jungle ready for us and a couple of the main places. To take a shower, you had to go, actually we had to go to the engineer's area to take a shower. I don't know if that changed after a while or not, I remember when we first had to take it, we had to go all the way to take a shower. It was all gravity-fed, you know, they filled the tank up on top, of course, the sun heats it. … We didn't spend that much time there, every time we were out in the field with the Ninth Division, spent most of the time in the field, but you'd go say on a ten [day] to two-week operation. I'm just using that roughly, could be one week, could be two weeks, could be ten days, and then you come back for two to three days maybe then go right back out again. You didn't stay in base camp very long, and then when we did come to base camp, most of the time, you filled sand bags, just filling sandbags because we're still building up the base camp at the beginning. You'd put sandbags around your tents, you know, so high around the tent from the front, we come in, so they always kept you doing something, you know. You'd have time at night to go get a beer, you know, the beer tent, or if they had rations, they give you rations. Everybody was allowed one beer or two beers or something for nothing. … Beer and stuff was so cheap, no whiskey. The enlisted men's club, the officers got all the whiskey, the enlisted men didn't get the whiskey. We had beer but we used to buy beer, it was like ten cents or twenty cents, I don't know, it was so cheap, you know, everything was cheap.

SI: Operation COLBY began in January. In that time period, were you just fixing up the camp or were you doing patrolling?

JWC: Yes, we did patrolling, we did some patrolling. We're just kind of getting acclimatized because we didn't have the coming over as a division, I believe the replacements, … I didn't come over as replacement, but from what I understand, the replacements, we had some come in before I left. … I think they used to get some kind of orientation. They must have gave them

some time for getting acclimatized. So, we did patrolling most of that time, and, you know, working around the base camp, getting everything ready. … That was the first major operation, Colby.

SI: Do any of those first patrols stand out in your mind?

JWC: No, we'd patrol around, you know, around the base camp into certain areas, I can't really remember how far out we went. … I don't remember if we went out on any motorized vehicles at the time before or not, I can't remember. I remember walking out, you know, we'd walk out, out of the base camp. … We could have went on a motorized patrol to a nearby village. We did, something at the village, we surrounded a village, security wise, for the medics to come in and treat the people and the kids. That might have been, I don't remember the exact date on that, but that could have been at that time with, you know, they come in and they give, examine the kids and give these shots or whatever. … They give the people soap and stuff, you know, in the village, and what we did, infantry wise, we just pulled security around the village just in case, stuff like that until, pretty much get acclimatized in a couple of weeks.

SI: Would you have to pull guard duty at night?

JWC: Berm, you had berm duty, but most of the guys out on the line, most of the time when we went, the guys that went out, I don't know if I ever pulled berm duty. That might have been left to a lot of the rear guys. … I don't think a lot of our guys pulled because we weren't in base camp that much, really. So that could have been left, I don't remember doing it much, I might have pulled it one time, maybe, I can't remember. Most of the time, you're out. The cooks or the whatever, whoever, you know, whatever, different R-E-M-Fs pull that.

SI: During any of these early patrols did your unit encounter any resistance?

JWC: I think the first action we had was Operation Colby when we got dropped off, that was the main. Yes, I don't remember if we had any sniper fire or anything. I don't remember anything up until that point. I mean we could have, you know, maybe another squad that came in to snipers or something, not the outfit, not the squad, or whatever I was with.

SI: What was the area like? Was it very dense jungle or heavy forest?

JWC: Down south, war zone D and C, it's like dense jungle. It's not real high canopy type thing, it's more of a brush thick jungle type, you know it doesn't have the real high canopy like up north with the high trees. … There's a lot of rubber plantations in the areas and you have, you know, scattered villages throughout the area. … A lot of areas are really not populated at all. We had zones of fire, we had free fire zones, and we had friendlies in the area. … Then you don't have a free fire zone, … they would tell you ahead of time anything in the area's not supposed to be there. So, you know, if you want, you could shoot but if, of course, you know, in areas with friendlies you can't. They had an engagement thing, … you had to be fired upon or whatever, got to check them out, this and that, so on and so forth, which made the war that much more difficult with the friendlies. … Free-fire zones, the free-fire zones you don't see nobody. The only ones you're going to see is if you run into an ambush or firefight. … Of course, that's the

enemy. You don't see too many people walking around the free-fire zones. They know where the free-fire zones are.

SI: What was being out in the jungle at night like?

JWC: Yes, at night you hear different noises. Of course, you know, you had the "Fuck you lizards." You know, they go "Up you, up you," you know, and they go on in certain areas. That's what it sounds like, you know. The first time you hear them, you think it's the enemy yelling at you but it's not. … You have all different types of smells, and then, if you're in the villages where there's friendlies, they have the Buddhists. You set up ambush patrols on a trail going to a pagoda, you know, and then you listen to the Buddhists, smell the incense, and just listen to the chanting, you know. You're listening for hours, sometimes you hear it, you just sit there, and you're on ambush patrol. These people just walk around, you know. It's kind of goofy, you know, the way things are, the way things were with friendlies and stuff, you know, you don't know who's who. I am sure you guys, you know, heard over and over the same thing that, you don't know. They walk down, be walking down, look like farmers, they got an automatic weapon strapped to their back. You can't shoot them till you see the weapon.

SI: When you were going to these villages, would you be searching for weapons caches and that sort of thing?

JWC: Yes, you look for any signs of the enemy, you know, the VC, NVA, whatever who may be in the area. You almost get a feeling for villages after a while, if you've been through a few of them that are friendly and not friendly. You almost get a sense about, you know, the people, you know, if something's wrong, you know. It's funny, I don't know how to explain it because we ran into several villages that were VC. They definitely were VC, we lost guys, got hit, but you couldn't fire, you know. Then you go into the village after guys get hit, and the people are there, there's really nothing you could do, you know. They search the people, they check the hootches, and some of the people come and they had interpreters, they'd check the cards or whatever they carry, you know. We didn't do a lot of that. They had some guys with us that did that, checking everything out, and you know. There's not much you could do. Unless they don't have their card on them, then they take them in for interrogation or whatever. … That has nothing to do with us, you know, we didn't get involved in that, the intelligence did that.

SI: How much time in advance of going and being involved with Operation Colby did you have to prepare? Did you have any warning in advance of the operation?

JWC: Yes, I don't remember. No, it was no, it was no week or anything saying, "We're going, no."

SI: No briefings or anything like that?

JWC: No, they give you, they might just say you're going to the hobo area. You know, "It's a hostile free-fire zone, good luck," and that's it, you know. As far as, they give you, you get coordinates, you get a map, we don't but the second lieutenant has the map, and everybody has got to know how to read, you know. Of course, you get all that in the training with the map and

you have a compass man and a pace man and all that stuff, you know. … We don't really, most of the time when I was out, in fact, … actually my congresswoman sent away for, because I didn't even know where I was in the field basically, you know. They fly you in, sometimes you'd be flying for say an hour, half-hour, hour on a helicopter, you know. You're looking down from, whatever, two thousand, four thousand, two thousand feet. I don't know where I'm going. Once you leave the base camp or wherever you're, then sometimes they would drop you off and we'd as many as two or three drops in one day. In some areas they drop you off, they spotted the enemy, we move in, they're not there, they pick you up right away, … get you to another LZ, and of course, the LZs ain't always where they want them to be so the enemy is not necessarily going to be where you think you're going. … So it's just, you know, you run back and forth. Other times you only have one drop and then you just stay out there for ten days, just what we used to call "hunt the bush" for ten days. Just keep going, going, going, you get a certain coordinate, you know, your grid coordinate, you cover such an area, then link up, and then you pull back out. We didn't, briefing did, you know, just tell you, like I said, if it was a free-fire, there's friendlies in the area or something, be careful. … We expect to find this maybe, they might say, "We expect there could be a probable tunnel network or a probable enemy village or something," you know, but don't say, you know, they don't know for sure.

SI: Do you remember how that operation started for you?

JWC: … We flew out of the base camp, and we flew into, it was a big LZ. I'm trying to remember if, I don't know if we were the first chalk in or not, but as soon as we landed, there was an explosion. Somebody said mines went off but nobody in our outfit got hit. I don't know if anybody got hit or not, and then we, as soon got into the jungle, we only got a short distance in, my buddy Tony got killed. We got ambushed as soon as we got into the jungle. We got hit right away and he got killed. Then, we stayed there overnight in that same area. They pulled him back to LZ, then we went off from there and walked through the jungle, got on an elephant trail. We tried to stay off the trails as much as possible. Usually, every time we went on a trail, we got hit, almost every time. There weren't too many trails, we didn't go on, we didn't go on too many trails when we had our first CO with us because it was almost a sure thing that, you know, you're going to get hit, so we avoided trails, but every once in a while we had to draw fire, so they put us on a trail. So, we rotated point men, everybody took a turn at point, except your leaders, you know, except your guys in charge. All the regular grunts would take turns at point because point was, most of the time, the guy who would get shot, you know, it's pretty inevitable. A lot of times, they didn't hit the center of the column, they just, you know, … just hit the front, shoot up a couple of guys and get out of there if they could. So we were on an elephant trail, we ended up on the elephant trail for a while. It was a big trail and we didn't know why we were going on this trail, and we turned, we went over a creek and went to the right. I'll never forget, we went to the right, kept going, and my buddy Naperano, a guy that I communicate with, took like an S-turn. As soon as we went around the S-turn, we got hit there, and he got shot, he got shot up, and we returned the fire, and there were blood trails. We never found anybody but there was blood all over the place. … They were shooting at us from across the creek we didn't even know it. We're laying down there, facing out instead of facing both ways. We just faced out where the thought the fire was coming from or would be coming from. We were like firing into the brush and they're shooting at us from behind over the creek. A guy turned around and say muzzle flashes going over our heads. We turned around, returned fire that

way, and then they were gone. … They "drugged" whoever got hit, the VC drugged him back across the creek, I guess, got out of there. Mike had to stay with us, we couldn't get him out. There was no LZ, so we had to pull the trees down the next morning to get him out, had to make an LZ, just pretty high, pretty good sized trees canopy was pretty high there. It was, you know, a lot of trees, so we had to blow stuff down, get him out. Fortunately, he wasn't shot up bad, just through the hip, you know, wasn't bleeding real, real bad so he was all right. He was just out for a while, a month or two. I don't know, I don't remember exactly. He came back later. I think that was the last guy that got hit on that. I don't think we got hit anymore on that one, twice, and then, oh, that's right, interesting story going back, that was Operation COLBY. We went to, I told Jason the story. I went to NCO academy. There was four of us in a room, and Tony Yescas, my buddy that I went with in my outfit, Tony Terazino, the guy from Manville, and this guy we called Red, "Cheyenne" we called him. He was from Wyoming, had red hair. We called him Cheyenne. Well, Cheyenne and Tony Yescas, the guy that got killed, were, didn't hit it off. … It was like two weeks in this one room, the four of us, and Cheyenne would never sleep in his bunk because he couldn't make his bunk in time in the morning to pass inspection. He'd keep failing, so he used to sleep on the floor. He'd make his bunk at night real, real tight, then he'd sleep on the floor, so I don't know, there was something between him and Tony Yescas. Tony Yescas is a Mexican-American, maybe that's what it was, there was something there. I don't know what it was, but they didn't hit it off, so they got into a fist fight one night, and we broke it up right away. You can't, you get caught fighting in there, forget it, you know. So, we broke it up, and that was the end of that, and we went through the two weeks. Well ironically, Tony and Cheyenne both got killed on the same operation. …

SI: I wanted to ask a couple of questions about the camp and how that developed. In terms of supplies, do you feel that you were well-supplied?

JWC: Yes, well, you're always short. Of course, they never over feed you, you lived on C-rations most of the time, and water was a problem during the dry season. Most of the water, we would start out with, if we had four canteens, carry four canteens, whatever they were, quart or whatever, in each one, and you carry as much water as you could without being overtaxed, you know, weight wise and stuff. … During the dry season, like I said, you kind of had to, if you're on an operation, see where the streams are and where you could fill. We had the tablets, and we would fill, you know, but a lot times, we did get to the point where you're short. Really, water discipline was really important. You had to be careful, you know, don't drink all your water, you know, because you're thirsty. You can't do that, you have to just drink, you know, a little at a time, … keep yourself hydrated as much as you could.

SI: Would you have C-rations that you would take with you?

JWC: C-rations, yes, yes, we had "C-rats."

GF: With your background in farming, do you think that ever helped you in any way?

JWC: Oh yes, definitely.

GF: How?

JWC: Well, on a farm, we worked out in the sun. It was, you know, really hot, and same thing, you didn't run to the water. We had a well, actually, on Yurchuck's, the one area we farmed, and he wouldn't bring us water most of the time. We just walked from the field to the well, hand pump well, so, you know, you didn't make a trip constantly to the well. You might be a couple of hundred yards or more, so you take a little jar with you or something. We didn't have ice water or nothing. You just filled up a jar and took it, you know, so you kind of have, that's what I said a lot of guys, even in the training, guys that were not used to the outdoors, you know. In the infantry, it's a little, altogether different type living. … If you're not used to the outdoors and stuff, it could be taxing on you, you know.

SI: You mentioned there were engineers and other rear area folks at your camp. Would they be building up the camp while you were out on operations?

JWC: I guess they did, yes, some of the stuff, but now, when we came back the one time, we had the materials, so they asked for volunteers, carpenters, so I volunteered. … I don't know, I'm going to say ten of us, maybe it was six of us, five of us, whatever it was, and we built all the, got to stay out of the field for a couple of days, so I said, "I'll volunteer." We built the skeletons for the tents out of wood, built the floor, and just, you know, just like a rack type thing, so you could throw the tent over it, it made it more, a little more livable type thing. At least you had a floor instead of just the dirt. Nothing fancy, just a shell, real quick. So, we did that, and that's the way it was when we left, I don't know if they ever did anything after that. Now, the rear, a lot of rear guys, when you get, you get into some areas, I mean, they had, like in Saigon, the security troops, they had regular houses. They lived in houses, air-conditioned. [laughter] … It's all together, it's like night and day, it's like two different wars, like you're in a different world, you know. It's hard to really explain unless, you have to physically see the difference, the contrast, you know.

SI: Some other Vietnam veterans I have spoken with talked about the differences between the French nationals who lived in Vietnam and the people who worked on the rubber plantations.

JWC: Never ran into them. … We went through a lot of rubber plantations on patrols, but French nationals, we didn't run into as a straight-leg outfit. I say straight-leg infantry, we're not advisers. We didn't talk to many people, our job was combat-type thing. We weren't advisers. We didn't advise nobody, you know, we didn't, we just went out to look for the enemy or they got and looked for us, you know. … There's so many different aspects at war, like with advisors, with Green Berets, with Navy SEALs, with whatever groups that lived with the people, lived with indigenous people. We had nothing to do with that, they didn't even want us associating with the people in the base camp who did our cleaning, … or when I say cleaning, did our laundry. … They kept them out of our company area. Nobody, they don't want nothing to do with that. We didn't do nothing with that, at least we didn't anyhow, I don't know.

SI: Was that an Army policy or a Ninth Infantry Division policy?

JWC: … I was in two different infantry outfits. The other one, the other one didn't even come back to base camp. You just stayed out in the jungle. You lived in the jungle till you died or you

went home. There was no coming back unless your company got wiped out and they tried to, you know, redevelop your company, whatever, develop your company back to full strength. Other than that, you just stayed there, you just, that's it, that was your life for the tour.

SI: When you were out in the field at night, would you be in a foxhole?

JWC: Yes, most of the time we dug, except ambush patrols, yes. You just lay there, you know, and make no noise, go out at dusk, you know. Sometimes you would move, you'd just go to one position, and get up as soon as it got dark and moved to another one, … try not to make any noise. But otherwise, perimeter is usually dug in. Every time you set up a perimeter, you dig in, you know, company size or platoon size, whatever, usually company size you would set up, you're digging a perimeter.

SI: Did they have a limit on how long you could be out in the field?

JWC: No, not that I know of. I never heard of nothing. Every outfit was different, every outfit, not every outfit, but a lot of infantry outfits, like down south, from what I understand, the guys in the real wet Delta area, I don't think they spend too many days out, you know. They'd come back in, dry out, they were just soaked all the time, even during the dry season, you know, from swamps or canals, whatever they did. They operated a little different because of the terrain and what they did. Then, up north in the high country, those guys would just stay out forever, they just get resupplied and just stay out there, different.

SI: Did the rainy season start while you were there?

JWC: It just started before I came home, in May, started down south. When did it start, the beginning of May, maybe. … I came home in June, beginning of June, and it was raining, it started getting into the monsoon, it was raining then. So, I missed most of the rainy season, which I don't miss. [laughter] I think I would rather be there when I was there than in the rainy season.

SI: One thing you hear over and over again from men who served in the jungle is the problem with wetness and jungle rot. Even though it was the dry season, did those things affect your unit?

JWC: Yes, we had several guys with jungle rot because you do get, you do go through rice paddies and you get wet, and sometimes your feet are always wet and you don't breathe right. The big thing is the leeches. I think some of the guys that got the jungle rot with us, they probably pulled the leeches off, and they just, it gets infected right away. So, you get big sores, it turns into jungle rot, and the skin just doesn't heal, you know, till you dry out and whatever they do medical.

SI: Looking over these operations, it seems like a lot of them were kind of the same operation over and over again, "Search and Destroy" type missions. From your training, had you known how to carry out these kinds of operations or was there a learning curve?

JWC: Well, the training, yes, it teaches you, you know, like going through the jungle, if you go through with a platoon and you go through in columns, you know, you put your flankers out. Of course, you had your point man, your pace man, and … your compass man, and again, your flankers, your distance, all that kind of stuff that you learn in training, you know, for security wise. … You can only train so much, but when it comes down to real fire, it's different, because it's chaotic, you know. Everybody just, I guess the training does come into effect, you do remember, you know, you get down and try to see where the fire is coming from. You don't, you know, looking around, standing around, looking around, you're obviously going to get shot, you got to be pretty dumb, but anyhow, did fire and maneuver, but with ambushes, it's like there's a kill zone. What's scary, most of the ambushes we had, fortunately I was never in a real big ambush like some of the outfits were that I was with later that had got ambushed really bad. The kill zone is like, it's just horrendous, if you could imagine, you know. If you have a platoon ambushing a company, and the heart of the company is in the kill zone, if it's an L shaped ambush, everything opens up at once. I mean it's, your casualties are, they tell you to attack the ambush, they train you, but it's really suicidal. … You're going to die. The only ones that aren't going to die are probably the ones that are outside the kill zone, other than that, in a kill zone, it's not much of a chance of you living, you're done. So, the training, you know, they taught you to attack it. You get hit, and you're in a kill zone, you just run at, you run at the fire. You ran away, it ain't going to do you no good, because they got you in the fire, they got you in the kill zone, then you're in a cross fire, you're done. So you run at them, there's nothing to do, which sounds suicidal, but it is, I guess. … Fortunately, like I said, we were only in small ones where they hit, you know, get a couple of guys, and take off.

SI: Did you encounter a lot of booby traps?

JWC: Yes, we ran into punji sticks, you know, the punji stakes they used to put the human waste and manure or them or whatever, we ran into them. We ran into one incident that I could still remember is we had a scout with us, and I don't know what operation it was on, if it was even an operation or a patrol. We had a scout with us and a dog, German shepherd, scout dog, and he was a Vietnamese scout, and we ran across a booby-trapped hand grenade. … He had the grenade, he was holding it, and our sergeant told him to, … just hold the lever and we were going to detonate it, you know, tie it and detonate it away. He said, "No, no, no." I know, I know, he's going, I don't know why he did it, but he threw it, he went off and threw it and it killed him. Went off as soon as he let go, it was automatic. … What the reason was, to this day, I don't, nobody knew, everybody was like, you know, what did he do that for? The guy, it was a Vietnamese scout. He said, "He knew it, he knew it," the way the thing was set up or something. He said, "No, no, no." I don't know if he was trying to impress anybody, but he died. Then the dog, they had to take the dog out. … They turned our claymores on us one night. We set our claymores on and they turned around. Fortunately, we didn't detonate them because they were facing us. That could have been a big problem if you weren't in a hole. I'm trying to think of any other booby traps.

SI: Other people have said that they would turn weapons that Americans had left out into booby traps.

JWC: Yes. Oh, we had, one of my good friends, he was also a Mexican-American when we got hit in the one village, they were throwing hand grenades at us. … A couple of them were duds and then one would go off. Nobody got hit, fortunately, but we were on a trail, and they were throwing them, and they were bouncing them on the trail. So the one lieutenant, which he should have never did, again poor leadership, took his platoon on line. He was getting scared, a grenade come close, and he got scared so he took his platoon on line to go through to try to flush out the guys throwing the [grenade]. Well, that was a big mistake. … It must have been, I don't even know, a 105 round or something, because they detonated it, and they got in, and it took three guys out. One guy was just nothing but pieces, couldn't even find him. The dirt, everything flew, was like, it must, it looked like it was sixty foot in the air. That's how big of an explosion, they self-detonated it. We lost three guys on that. … Well, two guys got wounded pretty bad, one guy died, and then the lieutenant just, … "What did you do that for?" He never should have did it. That's a no, no. That's something you learn in training. You don't go chasing people, you know. I'm sure you heard stories or seen movies, even in the movies, they showed somebody chasing somebody down a trail. You don't do that, let him go, you [don't] chase one guy.

JC: Did you want to elaborate on some of the lieutenants you encountered?

JWC: … Yes, well that was a village that we were losing guys at. We got ambushed a couple of times and got the booby traps, killed a guy. Well, we set up an ambush patrol on a pretty good sized trail, and, it was during the day, we had a platoon sized ambush patrol. Two farmers come walking down the trail, so they looked like farmers, and they were just about in the kill zone, somebody made a noise or something, I don't even know to this day what happened, but they got shaky. … We couldn't fire yet, they were not quite where they should have been, and they turned around. We couldn't fire anyhow because we didn't see no weapons, but when they turned around to run, they had the weapons strapped to the back. They were VC so we opened fire. They went down this bank when we opened fire and we missed them, … pretty high weeds. … Just before a village, so we went down there, and I was running point. … I don't know if we were running, I think we were running two lined columns, and the second lieutenant, we had that West Pointer who nobody liked really, he was what we called a "card puncher." So we're going through the brush and I heard something run in front of me. Move, run, whatever, it was pretty loud. So I stopped and I said, "Somebody is in front of me, or something is in front of me, whatever it is I didn't see what." … So he says, "Well go in and find out, keep going, see if you can find out." … Something just ran in front of me, or whatever it is, I have no idea what it is. This guy just ran down into this area. So, I said, "I don't know." So, I asked him to recon by fire, which we learned in training. So, he said, "No, there's no recon. There's friendly troops in the area." Not friendly troops, they're friendlies in the area, and so on and so forth. I said, "Well, I'm not going any further." I really disobeyed an order which is a no, no. He says, "You're disobeying an order." I said, "Well, if I can recon by fire, there's no problem because we either going to get fire back or hit somebody." He said, "No, you got to go." I said, "No, I'm not going unless you go in front of me." I told him, the lieutenant, which is wrong, you don't do that. "I gave you a direct order, you got to do as I said." I said, "Well, I'll go right behind you." I said, "You go first, and I'll be behind you, not a problem. I'll be right with you," but he didn't go. So it was kind of like, I ended up going, we ended up going, I went, but I made a big deal. I was really kind of pissed off, so this guy was really not careful what he did with his men. Nobody liked the guy. I mean he was, after that, really, they looked at him like, you know, this is a

leader and he was getting a little shaky. … We went through, fortunately, nobody got hit, but in that same situation, we got shot at from the village, and I remember rounds just, you just hear them going over your head. … Fortunately, there was a ditch, me and another guy dove in the ditch, and we asked everybody to lay down, we're trying to fire back, we couldn't fire back because it was coming right out of the hut in the village. … There's people walking around, civilians. So figure that one out, there's fire coming from the village and there's civilians walking around, can't fire back. "Hello," you know, we're getting shot at, you know. Fortunately, nobody got hit, but it come close. So, we couldn't shoot. Fire stopped and we went in, didn't find nothing. They're not going to hang around, you know, they're not going stay there. … Anyhow, that village, eventually, after we got transferred, me and Mike got transferred up north, that village, the second time around, they leveled it. They pulled the people out. They didn't kill the people. They took them all out, and they just leveled it, artillery just, the whole village, burnt right down. It was kind of a bad area. They had rumors going around that guys that were the leaders of the Vietcong in charge were French fighters. They fought the French, that's how old some of the guys were there. They had went through with the French, so, you know, the guys were pretty good. The Vietcong that were there, they weren't just the run of the mill, hit and run, they knew what they were doing. So they got rid of the village, just took it out.

SI: This one lieutenant seemed to be a problem, but in general, what did you think of the men you served under?

JWC: He was, like I said, he's a West Pointer. The guy had all the schooling and the training and everything, but he was what we call a "ticket puncher." Now, he was going to be, I think, he was working his way up trying to, the more under his belt as far as combat and this and that, you know, the better on his record and all that kind of stuff but he was, nobody liked him--nobody liked him. I don't think our CO, honestly, was too fond of him. He was a captain, but West Pointers come from another clique, you know. I don't think he cared for him neither too much being a mustang, but that's the Army. There's politics in that, but I'm not going to get killed for him, you know.

SI: Did you have access to artillery support and air support?

JWC: We had artillery, mortar, air support, … we had naval support. We used APCs, like I said, the Fifth Cav, we used, we rode on Cavs and tanks maybe, oh boy, I'm going to say two, maybe two or three times at the most, we got a ride, which was great just to sit down instead of walking, you know. Sit inside or on them, either or. The Vietnamese outfit picked us up once, South Vietnamese outfit. … Yes, usually artillery, like when you're in free-fire zones, they drop, at night. They'll set the guns, they'll drop, they'll call in artillery or mortars or whatever, maybe for your support, so they'll have the guns for a fire mission. They know where to set the guns for your outfit. In other words, you know, if you're Alpha One or Alpha Two, or whatever you may be, and Alpha Six, and you call in for a fire mission, they'll know to set the guns at such and such coordinates, or whatever the degrees on their gun, whatever that is, and they just fire. Fire for effect, they don't have to mess around, you know, as long as you didn't move, in case it's an emergency. They pretty much do that almost all the time in the free fire zone. Of course, if you're in a friendlies area, you know, you got to watch. You can't, got to watch what you do with that.

SI: You mentioned a few times working with the Vietnamese. How often would you have to work with them?

JWC: Not at all, we got a ride back with them. … They could have been, I don't know, we didn't run into them. Fortunately, I didn't really care if we worked with them or not. … They might have been on some of the operations we were on, but some of them operations, it could be a brigade size. You don't see nobody but your company. … It's not like you're in an open field, you're in a jungle, one area, the other company might be half a click or a click away from you. … You may not even see them through the whole operation, you know, unless you have to for support or something, you have to help so they could have been on operations with us that I never ran into them. Australians, we worked with one time, but again, they were on the operation was we never really ran into them in the field until we uncovered a big cache. Then their commander came out with our commander and took pictures for the newspaper. That was it … as far as that went. Wherever they were, I don't know.

JC: You met the Australians before that?

JWC: Yes, we met them before. … We had a good time drinking beer with them, you know, in the base camp, but out in the field, I don't know wherever they were. They got the credit, they got most of the credit for the whole thing. We actually, actually our company cleared the tunnel part. … We discovered it and we cleared it, the whole thing. Then the engineers came in and blew it, but we had all the weapons lined up and all the stuff we uncovered, and then they came in and got all the credit for it on *Stars and Stripes*. I should have kept the article but I didn't bother keeping, and it had a write up in the *Stars and Stripes*.

SI: Do you remember which operation that was?

JWC: Port Sea, that was on, yes, out towards the War Zone D out by, that would be east of Xuan Loc. It's was called Xuan Loc if you're familiar with that, east of that, that was east of that, southeast, somewhere in that area.

SI: Do you remember how that operation began and a little bit about what happened?

JWC: That was in April. That was the beginning of April, the end of March, I forgot what, somewhere around there. That was a couple of weeks. That was with the Australians, and we lost three guys to friendly fire on that one, three guys got killed, it was a four-deuce mortar. … We found a cache, we got hit on a water patrol I was on, we got ambushed. There were maybe five of us, four or five of us, all canteens from the platoon, went down to get water and we got ambushed on the trail, took the trail instead of going. … It was stupid, that was our fault too, because we only had a sergeant with us, Sergeant Nail, Steve and it was, I think there was four of us. … We should have just cut right across, there is this trail that goes, looked on the map, the trail goes right into the creek, so we said, well, we could cut across, probably hit the creek, but if you go on the trail, we knew we're going to hit the creek because it cuts right across where the trail is. So we said we'll do a fast move down the trail. We didn't get too far, they opened up on us--automatic weapons. Fortunately, nobody got, nobody got hit. One guy, … I was telling

Jason, I turned around and seen him, and the bullet, it was just like in a movie, they were just dancing all around, he was crawling. He was white as this paper and they just missed him. I mean the dirt was bouncing up all over him. He crawled like a snake to get out of there, and we could, they always set the ambushes up where it was really difficult for the rest of the outfit to get a shot, you know. Everything is set up to where they get the one or two guys coming up front and it's hard to return fire. One of our guys returned fire, and he almost shot the guy crawling because he couldn't get, you know, where the fire is coming from. It was real touchy, you got to watch what you do. … Fortunately, nobody got hit.

GF: I was wondering, in general, how useful were the maps? Is it hard to make sense of them when you got into the jungle?

JWC: Well, they give you a coordinate, and let's see if I can remember exactly. Your grid squares and you have coordinates, and say you're over here, you have to be over here and you're over here. You might be in this quadrant, or whatever you want to call it, and the grid coordinates, they want you to be over here, so they give you grid coordinates so you know from here, you know, say due north, well you set your compass to what degrees you have to go to hit this coordinate. … Approximately, say each coordinate is a thousand meters or one click, I'm just using that for instance. I don't really remember, it might have been a click, say it's a thousand meters, so, you know, well I got to go one and a half clicks, 1500 meters. So, then you do this in training. Everybody goes through the pace training, which means everybody's pace is different. Of course, I'm short, you're tall, so every so many, you count how many steps, normal steps, it takes you to go one hundred meters. You remember this, how many steps, say it takes you a hundred steps to go a hundred meters, so you know you have to go, you know. So every time, what you do is you're supposed to take a string, or anything you could tie a knot, and that's why you have the pace. You have the compass man stays on that compass. He reads that compass, he sets out at that compass, and the pace man, every hundred meters, he'll tie a knot in the string until he gets fifteen knots, which is 1500 meters. … You'd set on that compass, stay as close as you could, you know, to that azimuth, and that's where you should be. That's where you should be. The point man is just point man. The point man don't and our, and every outfit, I don't know if they all do the same. Our outfit, point man stayed point, he watched, he looked at everything, but the other guys are right behind him, saying, "Okay, you got to go to your right a little, okay." Of course, you're going to vary a little, and then if for some reason you're not sure of yourself, you call for a marking round. That's a white phosphorous, air burst. They call it air burst marking round, and what they would do is you'd call in a coordinate, and a lot of times, you wouldn't call in the coordinate that you're supposed to be at, you call it off somewhat to where if the enemy is around, he doesn't know exactly where you're going. You call off, you call it, and then you see the air burst, and you say okay, we're, you know, give or take, whatever. You could, you could come out, if you're good at it, you could come out pretty close, you know, it varies a little. … You definitely have to count, you got to watch, you know, you could just go right through it or not reach it, you know, if you're guessing at it, you can't, in the jungle, you can't, see there's no landmarks. If you got a landmark, it's fine. They always tell you use the landmark before you even, if you put your compass on a landmark, and you shoot, and there's this huge tree out there, it's not going nowhere. There's this big tree, and that thing is, your azimuth is dead set on that tree. Just keep going to that tree, it's not going to change, which is, you know, you still got to count how far the tree is. …

[TAPE PAUSED]

GF: You would use the landmark if possible?

JWC: If possible. … Of course, you know, if it's so thick, then everything looks the same, basically, you can't use the landmark.

GF: Was it a common occurrence that people would get their coordinates wrong?

JWC: … Yes, it happens, it happens. I don't know, I guess I wouldn't say every time, but there's times you could get off of where you're going, especially if you don't use trails. It's easy to find out where you go where trails intersect and this and that, but that is just, the enemy knows that's the easy way out, it's so easy walking on a trail with 110 degree heat and humidity. It's a lot easier than hacking your way through the brush, but you pay for it, somebody's going to get hurt. It's inevitable, it might not happen all the time, but it will happen. Somebody is going to get hurt.

JC: There was an instance that you mentioned to me about getting lost, but you weren't lost "lost," where this training might have helped you when you were setting up an ambush.

JWC: Oh, with the radio?

JC: That they snapped the antenna.

JWC: Yes, well we wanted to be lost, so. [laughter]

JC: Can you explain how that happened?

JWC: They sent us out on an ambush. Actually this is on, I can't remember the operation, but this was down by Long Binh somewhere, I believe. It was on a river.

SI: Uniontown?

JWC: It could have been. I won't say for sure, but it was down in that area, and then they sent us out on a river. It wasn't a real big river, but they sent us out. It was me, Gary, Pops and Grosshart. There was four of us if I can remember, four or five, four I think, with a machine gun. They sent us out to set up on the river. They said it was being used by sampan. They were using it, coming up and down the river, with material, right. Okay, no problem. So they give us the, where we got to go, the azimuth, this and that, same thing. We didn't go out real far, but, you know, far enough to, got away from the company area, the perimeter. So we went out and found the river, and it was a pretty good bank, so we figured, oh let's set up on top of this bank because it's a pretty sheer bank and nobody is going to go up, get up the bank too easy. So we set up the gun, and it was just starting to get dark, so we hear this artillery going off not too far from us. … "Boom, boom, boom." Why, you know, and they're walking it towards us, you can hear it coming, it's getting closer. He said, "What the heck," and sure enough, we ended up

getting a call over the radio that our, artillery, they spotted, whatever, and somebody spotted the enemy is moving towards us. They're dropping artillery, and they're walking it down towards us, to get out of there, you know, get out of there quick, don't. So, we thought that's good enough for us, so we pack up and we take off. … Now, it's dark and we had, we came through these bamboo thickets. Bamboo is really, the brush bamboo is horrible, you know. The big bamboo you see on TV sometimes, that ain't nothing, but the brush is like vines with big pinchers on them like a brush type thing and it rips you. It just rips you up. We start going through, we get into that, and we had to get through there. We were crawling, just trying to get our way through the stuff to get out of there, and we had the radio. Grosshart had the radio and he was like six-foot something, tall guy. He got the antenna caught and he panicked, he was panicking, got the antenna, and he pulled it and ripped it, ripped the antenna. Now, we had no communication. So what are we going to do now? We couldn't talk, we just kept going. We said, "We had to get out of that area because we were in trouble." So we kept going, we knew, we knew roughly where we were. We could have made it back at night, you know, but we just got out of the area, got close enough to the perimeter without getting into it. … We just stayed overnight. We just camped out on our own, we said, "No use going back in there. They'll probably send us back out again." So we just, we just laid low till the morning, then went in, in the morning. So they said, "Where were you guys, missing, we're going to send [people out]." We said, "No, we got the radio, we had no communication." We showed them the radio. We knew where we were, we figured we didn't want to walk in at night with no communication. You walk in at night, you probably going to get shot. So we said, "We just laid low until the morning so they could see who we are," but then, nothing turned out with that. … The intelligence was like, you know, especially down south, you know, you'd hear, that's why they used to drop us off so many times. … "The enemy's, hot LZ, you're going into a hot LZ." Yes, right, you heard that before, there's no hot LZ. … "They spotted a battalion. They're waiting in this area." Then we had air strikes come in, and I said, "Oh, you got to be kidding, you're dropping some heavy stuff," and we were the first, we were the first ones in, our platoon. … I said, "Oh man, I guess they ain't BSing this time," because they were dropping, you know, the F4's or whatever they were. They were coming in, they were, tons of stuff they're dropping, blowing this whole LZ apart. I says, "Oh, man, what's this," and sure enough, you're going in, and everybody is on edge, you know, because of all this fire going on, and we're coming in and just hovering over the ground. … Then, all of a sudden, we never touched down, just so high off the rice paddy and then they just went straight up, the chopper started banking straight up, and the lights, the whole thing lit up and the blades going "da dumpf, da dumpf," just about stopping. The whole board, I looked, and the whole board just lit up, and he's going like this, and I said, "Oh man." I thought for sure we're going to crash. I don't know how he pulled out, them guys are good, just went up like that, and then, came right back down again and got, and it's almost like the blade was going to stop. That's how slow that thing was starting to turn. "Da dumpf, da dumpf," and he went like on the side like this, and, oh crap, everybody is holding on. Just banked out, tried to draw fire. I was wondering what, why is he even doing this, you know. At first, we never did that before, we never went in like that, and then pulled out so sharp. He said, "Well, you know, we just tried to draw fire. "We don't want, they don't want to touch down, just want to see if they drew fire," and then got out of there and come back around. The planes that come back in again or whatever. Fortunately, we didn't draw anything, so we went right back in, came right around, went back in. Yes, there was a lot of different, that was same area that I was telling Jason. … Mike mentioned to me, Mike Naperano, that a squad, I think he said a squad got drowned and I don't remember. I

can't remember everything that happened but he says, "You don't remember?" He says, "The tidal water was so high, we were on the Saigon River area," and he said, "I remember the tide. The tide used to drop like it would go out, it'd look like eight foot, ten foot tide." That's how much the whole thing would suck right out, and all these mud skippers, you know, skipping all over the mud. Then the next six hours or whatever, maybe twelve hours, whatever, the tide would come in, and this thing would fill right back up and be ten foot, twelve foot deep. So, he said, we talk all the time, he said, "You don't remember that? The lieutenant or whatever, took the squad out. They set up in one of these when the tide was out." Now that's, there was something wrong there. I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Yes, the tide was out, and he must have found this gulley to set up in or something, and the guys were sleeping in there. … The tide came in, they drowned." I said, "You got to be kidding." I don't remember that, but he said, "Yes, in fact, a big stink over it." I don't know if he died with them, maybe the whole squad. He said, "Yes, they drowned." Oh man, not too smart, certain things, I don't know what, … but a lot of things happen.

SI: Do you remember Operation Uniontown which was around Bien Hoa and Long Binh? Do you remember where you were when that happened?

JWC: That was probably, we used to pull security. I don't know if that was Uniontown. I don't remember how many operations with the Ninth, there was several operations. Uniontown, I think, was the one we used to pull security at the Long Binh ammo dump and Bien Hoa airfield. That was our, it used to be like a company of infantry there and would rotate and spend so many whatever days or weeks. Then another company would come in out of the bush. … You're out of the bush really. There used to be bunkers, we used to have these bunkers on a small airfield, which was like used for like Piper Cubs or something whatever, a small airfield, and they would set up there. … Then, what would happen is if they start mortaring or whatever, the attack in the main airfield, then we were on alert. You would rush out there and try to take the mortars out or whatever. … The same with the Long Binh ammo dump. They used to just blow up, whenever, randomly, you know. Of course, you never catch these most of the time, you never get them. They usually blow that thing and they're gone or they mortar, they mortared one night. They mortared the airfield. They threw us on a three quarter truck, a squad. We took off where to the mortar supposedly was, forget it, they're gone. They're not going to hang around. It's not a major attack, it's a harassment, hit and run tactic, and just, you know, that's it. That's Uniontown, I think that was the only, the only thing I could remember that. Of course, we probably, that could have been even, the one, the operation with that village I asked Mike about and we called it Operation Tiger, and there was no Operation Tiger, and Mike was saying that Operation Tiger, they could have just used that, but it might have been a bigger operation.

JC: Like an operation within an operation?

JWC: Yes, it could have been another, it could have been a different operation, but I never got anything on that. I asked about it, I don't know. Maybe my CO would know, I don't know, I never asked him.

SI: I think Tiger came up in our research, or maybe you wrote something about it on the pre-interview survey.

JWC: Yes, I couldn't get anything on that operation. It's not in any of the books and I asked about it. They said it's not on any after action report, but it was only our company. … Yes, it was only our company, I think, involved in that at the time, and I don't know if they, I don't know if they would have that in, I think a lot of these are brigade and battalion sized, most of these operations bigger than brigade and battalion. I don't know if they'd even have a company or anything.

SI: Was that when you were with the Ninth?

JWC: Yes, with the Ninth, yes. … Could have been part, I don't think it was part of Uniontown. Uniontown was Bien Hoa area, that was a different area. I could never, I thought it was right at the beginning of the Delta area, right in the Delta area there.

SI: Was Port Sea the last operation you were on before you were transferred to the Fourth?

JWC: No, this Operation Tiger. Yes, that was the last major, major thing we went with the Ninth before I went to the Fourth. That was in May. Port Sea was in April, beginning of April. … I couldn't get no information on Tiger. I don't know what it was. … Nobody knows. I'm thinking, well the village ain't there no more, I know that because Gary was still there, my buddy Gary from Manville. He didn't go with us up north, he stayed with the Ninth, with our outfit, and he was on the second Operation Tiger, and he called it Operation Tiger Two. He said, "That's when they took the village out," but nobody has any information on that as far as the government, as far as I wrote. Nobody knows anything about that. So, I don't know what that is.

SI: In Vietnam, there was a big difference between what actually happened and what got reported, such as inflated body counts. Did you see any of that in your experience?

JWC: No, I didn't. I didn't run into any big firefights. Our outfit, with the Ninth, when I was with the Ninth, we only had ambushes and, you know, booby traps or whatever, we didn't. Now, up north, I wasn't with them long enough, and, actually, when I got with the Fourth Division, me and Mike went up, they had, the outfit that we were sent to, had just went through their big time firefights. They just finished up, then after that, they moved, their reports, they had moved up to Dak To. So they didn't really run into anything till the end, and then, he was in support of the 173rd up at Dak To. Mike was on one of the hills up there, but up until, they never did, they lost all the guys, … I don't know if they inflated. I don't think they had to inflate, the Fourth Division, they just fought. They fought for months up on the border there. One thing I want to bring out, not to make anything small of what the Marines or what any other outfits did, but you don't hear, you don't get, they don't get a lot of publicity, the Fourth Division or the Ninth Division. The only publicity the Ninth Division got was at the riverine, which you might have heard of the riverine force, they got a little more. A lot of these guys, you never, like the Fourth Division, had more battles in the central highlands on the border, probably, than a lot of these other outfits that you just heard about constantly, because of the publicity, the news. The Fourth Division was quiet, but they lost a lot of guys and they did a job on the enemy too, you know. They killed a lot of people, but you won't see too much on them. If you look in history, I'm sure

if you ever look up, you know, I think the only thing was the "Nine Days in May" was the only one that they really said anything about.

SI: David H. McNerney?

JWC: Yes, well actually it was, … "Nine Days in May," that was the only one. … My first sergeant got the Medal of Honor in March just before that. … The outfit that we went up to rebuild, we were replacements for, the company got pretty much decimated.

SI: Was that David H. McNerney?

JWC: Yes, McNerney. Yes, he saved the company. They were pretty much gone.

SI: How did it come about that you were transferred from the Ninth to the Fourth?

JWC: Okay, what the Army did was they were finding there was a problem going over as a division. The only problem, it's good to go over as a division because you're well-trained and your buddies and this and that and this and that, but in the same token, everybody rotates at the same time, which isn't good. So what they had to do is they can't have a division go over and then the whole division is rotated. Now, you got all new troops, you know, you can't do that. So what they would do is take, like, say we went to the Fourth Division, right. The Fourth Division, say, was in Vietnam, I'm just going to say six months before the Ninth Division, right. So, they went over as a division, the Fourth Division, same with the First Division, so they'd take troops like us, we were there for four or five months already, so they take two or three of us, go up to the Fourth Division, so that you don't have green troops coming in. … Then they'd have three green troops come in and take our place. You see what I mean? In other words, the rotation would be there would always be a mix of some experienced, so it won't be like just all experience was gone. There will always be, there is a name for it. I can't remember the name for the, the Army has a name for that, the rotation of troops, you know, from the States into the different divisions.

SI: Was that just called a rotation?

JWC: No, it's more than that. There's a name for it, I forgot what they called it. They called it something that they come up with to do this. … Then they would wait, maybe, we went over January, February, March, April, May, we were there five months already. So, then maybe, maybe a couple more months, they might take three more guys. I don't, see me and Mike went, I don't know if anybody else went at that time because we were getting replacements in before that. We got new guys from the States. We had a couple of replacements, one guy got killed, I didn't even get to know him. He came in, he was only there two weeks, but that's what they did with that. So, they wouldn't have green troops, otherwise you'd have a whole company of not knowing what's going on, you know, nothing.

GF: Did you feel that as you gained more experience you became better at what you did?

JWC: Yes, the longer you stay there, the more, you know, the more you're going to learn, there's no doubt about it. I don't know if you could learn in a year everything there is to know. I'm sure, you know, it'd take a lot longer than that, but it does make a difference to when you first get over there, you know, you absolutely just getting used to the living. It's a shock, you know, just dealing with everything. …

SI: We did not talk about Operation Green Leaf. Do you want to talk about Operation Green Leaf?

JWC: Which one, what month?

SI: That was a search and destroy mission in February. It says it started in February and ran into April.

JWC: No, we were on that, but I don't remember. From when was that?

SI: The end of February or mid-February it started?

JWC: Mid-February, COLBY was first, where the heck did we go after that. I don't know where that was located, I can't remember. That could have been. …

SI: Southern Chinon Tracj?

JWC: It's probably War Zone D, I don't know what. …

JC: When did Port Sea start?

JWC: I thought that was the beginning of April. It should be in there.

JC: Yes, probably.

JWC: I can't remember the dates exactly. February, I'm trying to think of where the heck we were in February. There might have not been no significant, with my outfit, we were out in the bush somewhere. I'm not sure where, where that was, I'd have to look at a map. Where does it say? …

SI: No, Chinon Tracj. T-R-A-C-J is the last word.

JWC: … Yes, I'm not sure, I'm not about that one. Our outfit, if it's in there, our outfit was there, you know. Maybe that was brigade size. …

SI: Did you have a question about that period?

JC: I know you mentioned that the Vietcong had left some messages on the chalk board for you in the woods before you went to up north.

JWC: That was Port Sea. Yes, that was Port Sea. Yes, "Yankees go home." They were always, they always knew where you were. If you read anything about Vietnam, or seen anything on DVD, General Giap, his big thing was, you know, always hit the Americans when they are not ready. Of course, when you outnumber them, when you have the advantage, which they always do, most of the, with the Ninth Division, probably the one reason we didn't get hit. There were some outfits that we went against, like in Port Sea, the big Vietcong main force units that operated in the area, that's the reason we were there, and possibly Green Leaf too. I'm trying to think of February, I can't remember … in February. We had to be, probably up in the rubber plantations, up somewhere in that area, but anyhow, but they wouldn't hit you unless they knew they had an advantage. They just, the firepower was just, you know, if we were a company moving, and we weren't on the trail, or they weren't in a situation where they could set up a good ambush, or set up some type of an attack that they know that they could overwhelm us before we called in support, a lot of times they wouldn't do it. They knew it would be suicidal that they don't have an escape route. There's no way they could hit and run and get out of there, and take without losing a good, you know, they didn't want to lose guys neither. So, that's one reason I think with the Ninth, most of the time we traveled through the bush. We stayed off, but they would make us go on trails, and I personally believe we went on trails to draw fire, personally, I believe. I don't know if it's true or not, but every time we had, they would try to draw, you can't fight the enemy if you can't find them. Your job is, you know, … you're there to fight the enemy. Westmoreland wanted to beat the Vietcong and North Vietnamese. You can't beat them if you can't find them, and if you can, one way to find them is draw fire. If you're going to fight them or not, I don't know, but one way to find them is send somebody in there to get shot. They're there.

JC: Was that around the same time that you came across Vietcong who were women?

JWC: Yes, that was that little hooch we ran across, and … got them off guard in their backdoor. We were on the trail, we're fortunate we didn't get hit that time, walking up a trail. I don't know what operation, see I can't remember which operation some of these were on. I don't think that was, it could have been Port Sea. That might have been part of Port Sea, but that was a free-fire zone, that was like COLBY. That was all, no friendlies, no friendly indigenous people in the area that, you didn't worry about. We walked up and before you knew it, we were on, we'd seen smoke and we smelled something cooking and we were on this hooch, there's one hooch and a little pen with animals and stuff, and one or two hooches, I forget exactly, but anyhow, they just left the stuff cooking right on the stove, big chunk of meat, left all their stuff except the weapons and took off. That was Vietcong, you know, they were, or NVA whatever they, whatever they, they were probably Vietcong. They had their little hideout there, I don't know where. They didn't have nobody on the trail.

SI: One of them was a woman?

JC: What tipped you off they were women?

JWC: Well, they had the …

JC: The feminine products?

JWC: Yes, the … feminine products and the little, not all women, I'm sure it wasn't all women. They had black pajamas they got out of there, those were women, I'm pretty sure. Well, it's hard to tell. It could have been a guy too, they're a lot smaller, you know. They're pretty small. So, we burned that down, just shot all the animals. They had all kind of animals--chickens, pigs, a little dog, a little puppy. Nobody could kill the puppy. Then that lieutenant makes, I don't know if he killed them or he made somebody kill the dog, we didn't want to kill a dog.

JC: After you realized that there were women there that could have been fighting against the United States, did anyone mention anything about it? Did they come to the realization that they were not only fighting men, but women too?

JWC: No, no, they knew there was women fighting, you know I mean that was SOP [Stand Operating Procedure] for them, there was nothing different about that.

SI: In these firefights you talked about, would you see muzzle flashes or would you actually see the enemy?

JWC: Most of the time, we never see the enemy, no. The only time when Mike got hit, no, I don't know, if Red, Red, this guy Red, we call Red Wallings, big rebel, he was fortunate, he was right behind Mike and he jumped up and fired into the brush where they shot Mike from. … He's the one who apparently hit whoever was in there, but even then, we, in fact I was on the trailing party that went in there, and we got on the blood trail like trailing a deer, you know. We trailed the blood trail to that creek, and then that was it. We didn't go no further going, we went across the creek, we fired where muzzle flashes were coming from, so you went across there and that was it. Somebody was hit pretty good, they drug him away.

SI: Did you always have medics with you?

JWC: Yes, yes, we always had a medic. Yes, Besler, one guy's name was Besler, he was a real, same thing. I wouldn't say he was a conscientious objector, but he was kind of like a pacifist, real nice, quiet kid, real. He was real, but he was, you know, if somebody got hit, he'd go running out, and one incident, we had to call him back, the same place where that village we got ambushed on the trail again. … Blazik got shot through the legs, the automatic weapon opened up and they sprayed him first, so he got shot right across the legs. He was screaming, really yelling bad. Ernie got up, and we were all laying down, trying to lay down fire, and he got up and just started running, stood right up and everybody, "Get down," yelled at him, you know, to get down. He dropped down till the firing stopped, you know, and he went over to help, but he probably would have got shot too if he didn't get down. … It was a wide open, big trail, like a cart-type trail, not just a one man trail, you know, it was pretty big. So, we yelled at him to get down and he got down.

SI: When you were in the south, did you get back to base camp much?

JWC: No, not much.

SI: Was your only recreation to go to the beer tent or just hang out in the base camp?

JWC: Yes, pot, beer tents and pot basically that was it. … You didn't smoke, well nobody I knew ever smoked in the field, usually you went out in the field everybody was clean, you know. As far as I know, and the guys I hung with in my platoon, we didn't have, I didn't know about the rest of the people. What they did, but we didn't have no problem with that, but you come back in the base camp, we relax, that was one of the things.

SI: Did the higher-ups have a lenient attitude towards marijuana use in your unit?

JWC: Yes, I can't speak for all of them.

SI: Just in your company?

JWC: Yes, in our company, our CO was pretty, he knew what we did, he knew us. Eight months he was with us, and we were his kids, you know. So, he kind of watched over us. He was pretty good. He'd make a remark, and we go out, you know, "All right potheads," he'd go, "You had a good time last night, but we're moving out today." A lot of times we didn't know exactly what day or what we're, you know, everybody'd wake up with a big head, or, you know, tired out, and, "Yes, we're moving out to the fields, so you'll get rid of that real quick." … We caught him, one time, looking in the tent. We were, you know, smoking, and we turned around and, you know, of course it's dark out, we had little lights on in the tent, turn around, he's looking in there, and he took off because, he really, the officers, you know, you're not allowed to do that, but if we didn't know that he did it, you know, that was up to him. Nobody could say, "Well, my CO allows us to," because he didn't allow it. … He might not have not said nothing, but he didn't allow, … he didn't justify the fact that you're smoking. You're not supposed to, that's not legal, but he was a regular guy, you know, he wasn't, now, if you would get this West Pointer, it's a different story. He was the commander, … he might have made a big deal, I don't know. What are you going to do, you know. … I mean if there's no harm done and the guys are just relaxing, if the whole platoon is doing it or half platoon, in one area, or half of the company, what are you going to do? Get rid of half of the company? You're going to get them on charges? … That's not too good, and nobody ever got hurt from it, nobody, there was no incidences. …

SI: How would you get it? Was it through the Vietnamese?

JWC: Yes, Vietnamese. We had a runner, a chaplain's assistant. He went over with us. He was a real, he was from LA. He was, I guess he was a drug runner in LA before he went in the service, and he was pretty, you know, a pretty hard core street guy. … He ended up, well the guy is the chaplain's assistant. He didn't fit. Ernie Besler would have been better than him, the medic, because he was like a pacifist. This guy was the opposite, he was just a bad ass, bad ass street guy, just bad, and well, I was good friends with him, you know, and he had access to all the villages, into the villages, a jeep driver. He knew where to go, he was good with that stuff. He found a place, and I mean it was so cheap, it's ridiculous. It's like two bucks for a pack, ready rolls. They roll them, I guess they had them little machines, … just unbelievable. But those were good times, we had fun. It was only time we had time to relax.

GF: Were you on edge when you had down time?

JWC: … Like I said, you didn't have that much down time even when you went back, you had the evenings, you know. During the day, they always find, you had to do something, they don't want you sitting around doing nothing. Fill sandbags, clean your weapon, get your gear ready, but then, at night, most of the time they cut you a break. They had the tent, an EM tent, you know, Enlisted Men's Club, no whiskey, just beer. So, back then, we had, the big beer that we used to drink a lot was San Miguel, a Filipino beer. I don't even know if they make it anymore. That was a good beer, it was kind of like a strong, and it was so cheap to drink. We didn't have nothing to do with our money anyhow. Nowhere to spend it unless you gambled, there was nowhere to spend it. So, you know, you did a little smoking, some beer, and just mellow out, eat all the packages when they came in. Somebody'd get the package, you get the munchies and you just eat everything, the whole package, like gremlins. There'd be chocolate and cake and cookies, … chocolate all over everything that you eat, "Give me some of that, give me some," you know, nonstop eating.

JC: Do you want to tell us about when you snuck off to Saigon that one time?

JWC: Oh, yes.

JC: You were not allowed to go there.

JWC: … No, Saigon, not just Saigon, I think most of the cities, but we never had a chance to go to any anyhow but Saigon. We went to this rest area for just a day and it was somewhere on the Saigon River, or the Mekong River, I think it was the Saigon River. For some reason, it's a big river anyhow. So, you're just supposed to go there for a day, lay out in the sun, dry out, dry your, dry up and everything, have a couple of beers, this and that. So, it's not far from Saigon, the city, so, "Don't go to Saigon." Don't tell us don't do something, "Don't go to Saigon, it's off limits to the whole division, it's off limits, the infantry is not allowed in Saigon." "Yes, all right." First thing we get there, me, the "Mex," I call him the Mex, Tony Gonzales, he was a guy I hung around with a lot, "Hey Tony, what do you think?" "Yes, we're going." We grabbed a cab, ripped our patches off, Ninth Division patch, grab a cab. "Where are you going?" The guy knew right away. "Okay." We go to Saigon, I forgot what it cost, but everything was so cheap back then. This is pretty early in the war yet, so it's cheap, so we went to a massage parlor. It was like a dollar, you know, for a "humjob," BJ, right, for a dollar with a massage and steam bath. We were getting done with that, then we go to the, I want to say it's the Capital--it's the Palace Hotel or Capital--whatever, the place that the GIs that were stationed in Saigon went, the Air Force, Navy guys, all these guys were office workers. They were all, it was an Americanized place. So, we went there and you buy a book, a chit book they call it. … It's got all these, that you pull out for a drink. It's like two, three dollars, again everything is like dollars. No ten dollar stuff, dollars, we buy a book, and we start drinking, it's like twenty-five cents for a shot or something. … We got hammered, and we were getting toasted because we weren't even used to drinking. We're getting toasted, we're drinking shots, and then our buddy, we went to the men's room, my buddy had to take a crap. So he couldn't, there's no toilets. This is the first time we experienced a French, this is a French hotel, right, and they have, you crapped in a hole in the floor. Well, we didn't know that, we're looking for a toilet. "I got to go, I got to go, do I?" "You're asking me?"

So, he went in the urinal. … He did it on a urinal, there's a hole in the floor to go. I said, "What the hell?" We left there, and then we ended up getting in a rickshaw. So, we told papasan, some old guy, man, this guy looked like he was seventy years old in a rickshaw, with a bicycle rickshaw, and we said, "We wanted to go get laid," right. So he, "Oh, yes, number one boom, boom." "Okay, pop, number one boom, boom." Well, he took us down the back streets in Saigon. This place is like, makes back streets in New York look like nothing, you know, this is not a good area at all. We have no weapons on us, nothing, not even a knife. He takes us down there, in and out of these places. "Holy shit, Tony," I said, "We get lost, if this guy don't wait for us, we're dead. Ain't no way we're going to get out of here." I have no idea, we were going for a while. We get into this, in the whorehouse, we go upstairs. We just get upstairs, the MPs raided it. Would you believe this? I said, "Oh, shit." Now, there's me, him, and this black guy up there, the three of us. I'll never forget the black guy. … No way out, we're in the second floor. There's only one door in and one door out. I said, "Oh man." We jump under the bed. Well, Tony laying under the bed, and I'm laying behind Tony, and Tony is pretty big guy, you know. I'm a little guy, I'm laying behind him, this black guy goes … and gets behind the curtains, and I remember looking, his feet are sticking out, like on TV where the toes are sticking out. He's hiding behind curtains. I said, "What the hell?" I was afraid to start laughing, right, we're drunk, we're hammered. They come in, and the girls are all yelling, "Number ten, number ten MP, number ten MP," what can we do, we can't go nowhere. Sure enough, they grab the black guy. They look under the bed, they see Tony. They get Tony out. I laid there, I didn't hear nothing. I didn't hear, "You too," or nothing. I just laid there. I said, "Oh shit, you know, the guy didn't see me." They didn't see me, I was behind, they never came around the other side of the bed. They just looked under the bed, seen Tony, said, "Get out of there." I was behind him. Then I stayed there, I had my thing, I turned around, now I'm thinking. I got done, and I said, "Oh crap, I wonder if Papasan's outside." Then it hit me, right. I said, "Oh man, the MPs came." I figured he's not out there. I said, "He's gone." Now I'm just sweating right, I'm done, I'm done. I mean, no getting out of here. I figured that's it. I went out there, he's over there, he's sitting in that rickshaw. He was out there for a while. I said, "Oh, thank you, thank you, take me back, take me back." I gave him a good tip, he took me back, then I'm done anyhow now. I didn't even know where to go, I have no clue. I couldn't get back to the trucks in time so I was missing again. Now, big time, big thing. They arrested me, the MPs got me, they took me to the security area, like house arrest type thing. They don't put you in jail really. They write you up, and I had to stay there overnight. Then, finally, they got me on a chopper back to the company. … The platoon sergeant didn't like me. My platoon sergeant said, "I got you now Chernesky. You're getting written up for battalion article fifteen." He said, "You're missing." He says, "That's like desertion." It's not really desertion, but he says, "You're AWOL, you know, in a combat area." I told him what happened. I said, "I tried to get back, I couldn't get back on time." "Well, you're going to go to jail, you're going to get this, you're going to get that." … I said, "Well, whatever it is, it is, I'm done with now, doesn't make any difference, can't change it now." So, supposedly, I was supposed to get this article fifteen, so we just happened to get transferred to the Fourth, so on the way out, the first sergeant I was telling you about, Sergeant Bucklew, the rebel guy, he didn't really care for some of these sergeants anyhow. He had to deal with them, but he didn't like them. So, he had Naparano, my buddy Naparano, had an article fifteen or something, I don't know, they got him for something, and I had one, so he hands them to us. He gives us the article fifteens, and he's looking at us, and he says, "Take these with you to, when you go up to the Fourth Division, and hand them in." … He's waiting for us, he's looking at us, he's giving us one

of these looks, and he sees us looking at the article fifteens. … There was this big barrel burning, they had burned all the papers and stuff, and he just smiled. He didn't say nothing, he watched, we threw it. We threw them in there and burnt them, and we left, and see, they can't, article fifteen supposedly doesn't get transferred out of your, doesn't go on your record, like it doesn't supposedly get transferred out of your outfit. It's not like a court martial. It's like a misdemeanor type thing. … He knew what we were going to do, you know. "You take these with you." "Yes right, Top," we said, "Yes, we'll take them with us, watch us." Right in the garbage can, and he just gave us that smirk like, "Yes, I figured you're going to do that anyhow." We had some good times, you know, besides all the other stuff. Like I said, you got to have a sense of humor, you can't, you know, they'd crack you if you don't.

SI: What was it like getting acclimated to the new unit?

JWC: Well, we got transferred up there. It was June, no it wasn't, it was May. I'm sorry, I came back in June, it was May 22nd I think, 24th, whatever, sometime at the end of May. … We got up there and we had, each had a duffle bag, and each had a homemade footlocker we bought from mamasan or whatever--they made them. So, we had our stuff in the duffle bag and a footlocker. We get up there, report to the company area, and Sergeant McNerny, was the first sergeant, and he looked at us, and he goes, "What are you doing with all that stuff?" You know, he was a real hard ass. "What are you doing with all that stuff?" "Hey Top," we said, "This is our stuff we brought from down south." He says, "All right, I don't give a half ass what you guys do with your stuff, you could give it away, throw it away, whatever you're going to do with it, but everything you own goes in that duffle bag--one duffle bag. Everything you own, that's it, nothing else. Lock it up, go to the supply room, you're not going to see it until you go home or you get shot. Of course, if you get killed, you ain't going to see it. So that's it, you ain't going to see it no more, done, till you go home." … He said, "Report to your, the company area." Well, we're in the company area, so report to whatever. So then we had a briefing, and they had a colonel give us a briefing about, you know, how different the combat is, and the terrain is, up north, and, you know, don't lift your head up, you know. If you see spike marks on trees, there's snipers, and all this and that. He says, "You're not playing around with the Vietcong, you're playing around with the NVA, regiment size, battalion size. There's no small ambushes, big time, you know. You get hit, you know, nine times out of ten you're going to get hit, it's probably big, you know, big deal, so watch what you're doing." We said, "Oh, let's go reenlist." So, me and Mike go to reenlist to get out of the infantry. So, we go to reenlist and the sergeant, Mike got shot, he got one Purple Heart already. So I said, "That's it, we ain't going to make it out of here, we're dead." This, it ain't going to happen, this is going from worst to "worster," bad to worst. So, we go to reenlist. So, the guy, he says, "Well, I'll get your scores." We both had pretty high scores on the GT and stuff. So, he said, "I'll get your scores, and then, what do you want to reenlist for?" … We took some transportation, different categories, you know, other than "grunt," no grunt. … He said, "I kind of figured that. I kind of figured why you want to reenlist for." Yes, I'd rather do three years just get me out of this because we ain't going to make it. So he said "Well, we could do that." He said, "But you got to report to your company. It doesn't make any difference. It's going to take months for this to process." … We only got six months, not even six months to go. No, six, we had about six months to go, right. So I said, "Whoa." I says, "He's got to report it, take a couple months," so that was the end of that. We reported to the company. He says, "No use even," we didn't finish filling it out. … We figured,

well if we can reenlist right away and they would have you in a holding company to hold you until it's processed because I'm sure we could have got something else, but it don't work that way because you go to your company. You go to a line outfit, and we were out on a chopper the very next morning, we're gone. We went to Jackson's Hole. I think we only spent the one night there. Then, we went to Artillery Hill, and then that was it. We operated out of there, and then we started moving north till and I came home on emergency leave, June 5th. My mom got sick, and then, I got reassigned to Fort Dix for a compassionate reassignment. I tried to get out, but that didn't work. [laughter] … They won't let go of you, so they reassigned me to Fort Dix as a drill sergeant. So, I ended up pushing troops for the last whatever, six months or whatever it was, of my draft time.

SI: You really did not have much time to get used to the Fourth Infantry Division.

JWC: Two weeks. Two weeks in the bush. We burnt one Montagnard village down, took them out, burnt that down. We didn't get hit while I was there, never got hit. Pulled patrols, which was ridiculous, ambush patrols. I don't even know why they did that. They sent four of us out on an ambush patrol, I was the squad leader. The outfit got pretty much decimated, so I was spec four, but they made me a squad leader. I was the highest ranking guy in the squad, what was left of the squad, so I had to take patrols out. I took a couple of ambush patrols out while I was there, which was suicidal. You're just a warning device then, you know. They're going to hit you, you're done. Just lay there and hide because you're not going to stop them. They're going to come with a big force and run right over you. … Then, Mike, like is said, Mike, he stayed with them till the end, till his tour was up. They moved up north. I was starting, I was moving up north with them. What happened is, I didn't know anything about my mom getting sick, so what happened, I was the squad leader, I'll never forget we moved out of Artillery Hill, and we start moving, I don't know how many days we're moving. … The monsoon started, and we're moving, going north, going north, "X" amount of days. Then, we stopped, and a guy comes around, a helicopter came down, that's what it was. The helicopter come down. He says, "Whose line number 121?" See, we never had line numbers down south, up north they had line numbers. So, he says, I'll never forget, "121." He says, "Whose line number 121?" I forgot my line number, I didn't even think of that. I'm going around, telling all the guys in my squad, "Who's 121, whose '21, whose '21?" and finally, it was the Colonel who was in the chopper, the colonel, lieutenant colonel, battalion commander, was in the chopper, his chopper. He's getting pissed off, so finally, they said, "Whose 121?" Then, they said, "Chernesky." I said, "Yes?" "You 121?" So, I said, "Yes," I didn't even think of it. I didn't think of 121, you know. I don't know, it just wasn't even in my mind, right. He says, "You got to get on the chopper." I said, "What's the matter? What's the matter?" Well he said, "Your mom took sick." So I had no clue, nobody wrote me from home saying anything about anybody being sick or anything, but, anyknow, she was sick, so I was out of there. Sergeant McNerny, I mean, he was great. It's like, next morning I was gone. I was home, like unbelievable how fast they processed the paper, he just, he pushed everything right through real quick. He says, "Take your time, don't worry about," you know. The first sergeant, "Take your time, take all the time you want. You just do what you got to do. Don't worry about the company or nothing." So, that was my tour until I got to Dix. Then, I ended up being a drill sergeant, which is the second worst job in the infantry.

SI: Why do you say that?

JWC: There's long hours, long hours, taking kids off the street and making them into a soldier.

SI: Did you have to go through the ceremony to get your hat?

JWC: No. I became a drill sergeant, and I didn't have enough time left, so they couldn't, they didn't send me. … If I reenlisted, they would have sent me to get my hat, because then I would have had the time. I didn't have much time left in the service, so they just gave a drill sergeant status. Eleven, it was Eleven FO or Eleven OF MOS, Drill Sergeant MOS, and you're, technically you're a drill sergeant. You do the same thing as, you just don't have, that's when the hats were just starting, a couple of years before that. So, technically you do, I had my own platoon. I took them all the way through basic training, graduated them, you know, did the same job as a drill sergeant. I just didn't go through the Academy. Actually, I went through the Academy later when I when I went in the Reserves. I had to go on through.

SI: What do you think of the men coming in? Around what time was this that you became a drill sergeant?

JWC: … The end of '67, beginning of '68.

SI: The draft had been going on for a while.

JWC: Basically, the same kind of draft. There's still the draft. Most of the guys in my platoon, in our basic training company, were draftees. There's a lot of draftees, same as we were, same, but they went over as replacements. I don't know how many of them made it, because, not that we didn't train them good--we trained them good--but that was just before Tet. So, a lot of them guys were there during Tet, went over, and I'm sure a lot of them went to Vietnam. Majority of them probably did because, you know, they were short. I don't know. I ran into one guy, when I went back into the Reserves in '83, and I ran into one guy in chow line that remembered me. I was his drill sergeant. He remembered me, out of all them years, that was what, twenty, what was that, '83, fifteen years, maybe fifteen years. Yes, he still remembered. Fortunately, he liked me, so, but it an experience.

SI: I feel like we should talk more about the Fourth Infantry Division. Is there anything that stands out particularly about that two-week period?

JWC: No, just the fact that, like I said, it was scary. Of course, it was, what had happened too, you got to remember, they took us away from our family, if you want to call it that, you know. We were with these guys for what, a year, over a year, and whatever. We trained and lived with these guys for a long time. … You talk about brothers and it's like, you know, really close, you know, which is good and bad. It works both ways, but they took us away from the guys we were with all that time. … One experience, the one guy I was with, well the first time I got there on Artillery Hill, I had to take a patrol out. Our platoon leader was a sergeant, a black sergeant. They had no lieutenants. They were killed, and he goes, "Chernesky, you got to take a patrol out." I said, "I just got here. This is my first day." I said, "I don't even know the squad, I don't know these guys." He goes, "Well, you got to learn sometime, you got to learn now. You got to

take ambush patrol." You got to be kidding, you know. Now, you don't know, this is not a good spot. This ain't a good area at all, I mean, this is bad, and there was a village right below Artillery Hill, and he says, showed me on the map this and that. He says, "Go around on the other side of the village. There's two trails coming in. … I want you to set up the gun right on the two trails." "All right, Sarge." So, there's only three or four of us whatever, three, four, and we had a machine gun. Go down, we get down there, set up the gun, it gets dark, there's noise in the village, and all this noise and stuff, and the two trails. This is freaking ridiculous, right. I said, one kid that was with us in the squad is coughing loud. He's doing it on purpose, I know it is. I said, "Hey, hey, hey" you know. … I stayed awake all night, get back, and I told the, "Sarge," I say, I forgot his name, I wasn't there to get to know these guys very well, so I say, "Such and such is coughing, I don't want him on patrol with me no more." He said, "No, no, no," and he knows he's doing it on purpose so he don't have to go on patrol. The guys are scared shitless because they got overrun, you know. These guys that I was with were the guys in the Nine Days of May battle where they got hit with the human wave attack and whatever. These guys are just shell-shocked, you know, they're gun shy. I said, "Well, the guy is making all this noise," I says, "We're going to get killed for sure." I says, "There's no doubt about that." He says, "Well, he's got to go out, he can't stay back in, you know. We don't have enough people, you got to do what you got to do." Then another guy wanted me to shoot him in the foot. "Hey, Chernesky, shoot me in the foot. I got to get out of here, I can't take this," he said. "I ain't going to make it." I ain't shooting nobody in the foot, you know, it's not going to happen. He was serious, he's dead serious. I guess he couldn't do it himself. He said, "Well, make it look like an accident or something." … Yes, it wasn't a good, these guys are really, and I met a guy in Jackson's Hole who was one of the survivors of the platoon that got overrun. If you ever read up on it, it's probably in there, the platoon that got overrun. [Editor's Note: From May 18, 1967 to May 26, 1967, the First Brigade of the Fourth Infantry Division engaged the North Vietnamese Army in a series of battles near the Cambodian border.]

SI: Twenty of them got killed.

JWC: Yes, my company had to go in before we got there, they had to go in and retrieve the dead. Well, there was eight of them, I think, that lived, whatever, but he was one of them that didn't even get hit at all. He hid under the dead bodies. I met him in Jackson's Hole and this guy was literally, he was gone. He was done, he was just shaking so bad, and he was telling me what happened, you know. … I said, "Oh shit," this is my first time up there, I don't really need this, you know. They just got overrun, and then, they just systematically shot the guys in the back, you know, shot them in the head, whatever they, whoever was laying there, and he was fortunate. They tied one guy up, and I don't think they killed him, they tied him up. They were figuring he would be screaming, they want to leave him to yell for help because they set up the ambush again. They had set the ambush up around the dead guys knowing that the Americans always come to retrieve the dead. They always go back in, so they figured, well they're going to come back in to retrieve, you know, the wounded and the dead, then we'll hit them again. Well, whatever happened, they moved out, I guess, before day break, before they went in to get him, otherwise my company would have got hit too. They were hit already, that whole area was bad, that's a bad area, Fourth Division was really bad, … right on the border, right by the Ia Drang Valley, that was probably just north of the Ia Drang Valley. Well, you never hear, like I said,

you don't hear, they don't have good reporters, I guess, covering all this stuff, so you don't hear much about it.

SI: They were also looking for bunker complexes. Do you remember any of those operations, either trying to locate them or clear them out?

JWC: … Not up north. I don't remember. Down south, we cleared out the bunkers in Port Sea, we cleared them out. We didn't have any tunnel rats really. We had guys volunteer to go in them. I met Sergeant Johanesburg, he was an old, old timer. He went in them, he cleared all of, I don't know who else went in there. We had a little guy, littler than me, little skinny guy. I think he used to go, he went in a spider hole. I remember he actually got bit by the spider in a spider hole, believe it or not. Yes, he got really sick, they had to take him out. He jumped in the hole and got bit. He turned real pale and come out, he's all, got sick, I don't know what happened to him. I think he came back, I don't know, but he might have been one of the guys. I remember Sergeant Johanesburg, he was forty-five, he went in there. He was a little bit, this is his third CIB, World War II, Korea, and now Vietnam. That was his third. He was an E6, that's a lot of years, E6. So, you know he lived a pretty rough tour from World War II. … '67, … figure twenty years.

SI: If he joined in 1945 it would have been in for twenty-two years.

JWC: So, E6--I made E6 in two years. I could have made E6 in two years if I reenlisted. Twenty years, and he's an E6, so that means he was probably, at one time, maybe first sergeant, who knows. Just boom, chop him down, you know, something happened. So, he was a little bit, but he did it. It wasn't easy for a guy that age.

SI: When you clear out a bunker, would one guy go in or would the whole unit?

JWC: No, he went in. No, you can't fit a whole bunch of people in there.

SI: Does the rest of the unit do something else?

JWC: Tunnel, yes, it's tunnel complex, tunnel. Yes, you can't fit a whole, the bunker you could fit, they had bunkers, the one, like in Operation Port Sea they had a big bunker. A bunch of us went in and laid in there when the artillery came over, but then, that would lead into a tunnel complex, but you … can't stick a bunch of people. … I don't know, maybe somewhere in the bunker, somewhere it got bigger. I don't know, I never went down that far. I just went down a ways, and I turned around and come back, you know. They didn't force you, it was voluntary.

SI: Did they use chemical weapons to make the bunkers unusable?

JWC: The ones that we had, again, I can only talk for what we did, there was other bunkers too in that, now that I'm thinking about it, in that Operation Tiger, there was bunkers outside that village too, I believe, but the engineers would come in and blow them. I don't know what they did. I know they blew them, they blew everything up. Now, I don't know if they put anything down or before then, you know. I hear all, seen all this stuff on TV and hear stories, you know,

you put smoke to see if it comes out somewhere, I don't know, but I know they blew them up. … I remember them coming in. We didn't blow them up, they came in. They use, I guess, some type of satchel charges or something, heavy duty stuff. I don't know what they did. … The weapons too, a lot of that stuff, I think they blew. We had, we must have had a pile of I don't know how many cans of sardines, like a big mountain of sardines, you know. They had them for food, buried and all the stuff in it. Weapons, a lot of weapons, the weapons they probably took in, and they had mines and ammunition. I think they blow all that stuff. I think they blow a lot of that stuff, the weapons and stuff. I can't say for sure, but I know they blow the, they used to blow the tunnels.

JC: Was it Operation Port Sea where you found a big cache?

JWC: Yes, that was a big cache.

JC: Did they find World War II weapons in there?

JWC: Yes, they had brand new, … I think they were Thompson's. They were brand new in cosmoline, packed in grease, never used. They had a lot of stuff there. That was one of the biggest caches up until that time supposedly. Yes, there was quite a bit of stuff. That was a big area there for, that was a big VC force in that area. Australians dealt with them all the time. … We would go in and kind of help them out I guess. … That was War Zone D. That might have been a secret area, I don't know. They had secret zones and stuff in there that I don't really know.

SI: Was COLBY a secret zone?

JWC: I think COLBY was too. That's why I said when I sent, well I didn't send away, actually Millicent Fenwick is the one that got these, I never even knew this was happening. I asked her that I wanted my locations of where I was for Agent Orange. I wanted to plot them. I know we went through burnt out areas that Agent Orange defoliated. So, I told her I want, this is what I wanted. I just wanted my areas of operation so I could plot it to where the defoliant was used if I was infected, came in contact with it, which everybody did, pretty much. … This is what came out of it. Whatever she did, I don't know, but she sent to the Department of Defense saying that I wanted it. … They sent me a letter back. Well you've seen it, the letter saying that the first letter I got had my two base camps, Pleiku and Bearcat, south and north. I wasn't even in them base camps a total of two weeks all the time I was there, if that. So, I wrote back to them, and in the meantime, they sent me all these books, too. It was declassified, so they sent the area of operation, where my company was, when I was with them, and so on and so forth. So then I said, "Wait a minute." I said, "I don't want the base camps, I want to know where I was in the field." The base camp, I know the base camp, and then they sent me another revised map, and actually plotted the areas that I was in the field because I had no clue. Some of the areas were Bien Hoa. Of course, you know that area, you know, but once you get into the different jungle areas, there's no, give you the coordinates on the map. I got a big map at home with grid coordinates. You could plot them on the grid coordinate to see where you were. Otherwise you'd never know, never know where you are.

SI: You said McNerny put you on this helicopter and that is how you got back?

JWC: … I went on the Colonel's helicopter, … the battalion commander, and then, I went right back to base camp. McNerny got me filed. The next morning I was gone. I came back in the base camp in the afternoon and I was gone the next day. He had the paper work all done.

SI: Did you fly out of Vietnam?

JWC: Fly, yes, flew out of, let's see, I went down to Tan Son Nhut. I flew from Pleiku to Tan Son Nhut on a 123 and commercial, Continental I think it was, commercial jet, big white body, and flew back to Travis in California--Travis Air Force Base. Then I had to get a, I got a standby. After I left there, got a change of clothes. They gave you class A's. You had to put class A's on, took the fatigues off. Back then, you couldn't, you didn't really travel in fatigues, you know, you travel in class A's. So, they gave me class A's, and I went from, and I got a standby out of San Francisco. They put you, I tell you, I was really impressed how quick that they pushed you through because the government is known for dragging their feet, red tape, you know. All this kind of, but it was amazing. Red Cross contacted them, you know. I guess everything has to be legitimized through the Red Cross, you know, with the doctors and so on and so forth, saying that it's an emergency. So then, you went through the Red Cross, and they just, it was like one day. You figured it would take a week or something with the paper work, and this and that, but I guess, in case of death, you know, if it's serious enough. So that's what happened, that was fast. I think Sergeant McNerny was probably a big factor in that too. I met, he remembered me, I met him in Fort Dix. I was telling Jason, I was on my way, in fact he was, he was going to payroll, I just came out of the payroll. I was just about done with my time too and he was going in. I think he was retired, he was finished, probably was retired, probably had twenty years in, and he was going in. He said, "Hey." I said, "How are you doing, Top?" He said, "How are you doing, how'd you make out," and that was it. … He was a, the guys loved him, and then he said, "They were dead," he said, "they were gone." If it wasn't for him, yes, he took control of the whole thing. That's why I said leadership is such a big factor. You got to have somebody to really take charge, there's too much chaos, you don't know what's going on.

SI: Coming back and still being in uniform, how were you perceived in the United States?

JWC: I didn't have a problem. Of course, I only stayed in uniform, I had no choice, you know. Once I got home, I didn't wear my uniform, I changed into civilian clothes. I went to see my mother right away as soon as, I didn't even go home, I went to see her at the hospital, you know. Then once I left there, my sisters came up. I forgot what happened. I think they seen me or something, I think they seen me. They were just leaving the hospital, I forgot exactly. I think they were just leaving the hospital, I was going up and they seen me, and then I was up in the room already with my mother, and they come running in right after, you know. They seen me going in so they, so then I got, I went home, and after that, I didn't wear my uniform at home, civilian clothes. I didn't want to deal with that, you know. Actually even like when we were in Kansas in training and stuff, once we got off-duty, I didn't, once you were allowed to wear "civvies" I never wore a uniform. We always went in civvies. The military wasn't like that much, you know what I mean. Back then, they had all the, why, especially a draftee, you had no choice. You're not saying you wanted to do this, but, you know, and I was, I had a bad temper

and I had a short fuse. I couldn't handle that stuff. So, I'd be in a fight real quick, I'd end up in jail or something. I was in enough of them because I always felt there was, I don't know why you would even pick on somebody that, you know, that's not very good logic. There's a guy in uniform, well he's no good, you know. That's the way the college kids talked, a lot of them back then. Whatever influenced them, I don't know. I didn't want to do this buddy, you know. I didn't have much choice except go to Canada and I ain't going to Canada, so, you know, I got to do what I got to do, but don't be bothering me about it, you know. I don't want to hear nothing, I didn't really want to hear anything.

SI: When you were in Vietnam, had you heard about the anti-war movement?

JWC: Not a lot, no. We didn't have, I'm telling you, it's hard for people to believe what an infantryman go through in Vietnam compared to even World War II or Korea with a frontline. You just don't, you're out, like I said, for ten days, two weeks at a time, whatever. You don't hear nothing out there. You don't even get the, … I think I'd seen the *Stars and Stripes* the one time, you know. You just don't. You're not dealing with nothing. It's survival, that's all you're dealing with, the elements and the surviving from day to day. That probably wouldn't have made no difference to me anyhow even if I did hear about it. I'm worried about myself now and my buddies. … I'm not going to worry about what somebody is doing back in the campus. I got to get out of here, you know. … I got to get out of here in one piece, I can't think about that. It changes your whole look at life, … situations, you're whole, everything--you just don't think the same way when you get out.

SI: Was it difficult to readjust not being in combat or in Vietnam?

JWC: Yes, it's bad. It's bad. Well first, I don't know, two years I guess, until I got married really. Once I got married, I started adjusting better. Yes, that's not easy.

SI: You served six months as a drill sergeant. When were you discharged?

JWC: Dix.

SI: '68?

JWC: Yes, March '68, two years.

SI: Did you go immediately back into construction?

JWC: Yes. I hadn't, see, that's what happened with the family situation, … that's the reason that it all started. I had to take the house over, so I went right to work. What had happened is, well actually, I bought the house from my brother because he was going lose it, he couldn't handle it no more. He had his own house with his family, he's just raising a family, had five kids, so, you know, like I said, working-class, we're not rich people. So, I end up taking the house from him so my mother had a place. She was my dependent, she was my dependent from when I was in the service, really, till she died. I didn't have much choice, which is probably better that I went

to work, anyhow. I got in enough trouble even going to work. Yes, the first couple of years was rough.

SI: Did you work for one company, or did you work for several different companies?

JWC: … Yes, I worked construction, including the lumber yard, which I consider construction, same crap, until I got married. I worked for a bank in San Francisco for a year, Bank of America. That was the only other job I had besides construction. Then, I got married out there in '70, came back, and I went back to work for a guy named Smitty for a year or two. Then I went into my own business, eighteen years. Then I went to work as a maintenance man in Bridgewater school system for a couple of years. Then I got laid off there, and went back out working in construction work, worked up in Summit for a guy, worked for my buddy. I worked for another guy, nine year, ten years, before I retired. I worked for my buddy for a while, semi-retired. Well, I went out on a one-hundred percent disability, so that was it, no work no more.

SI: Particularly early on after you came back, did you think you faced any job discrimination particularly as a Vietnam veteran?

JWC: Oh, yes. Not as being a Vietnam veteran, but when I first got out, I went to work, I went for a job in, public service was hiring, my brother had, my brother had been the boss there for, I don't know how many years he spent there, twenty years, whatever it is, and my cousin retired from public service. So, I had the union, I had electrical union experience already, so I went for it, I got an interview. I filled the application out so they gave me an interview, and the guy at the interview actually come out and said, "The only reason you're not hired is because you're white," you know. … He says, "Well, they had to hire minorities first." He actually come out and told me right there, I said, "Well, I'm a vet," and this and that. "It doesn't make any difference." … Didn't make much difference even if, at that time, even if you were qualified. Yes, that was kind of, yes, I ran into a couple situations, even my old boss at the lumberyard, you know, he says, he gave me my old pay. I said, "John, you know, I was gone for two years, ain't no raises or nothing for me?" So, he gives me a dime raise or something, … so he said, "Well, you weren't working for me you know." I said, "Oh, I wasn't working for you?" "Nope." So, I quit. That was the end of that, I just quit, "See you." Yes, it wasn't, the country wasn't, you know, it wasn't like World War II, you know. I didn't come home to all that hurrahs and stuff--different.

SI: Why did you decide to go to San Francisco for a year?

JWC: Well, me and my Army buddy decided to travel, took a train, jumped on the train, went across country on a train. … I knew my wife, and he used to date the girl she was living with, so they were out there, so we went out and hooked up with them. … We stayed out there for a while, and then, we ended up, my wife and I got married out there. … Gary left, he came back home. He actually never did come back home. He lived in Florida, he moved to Florida. He would only come up to visit, but he ended up dying from PTSD.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: You mentioned marrying your wife. How did you meet her and where did you meet her?

JWC: Well, actually, I met her in Manville. That's what I said, and then her and her girlfriend were here and we went out in Manville, you know, a couple of times. Then we moved out there and hooked up with them out there and that was it, got married out there. It's one of them things, I guess. Actually, we were going, never really planned on getting married, going out there to get married. We were actually going, we were going to try to get a job on a steamship, a freighter, not a steamship, you know, a freighter type ship. We didn't know what we were going to do. We were just bouncing around more or less, me and Gary, and that's what happened, and that was it. We married and had kids, which, you know, really kept me out of trouble, the responsibility. Otherwise, I don't think I would be here.

SI: You also went back to school? You went to Somerset Community College?

JWC: Yes, I went to Somerset on the GI Bill, what was left of it. I didn't use it when I first got out, which was a mistake in a way, you know. I don't know if I ever would, did anything profession wise with it, so I figured, well I might as well use what I got left. So, I went on the biology major, math, science, just short of two years. My wife and I both went. The GI Bill, back then, it was cheap, you know. GI Bill didn't really give you a lot of money, but the county colleges were very inexpensive then, the credits were. I forget what they were, but it wasn't much. So, the GI Bill paid for everything. I got almost two years out of that.

SI: Why did you choose those majors?

JWC: Well, I liked science, biology, and I guess if I ever did decide to follow through with it, I would like to, probably got into something to do with the environment, you know, like fisheries or forestry or probably more towards fisheries and live, you know, what you call it, wildlife type, you know, outdoor stuff.

SI: Wildlife management?

JWC: Yes, something, you know, something in that, you know, even if it's not a big money making, money paying job, but still, I would be interested in. Like I said, I wasn't really, at that time, office-wise, and I wasn't really much of an indoor person, you know, a lot of outside stuff.

GF: I was wondering about the deforestation process in Vietnam. What did you see of it and did you understand what was going on?

JWC: The defoliant?

GF: They would plow pieces of the forest and build base camps.

JWC: Oh, it was plowed out when we got there. Yes, I don't know, I guess they defoliated around the base camp. See, they had flight missions, a lot of the areas that we operated in were all dropped, … they sprayed all them areas by airplane. If you look on the map, it shows you on the map. They hit certain areas that, like I said, we went through one area that was really, I thought it was burnt out, but it wasn't. It was defoliated, you know, because it wasn't charred, it

was just brown. When you first come in contact with it, you don't know what it is. It's not burnt, you know, just, it's not green no more. It's all dead.

SI: With the exception of when you were in San Francisco and Vietnam, you lived in Manville your entire life. Since you came back from Vietnam, how had you seen the town change, particularly in early eighties when Johns Manville went under?

JWC: Yes, it kind of went under, yes. How did it change? Of course, it built up. Like, they're still squeezing a house in here and there, but Jason knows, there's not many areas they can fit a house in anymore, you know. So, that's one way it definitely changed and it's only, I think it's only two square miles, so it's, you know, surrounded by water. Two rivers, one on each side, there's not really, nowhere to grow as far as, you know. They beautified it, they, you know, when JM left, probably the best thing they did, and of course, they took it down. Everybody at first said, "Well, why are they, you know why are they?" The buildings were shot, it was an eyesore after, you know, so they took it down. They put that … strip mall or whatever you want to call it, which big difference and the town, it's, it keeps beautifying like the Main Street, they still do upkeep. They get, I guess, grants, I guess they get from the government every town, I guess, gets certain things to beautify the whatever. They're going to put the pavers in, benches, and they give the business owners so much money to, they got to kick in the rest if it's not enough to beautify their buildings. So they do upkeep, it's not, at least it stopped from getting rundown to a certain extent. They did make a few mistakes over the years. They gave up the water, they gave up the sewer. We pay for all of that, I mean, of course, you paid for it before too, but I think it was a mistake giving up some of the stuff, but that's the way it is. Then, they didn't, they wanted to put a transfer station there. They said no, there will be too much traffic, too much truck traffic, well, and pollutants and this and that, but they, those places, they say are just as clean as anything, you know. They can't allow anything to go up anymore, the way they used to, so these are all new facilities. They should of, they could have made a lot of revenue on it, but they said too much truck traffic, but they got truck traffic going to Odessa, which is, you know, little stupid things. It's all political, I guess, whatever the reason is, you know. Then the creosote, I don't know if you heard about creosote and parts of the creosote. They condemned so many houses and knocked them down.

SI: Because of the creosote seeping?

JWC: Creosote. Remember I was talking about …

SI: Was that grease or tar?

JWC: Tar ponds. Well, that whole area in the back there that was all creosote works where they creosoted the ties. Well they built that whole area with the development and the foundations, I guess are on areas that had creosote in it, and the creosote seeped in through the foundations on some of them, so they condemned them. Big deal, they came in and whatever, they knocked so many, they bought the houses out, knocked them down. … Now I think that, I think they can start building again. … I don't know what they did with that, but that's all political and whatever they do. … Other than that, Manville, I don't know, it was always a good town for me. I don't

know about the kids, you know, they grew up there, and they survived. They're not too bad. [laughter]

SI: You mentioned that you rejoined the Reserves in 1983?

JWC: '83, yes. I went into '83 to '87. Why, I don't know, and the recruiter said the same thing. He said, "There's so many Vietnam vets, after fifteen to twenty years, they go back in the Reserves." Well, I shouldn't say twenty years, after fifteen years, because I was right at the cut-off point. You have to be able to do twenty, you have to be able to do twenty years, including your prior service, before you're sixty years old or something, so I was right at the cut off. He says a lot of guys did that. He says he don't know why, it's some psychological thing. I don't know, it's just, you go through some kind of mental thing, I guess, with the camaraderie, or something to do with the, because the money, the money is not that much money involved, you know, it's, I don't know. … Anyhow, I put four years in the Reserves. I went through the, I went through the Academy, Drill Sergeant Academy. I had to go through that because that's what I, the Reserve outfit that I went into. I wanted to go into an engineer outfit, typical army, you know, everything you want to do you're not going to do. There was no engineering outfit in the area. The only outfit in the area was the training division, drill sergeant, so he said, "Well, you're qualified for that already. That's what you did." I said, "I know, but I really didn't want to do that, you know." Well he says, "Why don't you join, go into it, and see what happens. … Maybe you could," and anyhow that, I got out after four years. … I don't know how long after that it was disbursed. I don't know what happened, in fact, I still don't know what happened to the division. Now, I think it just all split up because there's no 78th. … Is there? I don't know where. … I don't know what they're doing. I'd like to know for my own personal, I don't know what happened to them. I know they got rid of Weigel. I think they, I don't think they're here. … Yes, on Woodbridge Avenue that little place we used to have our meetings. I don't think Kilmer there, Kilmer no more and they were at Dix too, I don't know if they're still at Dix. There may still be a, somebody said there's not a training operation anymore.

GF: You had four children, Jason included?

JWC: Three children and Jason.

GF: Could you just talk about them a little bit for the record?

JWC: Yes, they're good kids. I don't know what else to say. They're all, you know, fortunate. They all grew up healthy, and Jason, well, you know, Jason through Rutgers, and my other daughter just got down with hers out in California, I think San Francisco.

JC: San Francisco State, yes.

JWC: San Francisco State and Becky works at Metlife, the other twin, Sarah's twin. … Then, my oldest daughter, Leandra, works for Rutgers. She has two children. She's the only one married. That's the only grandchildren I have. Jason is getting married pretty soon, maybe.

SI: You want that on the record?

JWC: Other than that, they all work, fortunately, and so far so good. I don't know what else I could say. We're proud of them, you know. I never had no trouble really, any kind of trouble with any of them, to speak of. I see what some parents got to go through. I don't know if I could handle some stuff that, I mean I was pretty wild. I was much wilder than they were, I think. I don't know what exactly, I never asked them what they did, but I'm sure, I don't think they could match what I did. [laughter]

SI: You have also been involved with veterans organizations.

JWC: Yes.

SI: Which ones?

JWC: … I'm a life member the VFW 2290 in Manville. I'm a member of Post 12 American Legion, Somerville. I'm a life member of the CIB Association, Combat Infantry, CIA, Combat Infantrymen's Association. I'm a member of the VVA, Vietnam Veterans of America, and I'm a life member of the DAV, Disabled American Veterans. I think that's it.

SI: Have you been particularly active with any of them?

JWC: Just, I was years ago with the VFW. I did, yes, I did stuff for Vietnam vets, different things, raised money for, you know, they put a plaque on the monument, raised money for the wall in Washington, DC, when it was built; different stuff over the years.

JC: You went down for the wall ceremony.

JWC: Yes, I went down for the ceremony in '82. I think it was '81, '82, whatever.

SI: I have heard mixed responses from Vietnam veterans about joining veterans organizations.

JWC: Coming back, the World War II guys.

SI: Yes.

JWC: How did I know you're going to ask that?

SI: Did they welcome you or not?

JWC: I, you know, I didn't have much of a problem. There's always, there's always an isolated few, but the ones that acted negative towards, I just took it with a grain of salt, because they were fly boys. Nothing against the Air Force or Navy or whatever, no problem. … Most of the guys, when I joined, there was a lot of infantry World War II and Korean guys, and they took you right in. Yes, overall, I know what you're saying, because I know guys from my town that wouldn't belong to the VFW in Manville. They said as soon as they went there, they had trouble. I said, well, maybe it's because my uncle was a World War I vet, and when I got out, he, right away,

"You got to sign up," because he was like one of the charter members of the VFW in Manville, goes way back to when it started. So, he goes, you got to join through him. So, he got me and my cousin was in Vietnam also, his son, and we joined, me, him and Gary. … So we joined, and, you know, I never really never had, like I said, there's always a few. They don't bother me. I kind of wrote them off, I didn't want to associate with them anyhow. … But if they said something back in them years, said something derogatory, I just tell them to shut up, just out and out, shut up, you know, simple as that. I wasn't a real pleasant person at times. I just said it the way it was, you know, "Leave me alone, you're better off keeping your mouth shut." Done, let it go. That was it. So, from my point of view, I didn't have a problem, but there are. I knew you were going to ask that, because I could see faces in people that wouldn't join Manville VFW for that reason. They said, "They don't welcome." I said, "Well, I don't know, I don't know."

SI: From what I understand, that was one of the reasons why the Vietnam Veterans of America was founded.

JWC: Probably, it very well could be. … I really, you know, like I say, I had no trouble. I belong to so many of the organizations. Well, of course, the American Legion was my power of attorney, but yes, I used to tell these guys that didn't want to belong to any organization that they don't realize when you're in trouble, or when you need help, you know, I mean they'll still help you, don't get me wrong. If you don't belong to the American Legion, and you're a veteran, and you go up to me, and you need help, they're going to help you. They're not going to turn you away, but, you know, the members keep this thing going. Now, if the members, if you didn't have members, you ain't got nobody to turn to. Who you going to turn to, you know? You got to go, you go to the VA, strictly to the VA, without a representative or something, good luck, you know, you got to have somebody knowledgeable with the stuff. … You just can't do it. These guys, you know, they "Oh, I don't want to belong, I don't want to belong to them." Do what you want, you know, it's your life.

GF: How do you think your military service shaped your life afterwards?

JWC: … Shaped my life? Well, it made me look at things completely, almost different, as far as life. How do I explain this? Material stuff isn't important. Money isn't important. Except, of course, you need it to live. Obviously, I'm not going to live on the street, I just, I'm not at that point. … I was raised on family values, you know. I mean, you come from a home that was family-oriented, so naturally, you're, well, you should pretty much do the same thing, but you just look at things better. Some people make very significant in their life is insignificant in my life. What you or you or Jason may look at that's important, that I may look at that doesn't really mean anything anymore, you know. If I didn't go through, if I didn't see what I did see or maybe, it would make a big difference for anything, you know. A new vehicle, a door, well how come this ain't fixed, you know, is it really, you know, you do what you got to do. I don't know if, you know, what I'm saying, if I'm getting across.

SI: You let things go easier?

JWC: Certain things used to bother me, like not so much, I mellowed a lot, now, but, you know, the simple things, like wasting food used to bother me when I first. I mean, it still bothers me. I

don't believe in wasting food, but, I mean, that used to be a big thing. I used to see people, you know, because you went so much without eating and seeing people that were digging in garbage to eat, to live, digging out of a hundred degree heat, picking pieces of meat out of a C ration can. I mean this stuff is rank already, you know. They're eating, they're living on it, they eat that, you know. People that throw whole pork chop away or something, or throw a whole, half a steak. … Then, they make it more important, "Well, I got to have a new car, but I'll throw the whole meal away, I ain't going to eat this." I don't like wasting, okay fine, you know, whatever. You wouldn't do that, you know. A lot of things that probably seem stupid to somebody who didn't go through a certain amount of hardship as far as, don't get me wrong, I didn't go through nothing near like some people did. I'm not, you know, but I'm just saying, it does change your way of thinking. Just, certain things aren't important. I guess, discipline wise, it probably made me a better person, you know, you never miss work. I don't care if I had a hangover. I did a lot of beer drinking. I did twenty years. … I don't know how many years of beer drinking I did. I wasn't really much of a whiskey drinker, but beer, I drank a lot of beer, and I wouldn't miss work from drinking, or, you know, just laying around. … Always made you, well, discipline was a big factor. … Again, that's me. I don't know, maybe with work ethic, I was raised that way, because I always went to work since I was young, and you see a lot of guys just go off the deep end, like some of the homeless. They probably have the same attitude, "Why you worried about," you know. They just, I don't, you know, everybody's different, everybody's different. … Things just ain't important, certain things don't, really doesn't matter. Family matters, you know, certain things, but, you know, people, like I said, they put material things. It's more important, I feel, to help people, you know, to give somebody a hand or something. Don't worry about, hey, you going to scratch my car or don't do that, why are you doing that, yes, yes. Then you have to see somebody falling down or something. … "I don't know, I don't know that person, I have nothing to do with that." So, I think that was for the better, that way.

SI: Is there anything that we missed that we should put on the tape?

JC: Do you want to talk about the Veteran's Administration at all?

JWC: No, … it's just that I got a one hundred percent after a long struggle with that. I think just about everybody in my outfit probably got that. …

SI: It was a long time recognizing things like the effects of post-traumatic stress and Agent Orange related diseases.

JWC: Yes, yes. I actually had PTSD in '68. They didn't recognize it till '80. They wouldn't even treat you, they didn't, I had to pay for it for the doctors on my own. I paid out of my own pocket. I was on medication for a while. They didn't even recognize it, then, when I did go for the first exam, was '80, '81. I think it was just starting to come into effect, and put it down, and I don't even remember going to see a psychiatrist at East Orange. I don't even think they sent me. They denied everything, everything, they just, they like I wrote it off, you know. I was married, raising a family, working everyday, weekends, trying to get work, get jobs, and you just don't, you don't have the time to put into following through. Well, if you ever dealt with the VA, it's a procedure, you know, could be dragged out. … I never followed through with the, with … my claim. So what happens after you don't follow through after a year, if you don't put another

claim in, or an appeal, it's dropped, and you can't go back to it, you got to start all over again. By the time I finally did put in for it, what's this, ten years ago, ten, eleven years ago, a Korean vet, a friend of mine, he passed away, he had his leg blown off in Korea, he's the one that took me up there. He says, "What are you doing, how come you never put?" I said, "I put claims in back a long time ago, they didn't, they just." He said, "Well you can't, you can't drop that." He said, "That's it, you got to start all over." He said, "They're not going to do anything, they're not going to do nothing." So then, I went to the, I went to the VA rep, and he processed the papers, then slowly they gave me the increases in disability, but I really should have been collecting from '68, but nobody, they're not going to tell you what to do. That's why I said these organizations you're talking about, they're the ones that … will help you. … The VA is not going to tell you what to do. You got to do that on your own. They won't tell you. You could be really bad, and they'll say, "Well, you got to get help." The only thing you do is go up to the hospital and sign yourself in. I think you could sign yourself in, I don't know. I don't know if you even could do that, or something like that, I don't know. I imagine if you have proof. …

SI: One other question I had about being in Vietnam in 1967, did the enlisted men you serve with talk about whether they considered it a winnable war? How did they feel about the Vietnam War?

JWC: … I think, '67, it was still kind of winnable in their eyes, but it just changed us. We were really naive, all of us, that, when we first went over, as far as the, you know, private up to, whatever, even up to buck Sergeant, the guys that were drafted and went over, like I said, just the living conditions. I really talk about being, you know, gullible or whatever you want to call it, naive, gullible, whatever, as far as, you know, in fighting the war. I'm proud of being an infantry soldier because they're the ones that did the fighting, you know. They, you know, you see, even with the statistics, that it's just, … if everybody just would see how the REMFs lived, compared to the, the REMFs lived compared to the grunts, there's no comparison. It's like, it's unbelievable, and … even compared to Korea and World War II. … I mean, I'm not cutting anybody short, an infantry soldier is an infantry soldier no matter what. He's still got to live with the dirt and filth. They had a frontline. Something as simple as a frontline, everybody goes, well we didn't have a frontline. Do you know what it's like not to have a frontline? Could you realize, it's like not to have a place where you could, where they drop you off ten miles out, and no matter where you turn around, it's all enemy. There is no friendlies. You can't turn around and say, "Well, I'm going to run back two miles." You're not running nowhere. There's nowhere to go. In other words, you're surrounded. If you want to look at it that way, not saying that they're there, but they could be. There is no place to turn around and say, "Okay, I'm going to be safe. If I go back there, I'm cool. I'll get something to eat, something to drink." There is no frontline, there's no line. You're out on your own, you're on your own. I don't know if you, and then the guys in the rear, you seen all the stuff with the drugs and this and that. Well sure, them guys, they had so much time. I mean, they could party every night. They do their eight hour job, ten hour job, whatever it is, they could party every night. No party out in the bush. There's no parties going on. It's work, work, work, work, you know. It's survival. Just, I got very bitter, and to this day, I'm still bitter about that. The grunt did the work, and the majority of the grunts, no matter what your statistics say, in my outfits that I was with, were drafted. I'll put that on the record. The two outfits I was with, the majority of the grunts were drafted. Whatever the statistics, I'm sure they're right, they take a big, you know, whatever amount of people over the

years, and have compiled all of this, I can only tell you what I seen, and I wasn't happy with that. I mean, you know, I didn't join. I wish I did join. You can't blame the guys that joined, really, because they did things to get, I would have did the same thing if I could, but I can't, but now, I want to be recognized too, you know. You don't, you compile, the only thing that difference in recognition is I can wear a CIB, which is that, you know, the prestigious badge of the Army, you know. Other than that, everything else is basically, you know, the same. Combat pays the same, overseas pays the same--the work ain't the same. So, you'd be a little bitter. You'd get a case of the ass if you did it. I know you would, most people did. That's the way it is.

SI: It sounds like in the Ninth Infantry Division the draftees were very devoted to duty. The only examples of people that you gave who were trying to get out of duty were in the Fourth Infantry Division.

JWC: They were, the only reason is because …

SI: They went through the battle.

JWC: They just, yes, they just, fear. It wasn't that they were any more unpatriotic, I don't think, than anybody else, or that they, they were just scared shitless. I mean, it was horrendous. … It was really bad. It wasn't a good place. Like I said, it's not publicized. I only seen the one "Nine Days in May" in the VFW magazine. That's the only thing I ever seen about that. You never see it on TV, never read about them, I don't remember anything in newspapers. It was bad. …

SI: I think the unit earned three Medals of Honor in that period?

JWC: Yes, they could have. I wouldn't doubt it. I probably have it somewhere … at home. I used to keep a lot of the statistics, Jason knows, I used to, over the years, … if something come out of the VFW or American Legion with statistics, I would just keep it, just for my own knowledge. … Then, like I said, I just got a new one in. I don't know if it changed or not, but they always have something as years go on. They'll have something in there that, you know, brings out whatever, something different, the amount of people, the amount of this. You know, it's pretty interesting, you know, just to compare it.

SI: If somebody had reached the breaking point, would they get the person out?

JWC: No, I don't know how you would do that. I, we talked one guy down, I was telling Jay that. I don't want to mention his name. I don't think he'd care. His first name was Gary. He was going to kill a lieutenant in the field. We talked, we actually talked him down. He had his finger, he was shaking so bad. He had, from me to you, he had the M16 pointed at the lieutenant's chest and safety was off. He was ready to fire. I knew he was going, it just, it took us a little while. Nobody grabbed him, you know. We just talked to him. The lieutenant, the same thing, he just, he broke out in a cold sweat. He was just, he figured he was dead. It really come close, I mean real close to murdering him.

SI: This is the West Pointer.

JWC: Yes, he was going to shoot him, there's no doubt about it. I think if we didn't talk to him, he probably would have shot him. I think he would have shot him. You can tell just by looking at him, he just, you know, he'd had it. He was done. … He was one of the guys, when we got ambushed, he was with Blazik. In fact, I was only a couple of guys behind him when they started shooting, he must have went through. He was getting real shaky, you know. He, I don't know, he must have went through, it seemed like ten magazines. I don't think it was that much, but he was loading that rifle, his rifle, fired that thing so many times, holy crap, which maybe it helped to stop the firing from them, but, you know, he was just a nervous wreck. He was, you know, I think he was just at that point. I don't know what ever happened to him, we got transferred. I'm sure the lieutenant wrote him up when he got back in the base camp, probably wrote him up. I can't tell you what happened after that. There's a lot of things that, a guy breaking, we had one guy, a clerk, who wanted to get a CIB. Again, I don't even remember his name. He was a little guy, he just happened to hit us. He came out, they stuck him in our company, and we were going on a night patrol, and it was really a very taxing patrol. We had to surround a village by, before daybreak, before the enemy got out of the village. He was with us and he cracked. They actually took him out. He was "lulu" by the time we got back. It was only one day, but he ended up coming at a bad time, it's not funny, but he came in at a bad time. It wasn't a good patrol to on, you know, it was really horrible.

SI: Was that with the Ninth or the Fourth?

JWC: Ninth, yes. He was, you know, he just, he was gone. I don't know whatever happened to him. They said they took him out, he cracked. Yes, that's about it. I guess, as far as people, I guess a lot of people at the point, that's half times I can imagine up north, with those odds, what those guys went through. They were nervous, they were, they were nervous, believe me. I had enough time in country already, I knew when I seen them. I say, "Oh boy, this ain't good, not a good thing." They were jumpy, you don't want to get out in front of their perimeter at night by accident or you're dead. There ain't no call sign or nothing. These guys would probably shoot you without even thinking about it. They were jumpy, they were bad.

SI: When you were with the Ninth, and replacements started coming in, did you actively try to bring them in or were you a little bit more standoffish?

JWC: I don't remember them.

SI: Okay.

JWC: All I remember is one black guy came and he ended up getting killed. I don't even think, I never knew the guy's name. He came in, and that's when Mike and Gabby got all three of them there in the same foxhole, and a friendly mortar round had an airburst right on top of them. Killed all three of them, and I can't remember the guy's face. He was, he was the, somebody said he was a new guy, you know. I said, "Who was the guy, who?" We knew Mike and Gabby, of course, who was with us all, and then he said, I said, "Who is the other guy?" He said, "He's a new guy." Black guy just came in the company. So, he was only there, it could have been days even, maybe not even a week, I don't remember. I don't remember the replacement. He might have been the first replacements we got, I don't know, maybe. Yes, I don't remember.

SI: I could probably just sit here and think of questions all day.

JWC: Oh, I don't care it's up to you. As long as I get home to make dinner. I'll get fired. Boy, that'd be great, ain't it, the one job I love.

SI: Were there other ways that you learned to improvise in the field?

JWC: I'll tell you a good one I left out--good you brought it up. Explosives, everybody, every platoon carried a block or two of C4 plastic explosives, comes in like a block for blowing trees down or whatever, for LZs mainly, mainly what it's for, and makes good fire, very hot when you light it. It don't blow, you have to use a detonating cap to blow it. It won't blow, you can burn it. You could slam it, burn it, whatever, but it needs a detonating cap to explode it, so it's safe, carrying it is safe. Well, we found that you take a little piece about that big or whatever, light it, and you could cook about four C-rations within seconds on it, that's how hot it is. It's like a blue, white, hot, or whatever. It gives off more heat than a normal fire. So, we would use that to cook because they want you to eat your C rations but they didn't give us the sterno tablets down south. I don't know why. Up north, they had these tablets they give you to burn. They didn't give us any, so we're eating cold C rations all the time there. … Shit, grease, and you know if you eat that stuff, you get whacky eating it anyhow, so we decided, well, we'll try the C4, we lit it. Oh, man, hot food, instant, just like "poof," it's hot, right. Punch a couple of holes in a can, throw it in an empty can and "poof," heat her up. Well, we would do that, but before you know it, when my buddy Mike got hit, we didn't have no C4. Everybody was using the C4 up. Well, and the CO, he had a fit. "You're not supposed to use that to cook C rations. That's for emergencies." Oh shit, everybody was using it in all the platoons. There was hardly anything left. He flipped out. He had enough to get the trees down, what he had to get down, but he says, "You get caught doing that again, you're going to get court martialed." It's really not the right thing to do, but you talk about improvising, we'd do that, anything to make the C rations taste better. … The guys used to get hot sauce from home, Tabasco sauce, throw that into everything. Then you learn how, you know, heat up your bread, toast your bread a little with, you put the stale bread and the stale peanut butter and the stale sauce.

JC: What did you get from home to make the water taste better?

JWC: Oh Tang, Tang was a big thing and Kool-Aid. I used to like the Tang. Tang you'd get that from home. Gram used to send me, grammy sent me a six pack of Schaefer. It made it, it made it through the, I couldn't believe that. Schaefer was the beer then, before Budweiser took over. … I said, "Man, I'm dying for Schaefer. I ain't drinking all these different beers over here. I wonder if that will make it." A six-pack made it over. I couldn't believe that made it. I don't know how she packed it or what, but nobody got at it. Then, he said, one time, you just get, you can't believe how tired you get of eating C rations. I mean, this is really basically what you live on. Then, we used to get sardines. I used to buy sardines in the PX or my mom would send me that. I got into the Chef Boyardee thing for a while. Raviolis, you know, them little mini-raviolis. We went on an operation, I got a package from home, and I don't know how many C-rats we were carrying, three days or whatever. I mean our rucksacks, we had rucksacks, as small as I was, my whole back was covered with a rucksack. You couldn't even see nothing but two

little legs and a helmet, everything was filled up. I mean, that thing must have weighed about eighty pounds, had Chef Boyardee this, fruit cocktail, anything, anything but, it weighed a ton. I mean, the thing was so heavy with all your ammo and everything, but I figure, well I'm going to eat good. It will get lighter as we went on because I'd start eating all the food, so it got lighter, but you do anything you could to. It's hard to imagine, just imagine eating the same thing over and over and over every day. … It tasted like, just loaded with salt, and it just, it just, pieces of metal in it, you know. You open it up, and all the crap falls in it, and all the junk, you know, but … you survive. Then your teeth turn brown from the iodine, your teeth starts getting discolored from the iodine tablets. That's all we drank. After a while, that stuff would make you sick. You'd drink it with Kool-Aid or Tang, any kind of powdered mix, take the taste out. You didn't use them, you get worms, you get parasites, don't take long. Your shit would be crawling.

GF: When you were in the south, which province would you mainly be in?

JWC: III Corps.

GF: Which one is Dragon Mountain?

JWC: That's Pleiku.

GF: Why was it called Dragon Mountain?

JWC: The same reason Bearcat was Bearcat, because Bearcat is Camp Martin Cox, so I don't know what they, why they put nicknames. … I think Dragon Mountain was called Enari. I don't know if I am saying it right.

SI: Enari?

JWC: Yes, there's a name, … Enari, I don't know, whatever it is, but everybody called it Dragon Mountain or Bearcat. Nobody, said Camp Martin Cox. They named it after somebody, I don't know.

SI: Did you always have the same helicopters or you would call on different helicopter units?

JWC: Yes. Ours, believe it or not, ours was called the Jayhawks, the Ninth Division. I think ours is called the Jayhawks, their nickname, but I don't even know if we ever, I don't remember if we flew them or not. I remember one was the Cowboys and different names, different names. I don't know how many times, I guess they would get them from, I don't know, I don't really know where they. … There's so many different aviation groups. I don't know, but ours with the Ninth. We did a lot of flying in the Ninth. North, we didn't. They were all walking and walking. The Ninth we flew a lot. We probably had enough time in for an Air Medal, enough hours and enough assaults. Yes, I did a lot of flying there.

JC: Do you want to touch on any helicopter incidents that you remember?

JWC: Oh, the one that crashed. Yes, I think that's in the paper, the one crashed on us. The guy was shot in the head at night. I don't know how he got shot. He either shot himself or accident or something, but got shot, shot himself through the head. So, we had, it was only our platoon, and we had to get him an LZ. It was dark already, so we had to go back up the trail. Four of us carried him. He was dying. We had it wrapped up just to hold his brains in, had the thing bandaged up, and we carried him up, got to this spot that looked like enough to get a helicopter, one helicopter in, up and down. No coming in, got to go up and down. So, we called in for a dust off, and that's voluntary at night, so we got one volunteer to come out, and it took a while. We kept him alive, we laid with him there for a while. He was dying. He was still living, and the chopper came in, and he come down, lit up our helmets with C4 and made an LZ for him. He came down, he had to come straight down. There was no leeway, the trees, just enough for him to get down. He came down alright, and we loaded him on, and all right, go ahead, so we all laid down and made a perimeter. There was about ten of us or whatever, and he took off. He started going up. The next thing I know, I seen a, I noticed that the light, he had a spotlight in the front. Well, it wasn't shining on one spot. I seen a light going like this, you know.

SI: Swirling.

JWC: I said "Whoa," I just looked up in time. Here he came, he was sideways, and the thing was whipping around, and the chopper was sideways. I said, "Look out," and we just took off. Everybody just scattered. I mean, this thing was coming down big time, you know, like upside down and all twisted up, and then it came down. Actually, it didn't flip over. It looked like it was flipping over, but it came down, and I think it righted itself somehow. Anyhow, it crashed, and because, it might have been on its side because what's his name got hit with the skid so he just hurt his back, but then the thing, everybody inside was, all the crew, they were all beat up. … Then it started on fire, and I forgot who it was, somebody grabbed a fire extinguisher, one of our guys, otherwise we, if it, we were right, we were all dead. We're dead. We were right on top of the chopper. If it blew, it was gone, it was over with, everybody, except anybody who was out further. Then we got, we got the chopper out. Then we had to get everybody out. We had a whole bunch of casualties now instead of one guy. Well, he died, he ended up dying once it crashed, and then the other guys were all, guys were missing fingers, broken legs, broken arms, head injuries. It was just a mess. It was like scattered. Another chopper come in, and I took a walk. I grabbed my rifle. I lost my rifle. I found my rifle. I just grabbed my rifle, and I just went, "Enemy or no enemy," I says, "I ain't underneath that chopper this time." He come down, he loaded the guys up, I went on security way out in the jungle. I said, "I'll take my chances getting shot by Charlie," I said. That was too close. That blade stopped from me to you.

SI: There are about two to three feet between us.

JWC: That's how close it stopped, … before it stopped rotating. Oh, I was done, gone, if that hit you. Oh man, it was just too close. Gary lost his glasses, he couldn't see. They had to take him, he ran into Mike Naparano, you know. Mike is short, Gary was tall, he hit him in the nose. That's how he broke his glasses, he couldn't find his glasses. Guys had stuff scattered all over the place, everybody scattered, I think. We didn't know what was going to happen, where it was going to end up.

SI: You think the guy that the helicopter was called in for, you think he tried to kill himself, or you are not sure?

JWC: No.

JC: Mike said he went to sit down and he put his rifle down and it went off by accident.

JWC: I think it was an accident. … Yes, nobody knows. He was, Pop, we used to call him Pops, too, because he was the oldest guy in the company. He was older than our CO, except for Johannesburg, the oldest, but out of the drafted guys, he was like thirty-some years old. He joined or whatever because his wife, I don't know, divorced or something whatever, another quiet guy. Kind of, but he had a hard time keeping up. I mean, really, physically it was tough for a guy thirty years old, it was tough compared to us guys who were twenty, you know, big difference when you hump through that kind of stuff, you know. He was exhausted, we were all exhausted. We were pushed so hard, so long that we used to sit down, take a ten minute break. He'd sit down, and all he would do, your rucksack used to cut into your neck, you know, cut in here so bad, just cuts the circulation off. The first thing you did when you sit down, you just threw you rucksack on the ground. Let your arms go, let go of the pressure, get the pressure off your shoulders, and you just lay there. You fall asleep like in seconds, that's how exhausted you are. Hard to believe you'd be so tired, but that's how tired you get, and you'd fall asleep. Well, that's what happened on this. We were, I don't know how long we were pushed for how many days, and we, everybody was just, to the point of exhaustion. … He was tired I guess, whatever, he made a mistake, whatever. He had the safety off, whatever he did. Why he had the safety off, I don't know, but who knows, maybe he jammed it, you know. He might of not just put it down, or it fell. It was dark--nobody knows.

SI: How often would you be operating at night? Would you mostly just stop where you were at night?

JWC: Yes, yes. You send ambush patrols out, or a listening post.

SI: Was that one operation you were talking about with the clerk an operation that was at night?

JWC: That was the first one that was done. That was a big deal, they made a big deal out of it, because moving at night ain't easy, not easy, unless you're on a trail. We went right through the jungle, we didn't go on no trail. I mean, it's hard moving, really hard, so that was a big deal, you know. We were going to surround the village and we never did make it in time. It got light before we got to the village. We got to the village, but a little bit too late, a little bit too late to surround it, you know. They didn't know exactly how long it was going to take, you know, it was pretty far away. We walked all night, and when it got dark till the next morning, just non-stop. Just a break here and there, you know, get a little rest, five minutes or something, and keep going.

SI: In a typical night out in the field, how much sleep would you get?

JWC: Well, with the Ninth Division, we had fifty percent alert, which is tough. We had two-man foxholes when we first got there, so figure that out. What could you get? Four hours, maybe. Four hours sleep, you know, with two hours on, two hours off, two hours on, maybe six hours sleep, whatever, if you didn't get disturbed. Well, you're always tired. After the first couple, first couple days you're out there, you're just, you're exhausted. You're physically exhausted, then you don't get enough sleep, you know, right kind of sleep. You don't sleep good anyhow, you're in a foxhole. You ain't sleeping good, you know, sleep outside of it, you still ain't sleeping good. So, you're just, you're exhausted all the time. Up north, we had three man foxholes, which was a little better, you get a little more sleep with three men. One guy alert, you know, two guys sleeping, ultimately you get a little more sleep, but fifty percent is tough. Yes, it's rough. Never get enough sleep is one of the worst things. Everybody think, you know, water and food, but sleep is, you can't go too long without sleep. You really, because you start getting goofy, really bad.

SI: Any other questions? Well, thank you very much. We appreciate all your time.

JWC: I hope I helped you, sorry about those interruptions, but I can't help it.

SI: It happens in many interviews.

GF: Thank you so much.

SI: Yes, thank you.

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

Reviewed by Katie Ruffer 1/19/13
Reviewed by Nicholas Molnar 2/14/13
Reviewed by James W. Chernesky 3/6/13