RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES J. RILEY

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

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

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with James J. Riley on April 22, 2005 in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Shaun Illingworth and …

Marc Friedland: Marc Friedland.

SI: Mr. Riley, thank you very much for being here this morning.

James Riley: My pleasure.

MF: Mr. Riley how long ago did your family come to the US?

JR: Let's see, my mother's grandmother came here in, I would say around 1850; her grandmother and her grandfather. On my father's side, his grandparents came from Ireland probably around the same time. My father's, one of my father's grandfathers, I believe was Polish and he came from Poland or Germany, I'm not sure, I would say around the mid-1800s, all of them.

MF: Predominantly … your family was Irish?

JR: Pretty much, yes, yes.

MF: How extensively did your family participate in, being here for such a long time, the various wars that this country has been involved in?

JR: Well, let's see, my father's father died when he was very young, had the flu in 1918, the pandemic I believe. He wasn't in the military, and my mother's father was, he was crippled so he wasn't in the military either. My father was in the Navy during World War II, and he wound up being in the Shore Patrol, the Navy Shore Patrol. … He spent World War II in New York City as part of the Shore Patrol, which is the military police. He didn't go overseas. I had two uncles who were in the Navy, one was in the Pacific, and one was in the Atlantic. They saw a lot of action. That's about the extent of the military background I think.

MF: Could you go into how your parents were brought up and their experiences through the Depression, things like that?

JR: Sure. My mother's family, she was one of four and they lived on Huntington Street in the same house she still lives in, and her father worked running the Lyceum, the building that's right next door to St. Peter's Rectory, right near where Zeta Psi on Somerset Street is, well, right next door is the rectory, and then you have the Lyceum. Well, the Lyceum was like a club for the military guys, and for the local people, when they came home there was a place to go. They had bowling alleys there, basketball court, things like that. So he ran that and he would publish a newspaper of all the guys from New Brunswick, where they were, what they were doing in the military, and stuff, and that was given out all over New Brunswick. So that's what he did. They didn't have a lot of money and, again, he was a cripple, so they had to carry him in and out of the Lyceum everyday and bring him home. As I said, there was very little money, but my mother, she never said that they were starving, or anything like that, … I mean, I think they got by, but

they weren't rich by any means. My grandmother didn't work. Later in life, my grandmother wound up working in Winants Hall, which we were talking about earlier. As far as the Depression goes, the only thing I remember my mother telling me was that people would come to the door, knock on the door, looking for food … and her mother, my grandmother, would tell them to go around to the back porch, and didn't have them in the house, but on the back porch, and they'd sit on the back porch and she'd give them whatever food they had; … again, that was on Huntington Street. My father grew up on the other side of town, over on Livingston Avenue, right up from George Street. He was an only child, as I say, because his father died in that flu. I don't think, they certainly didn't have a lot of money either, but I think what they did was gather everybody together and live in one house, with aunts and uncles … who maybe, whoever was working. They pooled everything together and they survived that way. So that's really all I know about the Depression.

MF: How did your parents meet?

JR: In high school, they went to the same high school, St. Peter's, right up here on Somerset Street. Everything is geared to New Brunswick in my family, believe me.

SI: Do you know when or how your family came to New Brunswick?

JR: Well, I think, they went first, on my mother's side, anyway, they went to the Bronx. They were in the Bronx and that was on her mother's side. On her father's side, they were in Jersey City, but when the relatives, the only thing I remember is, when the relatives would come see us in New Brunswick from there, they would say they were going to the country. This was the country. But why, specifically, they came to New Brunswick, other than, I'm trying to think, I think for work. My mother's grandmother, who came here from Ireland, worked for Johnson & Johnson, and that was where people went around here to get jobs, and she would clean houses and things like that when she first came over. On my father's side, his aunt also worked for Johnson & Johnson, and she worked there for fifty-five years, my aunt Gussie. Her name was Gussie Daley, and she used to talk about "Seward and Bobby," meaning … the Johnson & Johnson guys who started it. Not too many people referred to them as Bobby and Seward. Because they lived, the Johnsons, lived right down here on the corner of Hamilton and College, where those food things are now.

MF: The grease trucks.

JR: Yes, that's where they lived, that was their house, big mansion, and that was really very close to the plant, which is right down the street from where they are now.

SI: When we interview people from New Brunswick, we hear so much about how Johnson & Johnson changed New Brunswick, particularly the Hungarian section, bringing in Hungarian workers.

JR: Yes, yes, that was later. I mean, they started with Irish workers and they brought in Hungarian workers later, yes, for sure.

SI: Your father, the area he lived in, was that the Irish Ward?

JR: It kind of was. We always said, we're right up here where I lived they called it the Sixth Ward Irish, that was the Sixth Ward. My father lived in the Second Ward, a lot of Irish, but also a lot of Italians. New Brunswick was set up, as I remember it, by churches. If you were Italian, you went to St. Mary's. If you were Irish you went to St. Peter's or Sacred Heart. If you're Hungarian you went to St. Ladislaw. If you were Polish you went to St. Joseph's and if you were German you went to St. John's. These people lived in those areas and that's the way it was. I went to St. Peter's Grammar School, as did my mother. My father went to Sacred Heart Grammar School, and there was only one Catholic high school, St. Peter's, in town so that's where everybody went, and that's where my mother and father met. He graduated in 1935; she graduated in 1937. They got married a few years after that. He worked on the, before the war, he worked on the railroad. He worked for Pennsylvania Railroad as a conductor, and then he went in the Navy; when he came out, he went back to the railroad, I believe, and he was, I remember him saying he was making four thousand dollars a year. Well, his father had been a fireman and his grandfather had been a fireman and he wanted to be a fireman. So he became a fireman in New Brunswick and he went from four thousand dollars a year to two thousand dollars a year. I remember my mother saying when he brought home the first paycheck, "What's this? How do we survive on this?"

MF: He never took advantage of the GI Bill?

JR: No. No. He never did. He just worked. I guess, I was the first one then, yes, I'm sure I was the first one in our family that went to college, nobody went to college.

SI: I'm always interested in the relationship between Rutgers and New Brunswick. People who live in New Brunswick, did they ever talk about having any feeling for Rutgers, or was there any interaction with Rutgers before you went there?

JR: Not so much. I'm trying to remember, … when I first started, … Rutgers was, the people that lived here, Rutgers was always a pain. There were always students around. What I mean …is where we live and … I think it's still a lot of that. But I went to Rutgers, I think I mentioned to you earlier, because I couldn't afford to go anywhere else. I would have liked to have gone somewhere else, but we just didn't have any money, so I could stay at home. I just lived at home. I went to classes and unlike you guys, I took all the eight o'clock classes because my mother would get me up early, and I didn't have any choice, so I would go to the eight o'clock class and I'd be done. Whereas, the guys in the house, [Zeta Psi] they would take late classes because they were sleeping late. So I was up. I digress, but, yes, Rutgers, I don't know, I don't think there was, in my growing up, there wasn't any great love between the town and Rutgers, right? I mean when I got into Zeta Psi, we would call the guys, the Brunswick guys, townies, right, and now … I was … both. I was a townie, but I was also a Rutgers student.

MF: When you were growing up, what kind of activities did you do? Were you involved in sports, or Boy Scouts, or anything?

JR: Right, yes, yes. I was in the Boy Scouts. We had a troop at St. Peter's, Troop 33, I think it was. Yes, I was always playing basketball, football, … the normal stuff, and, again, growing up here on Huntington Street we had Buccleuch Park right across the street, so that was perfect. I mean, we lived in that park, every blade of grass I knew in that park, and then when I went to St. Peter's High School, we would have football … practice there everyday. I … really didn't go anywhere … until Vietnam. I don't think I ever left New Brunswick. That was just the way it was.

SI: What stories did your father tell you about being a fireman?

JR: Oh, my goodness, yes, oh, God. Well he absolutely loved the job … as I do, truly, truly loved it. New Brunswick, in those years, … there were a lot of fires and they didn't have the equipment. They didn't have the air packs and stuff like that, so it was hazardous, it really was, and downtown there were a lot of fires. George and Albany every corner there, I believe, burned. My father, oh, gosh, the old opera house burned down. I don't know if you remember, you wouldn't remember, but you might have heard of it, but the opera house was on the corner of George and Richmond Street? Richmond Street comes up to Nelson. Nelson and George run parallel, the one in between where Richmond Street, it's Nelson and then, I can't think of it, anyhow, the opera house fire was a serious fire. My father was the chief's aide at the time, he was a young firefighter, and the chief said, "Henry, go around the back of the building and check it." He went around the back of the building, and, as he did, the whole front wall of the place came down and buried the chief, broke his leg and everything. I mean, that was one story. There were so many that he had, big fires, little fires, it was just, when J&J [Johnson & Johnson] was thinking about building, there was a big controversy about whether they were going to stay, whether they were going to leave, that was probably the '60s if I recall so there were a lot of fires in that area where Johnson & Johnson World Headquarters is now. There was Washington Street, Nelson Street, and Katherine Street in around there, and some serious fires. That area of the town was pretty busy as far as fires go. Maybe as we go along I'll think of more stories of his, there were so many.

MF: Were there discussions whether those fires were preset or not?

JR: Yes, oh, yes, a lot. It was in the newspaper. I mean, I'm not talking out of school, but who knows, and there were a lot of rumors, "The railroad was buying up the area." Remember, they were saying the railroad is going to buy all that property? It wasn't the railroad; it was J&J that was buying it all up. But I think they stayed, I think that was an impetus for the city to take off and be in the great shape it is today, and, not to jump right to the present, but, the fact that Jim Cahill and Dick McCormick are good friends and are getting along so well in town, and gambling, I think is coming together for the first time that I ever recall. Now, I go back to Mason Gross.

SI: What was New Brunswick like when you were growing up? I've heard stories. One thing that always comes to mind is down where those new, when you get on Rt. 18 from Rutgers, there are all those huge high-rise apartments they put up they used to be all jazz clubs. Was it that way when you were growing up?

JR: Well, it was Burnet Street, we used to call it, and it was … a little bit of a rough neighborhood. The fact of the matter is, it was really the black area. The black people, for the most part, were down in there, and, I guess there were a lot of bars, and stuff like that. But, I mean, you're talking probably early fifties and I was born in '45, but, yes, it was a bustling area, and then they built the projects, which maybe is what you're talking about, the projects down there on . . .

SI: Yes, I only brought that up, I mean, I would never, ever know that that was there. There's no record of it left.

JR: Right, exactly, yes. That was like the center of town. I mean, you know where the bridge came across from Highland Park, that was a bustling area and, I guess, that goes back to a couple of hundred years, right. Right on the river there, that was where, so I think, any of the real history of this town is probably buried under there and there was a lot of controversy, when they tore all that down about tearing down the historic buildings. There was a lot of controversy, but the projects they built, they've been torn down now, but they probably went up in the '50s.

MF: Did you always have a plan to follow in your father's footsteps, you might say, or did you start out studying to become something else?

JR: Sure. Good question. When I went to college, I didn't know what I wanted to do, I really didn't. I majored in history, which I enjoyed, but I didn't know what I was going to do with that, but my part-time job, when I was in Rutgers, was I worked in Boylan's Funeral Home, right over here on Easton Avenue. And he was actually a relative of ours, a great, great guy, and I really enjoyed that. So I thought that, "Well, when I get out of Rutgers," I had my ROTC obligations so I thought, "Well I would like to be a funeral director." So, okay, I talked to Dick Boylan about it; he says, "Well, there was a year apprenticeship that I had to serve." So when I graduate Rutgers in June of '67, I started my apprenticeship. So I worked as an apprentice for a year, and then went into the Army because I had that obligation. So still thinking that I wanted to be a funeral director when I got out, when I get into the Army, they put me in the Quartermaster Corps, and because of my background in the funeral home, and they said, "Oh, we have a job for you." So I wound up in Vietnam as the mortuary officer, that's how that went, but when I got out of the Army, I really, you know, I didn't want to go into the funeral business. The funeral business is a tough business unless you own it yourself, you know, if you're going to work for somebody, it's really kind of rough, your hours, and so, when I came home, I don't know if I'm jumping ahead?

SI: We can go back.

JR: Okay. Before I went to Vietnam, I had two kids. I was married with two kids so when I came back from Vietnam I really couldn't afford to go back into the funeral business; so I got a job working as a manager of Rutgers Oil Company in Edison. So I did that for three years, and I really hated it. So my father said to me, he knew I wasn't happy, and I wasn't sure what I wanted to do, and he said, "Do you think you'd want to be a fireman?" And I was like, a fireman I don't know, you know, but I was thinking, "I do want to do a job where I am working with guys in a team type effort." So I thought, let me try it, you know, and that was the best thing I

ever did, really, that was, and I thank my father to this day for steering me in that direction. So that's kind of how that went, for what I wanted to do anyway.

SI: Is that something that when you looked at your father, when you were younger, the team dynamic appealed to you?

JR: Yes, yes, it really did, and does to this day. I like working with team guys and guys who are, you know, gutsy, want to do crazy things. That's what I do. Sounds crazy. Somebody's got to do it.

SI: Which house was your father in?

JR: Firehouse? That's a good question, too. Mostly headquarters, headquarters is on Joyce Kilmer Avenue, which used to be Codwise Avenue before they changed it to Joyce Kilmer. I could tell you stories about Joyce Kilmer, too. You want me to? Okay. My aunt, who I told you worked for J&J, was a friend of Joyce Kilmer. So from what my other aunt, who just died, recently told me, they were more than friends. So she had a, as I'm sitting in my aunt's house over there in Woodbridge Street, she said, "That vase, sitting there, Joyce Kilmer gave to Gussie." I was like, wow. Anyhow, she said, I have, at that time, she said, "I have letters from Joyce Kilmer to Gussie." Holy mackerel, Katherine, do you know? So this was a few years ago, and I talked to her recently, right before she died, she said, "Oh, Jimmy I threw them out." "You threw them out." Can you imagine? Anyhow that was the story about Joyce Kilmer, and Gussie never married. So anyhow, yes, my father was primarily in Joyce Kilmer Avenue Fire Headquarters that's where he spent thirty-five years on the job. He might have spent a little time in what we call 'the outhouses,' there was a firehouse on Dennis Street coming down the old section and myself, too, I spent a few days here and there, but I primarily spent my time in headquarters, because that was where the action was. They were the first ones in, that's where my father's like me, and we just want to be where the action was. But there's a house on Remsen Avenue, where we have our museum now, that's closed up. But the Firehouse Museum, if you haven't seen that, that's cool; it's on the corner of Remsen and Suydam. There are a few others around town, but then when they built that new one which is out by Route 1 and 18 they dismantled a couple of the others. Right now there's Engine 5, which is right on, the street here, [Bartlett] Headquarters, and Engine 2. They have three houses now.

SI: Was your father ever injured on the job?

JR: Yes. It seemed like he wound up in the hospital a bunch of times. He was tough. He was hard, tough guy. I'm trying to think what injuries he might have had. They didn't wear air packs in those days, and he had asthma too, so, you know, it's really, he just kept going back at it because he enjoyed it. I don't think he was ever injured severely, but we all wound up in the hospital a couple of times.

SI: Perils of the job.

JR: Yes. The police director when I was the fire director, the police director was Mike Beltraneina, and when we were really young on the job, we went to a fire. He was a young

police officer, I was a young firefighter, so we got to this place, there was smoke coming out of this apartment, so I looked at him, he looked at me, he said, "Okay, let's go." So we knocked the door down and we went in. What the smoke was, those sulfur bombs that they used to kill cockroaches and stuff. Well, the two of us were overcome like that you know. So we wound up in the emergency room next to each other on gurneys and that's how we met. Young guys, and we wound up being police director and fire director. Shows you, you got to think before you jump into something. That was one of my trips to the emergency room on the job.

SI: Back in your father's career, or early in your career, did the New Brunswick Fire Department get called out to other cities?

JR: Not too often. They do a lot more now. For the most part, it was the reverse. It was the surrounding towns that used to come in to New Brunswick, because we had the big fires, and in the surrounding towns there wasn't much going on in those days. Now it's a different story. New Brunswick is a career department and the surrounding towns, for the most part, other than Edison and, say, Perth Amboy, are all volunteer. So during the day, in today's world, they have a hard time getting people, so New Brunswick does respond out to the outlying areas to help them, more than we did years ago.

SI: Do you have a special arrangement with Rutgers?

JR: The New Brunswick Fire Department covers all of Rutgers within the city. We don't do Piscataway.

MF: Yes, the Zeta House has had a couple of run ins with them, the New Brunswick squad.

JR: Yes, recently?

MF: Over the last four years, or so.

JR: Oh, really?

MF: Fire alarms are getting tripped. They always come over and turn it off and say, "All right, bye, guys." They come in and it's routine for them now.

JR: Yes, well, it's good that you have what you have; you finally put a sprinkler system in there, which is really important in those old houses. Yes, but Rutgers, yes, we always handle all of Rutgers, and, for the most part we got along well with Rutgers Police Department and the Fire Department. As I said, they handle mostly Piscataway, but they have inspectors over here so we try to work well with them, too. But false alarms, as you know, in here are constant and sometimes real things, too; students living in the type of housing that they do in New Brunswick, I'm sure I don't have to tell you about it. We had a fire on Hamilton and Hardenberg one time, and I was just a young fireman, and the fire was during the day. The fire was in the walls, it was ripping, and we were trying to fight it, and finally, we're like, we have to, we had to get out of there. It's really that bad, we couldn't get at it. So I was on the third floor, so before I left something told me to kick in this little door, it was only a door about that high, and I don't know

why, but something told me to kick that in before we left, I kicked it in, and smoke and the heat came out, and I dropped to the floor and I just reached my hand out, and I felt there was a kid in there. So I'm like, "Holy mackerel," so I grabbed him and I started dragging him down the hall. He was a Rutgers student and I'm hollering for the guy I was with, his name was Buddy O'Donnell, I said, "Buddy, help me, help me." Well, the smoke and the heat were so intense; it was so dark you couldn't see anything. He comes up and he grabs me under the arms, he's dragging me, he thought I was in trouble and I said, I'm fighting him, "No, no," you know, anyhow, we got this kid out and brought him down. He wasn't breathing and a couple of guys did CPR and stuff and brought him back in. He's a doctor today. So I feel real good about that, but, again, something told me to do that. It wasn't me. The good Lord had plans for that kid, I think.

SI: Back in your father's day, again, Robert Wood Johnson was Middlesex County Hospital; it wasn't as big as it is now. Was it difficult to get medical assistance for people?

JR: Medical assistance, well, for the longest while the fire department had our own ambulance, so our guys were manning the ambulance, so we always had people with us, with an ambulance, that could get people to the hospitals. It was a great advantage having two hospitals within such a small area. I mean, for the time I spent on the ambulance, when we scoop somebody up, we could have him in the hospital in two minutes, you know what I mean? So that was really an advantage in that regard, but hospitals were always good. There are two emergency rooms and one in each and it was never a problem with medical in New Brunswick, that I recall.

SI: When did the fire department stop having your own ambulance?

JR: I'd say in the '70s. It went to the hospital. The hospital runs it now, the paramedics went out of the hospital and the EMTs also, advanced life support and basic life support all run out of the hospital now. A lot of guys didn't want to do it; you know what I mean? It was like, "Oh, man, I'm on the meat wagon tonight," that was what they used to call it. So in hindsight now, the fire service does do a lot of medical and New Brunswick Fire Department does first responders, they respond with a fire engine if there's a medical problem, that the ambulance are tied up but they don't transport.

MF: Going back to college, what made you decide to come to Rutgers?

JR: Well, it was financial. Again, my father being a fireman, he didn't have much money and his part-time business was a burial vault business. So that's what I can remember, back to being a little kid, pushing those vaults all through the cemeteries, but there was a problem there with people paying him, so that wound up going bankrupt, that didn't work out. We just didn't have the money and they wanted me to have an education and, as I say, I was the first one in the family to go to college, and they thought that was the right thing to do. It was. That's why I went to Rutgers.

MF: Since you lived on Huntington Street, you stayed there while you were going to school?

JR: Yes.

SI: Before we get too deep into Rutgers, I want to ask you about growing up as a child in the '50s, what do you remember about the Cold War? Being a child, do you remember air raid drills or civil defense drills when you were in school?

JR: Yes.

SI: Was it something that was on your mind?

JR: Yes, yes, it really was. I can remember as a kid being petrified when, like, the sirens would go off because, again, the surrounding towns had volunteer fire departments so they would blow the siren to get them out. I always thought that was an air raid and when I heard planes flying, we were so indoctrinated, if I heard planes flying over the house, I thought it was the Russians coming. Yes, I really did. In school, we did have those things where you get under the desk and stuff like that, but, overall, for my life I think the '50s were … the fun time. Growing up, it was, there were those issues, but, as kids, you didn't dwell on that and it was a carefree time. After the Korean War, I mean, I had a cousin that was killed in Korea, but I was too small to know, but after the Korean War, we get into the Cold War, and it really wasn't a real war going on so we were carefree growing up. I just remember them being as good years, and then the '60s hit, wow things really changed. But the '50s, to my mind, were the calm years.

MF: Was New Brunswick heavily affected or …did you see a lot of signs of the various movements that were springing out, whether it was the Civil Rights or anti-war, or anything like that?

JR: Oh, yes, absolutely. Just to go back to the '50s for a second, Camp Kilmer was where Busch Campus is now, and there was a lot of activity there in the '50s. I remember…a lot of soldiers and stuff being over there. But as we started to get into the '60s; I graduated high school in '63, and came to Rutgers right after, so the anti-war movement was starting, and we would have to march every Wednesday over here in Buccleuch Park, hundreds if not thousands, thousands of us. We would have drills and things and the hippies, as they called them at the time, would come with flowers, and you'd be standing at attention and they would take a flower and put it in your rifle. It was really kind of crazy. There was some animosity between people. At the time I was a hundred per cent for the government and I didn't care about what other people said, "My country right or wrong," and all that. That's just the way I was. So there was between the guys in the ROTC and the hippies, I guess, love children, whatever it was.

SI: Did JFK's [John Fitzgerald Kennedy] administration stand out in your mind? In the history books it's always portrayed as this period of change, of getting a young president in, and …the world was going to be totally different after that.

JR: Yes, yes, it kind of does. Being from an Irish Catholic family and Democrat, oh, my God, they thought the sun rose and set on JFK, and, yes, that was a shame. I remember when he came to Highland Park, I think in '62, or somewhere around there. I didn't see him myself, but, oh, man, that was a big thing, pretty sure. But, I can remember being right over here by Frelinghuysen Hall, and just walking from class to class, and somebody said, "Hey did you hear

the president got shot?" What? You know how everybody says they remember where they were when they heard it? Well that's where I was, right by Frelinghuysen Hall. Yes, we thought that was really going to be … what a terrible shame.

SI: Do you remember the Cuban Missile Crisis?

JR: I do. I can remember being herded into the gymnasium at St. Peter's High School and the nuns had us all praying, and, I mean, they had us terrified, and maybe we should have been terrified. Who the heck knows what was going to happen there? But, I can remember being scared to death, with everybody in the gymnasium praying, and then we left. School let out, and we went and played ball. It was like, I don't know, we just forgot about it. So that's the way I remember it, being scared and then just saying, "Well, we're out now," like, "Okay we're away from the nuns now, we don't have to be afraid anymore." Nothing had changed.

SI: Were you taught by nuns the whole twelve years?

JR: Yes, right, right, yes.

SI: Did you have any lay teachers at all?

JR: A couple, yes, but mostly nuns in St. Peter's Grammar School and High School. Yes, Sister Catherine used to say, "I'll box your ears." They wouldn't hesitate to knock you out of your chair, or whatever. I don't know if we're better or worse for that. I can remember being scared to death because of these nuns. I don't know, how could you learn if you were afraid of them, but overall it was a good experience. It taught us discipline and guilt, that's for sure. [laughter]

SI: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

JR: I liked history and geography, yes, things like that, French, I took French, and I kind of enjoyed that. The nuns were trying to gear me toward being a priest, you know, so they insisted I take Latin, four years of Latin, oh, my God, "Go to be a priest," so I had a lot of Latin.

SI: Would they encourage you to go to a Catholic college?

JR: Oh, yes, oh, yes. They didn't like the idea I was going to Rutgers at all. No, no, that was not good, what could you do? Yes, they really, oh…

SI: From what I understand a number of St. Peter's students come to Rutgers. Were they that way with everybody, or just because they wanted you to be a priest?

JR: No, I think with everybody. They made it clear they didn't like it. They wanted you to go to a Catholic college, "A bunch of communists at Rutgers," you know. Right? [Laughter] It's no joke and I had always been with Catholic kids, and when I got to Rutgers I had Jewish friends, and Protestant friends, and, when I was growing up, you were not allowed to even go in a Protestant church. No, you were in big trouble if you ever went in a Protestant church, no, no, so things really have changed.

SI: Was it mostly Irish Catholics or was it a whole mix of Catholics?

JR: In St. Peter's?

SI: Yes.

JR: The high school was a mix, it was a mix. I would say the grammar school was probably half Irish.

SI: Was it the kind of situation where all the Irish kids hung out together, and all the…

JR: Not really, not really, no, we got over that, but where we lived up here, there was mostly Irish kids so when we went to the park we played with the Irish kids, but we got over that, too.

SI: It was integrated, but how integrated was it? I mean, were there any African Americans in any of these schools?

JR: In St. Peter's when I was there, no, no, maybe one or two. Actually we had one kid in our class when we were freshmen, he passed away, and I forget what happened to him, but at the time, no. They all went to Brunswick High, and, you know, there was a heck of rivalry between St. Peter's and Brunswick High. They always killed us in football, killed us. My father-in-law taught at Brunswick High.

MF: St. Peter's doesn't have a football team anymore.

JR: They don't? Probably not. They only graduate like twenty, or thirty kids. I don't know why they keep it open.

MF: A friend of mine who just pledged the House. He graduated from St. Peter's, he had a class of fifty-five kids or something like that.

JR: In New Brunswick, I mean, it's not so much anymore, but everybody knew everybody, so you couldn't say anything about somebody, or maybe it's a relative. It was really a close-knit community, I think.

SI: Did you have any kind of interaction with Rutgers before coming here? Did you go to the football games?

JR: Oh, yes. We would cut the chain link fence and sneak into the games. Where it was like the vine covered wall that goes up right off River Road, we would sneak up there, cut a hole in the fence and go in. I still have pieces of goal posts home, from the '50s. They would tear down the goal posts and, we were little kids, we'd run out and we couldn't get a big piece, but we'd get little pieces, maybe, of the goal posts and I would write, you know, "Rutgers loses to Lafayette," or something on it, 1956. I still have some of that. We always went to the games. In the buildings, too, like, in the summer we would sneak into cellar windows in the gym, and go in and

go swimming. One of our friend's father was janitor in the gym, so he would let us in once in a while, play basketball, and stuff, when nobody was around. A lot of good memories of up here because, I guess, mostly basketball, it was a place to go to play basketball. They had the nets outside, you know where the annex is on the gym now? That was just a black-top basketball court, so we would play up there all the time. I remember when the library was being built.

SI: You must have seen the ROTC a lot in the Park?

JR: Yes, oh, growing up there, sure, they were always over there. My father, I wasn't on the job, I guess I was still here, I just got out of here, they torched the Army ROTC building during the '60s, so that was a pretty good fire. Rutgers was a big part of my life because I was always here, but the people who came here who were going to Rutgers when I went, they were excited about being here and I was, like, it's just another day in the neighborhood. We all had to wear our dinks. When you were a freshman you had to wear your dink, and if you got caught as a freshman without that you were in big trouble; like the pledge pin, better have your pledge pin on, right?

MF: Sure, it is a fatal sin.

SI: What else do you remember about your freshman year, getting acclimated to Rutgers?

JR: Yes, it was nerve-wracking. It was different as far as the education. I think the nuns they just hammered a lot of stuff into us that was, when I got here for English 101, English Comp, right, is that what it was called? I didn't have a clue. I don't remember the one we were reading, I don't even remember what book it was, and you had to read a book and try to find like the hidden meaning of the book; what the book was really talking about. I didn't have a clue. We never did anything like that in high school, and I can remember this professor saying to me, "Now, here we're talking about this man out in the woods, who finds this stream that nobody has ever found, and he fishes there for the first time. What is that saying to you?" I'm like, "What?" And they were like, "This is, don't you see, this is like a woman that the guy has met and now this is their first." "Where do you see that?" So I had a hard time. I really had a hard time with English Comp. I think I just passed that. At that time the highest grade was a one, you're opposite now, right? Okay, well the highest was a one, and the lowest was a five, and I must have got like a four point nine, or something, I just passed it. I was terrible in that, and then I had economics too, and I didn't have a clue about that either. So I had a hard time with that, but, eventually, I got through it. But it was totally different from what education I had in St. Peter's, totally.

SI: Was it also a shock for you from the regimentation of the Catholic school to the relative freedom at Rutgers?

JR: Sure, yes. You didn't move without permission, and whatever, and at Rutgers, yes, like you say, relative freedom. The only freedom I didn't have is, like, I had to go home. Whereas, guys who were in the House or in the dorms, or whatever, and I had a lot of buddies I hung out with, in the dorms and Pell Hall over here, a lot of good times. But I didn't have the total freedom. My mother still made sure I did my homework.

SI: Unlike most commuters you were able to participate in a lot of social life.

JR: Oh, yes, sure. I think if it hadn't been for Zeta Psi I wouldn't have stayed. But when I got into Zeta Psi and got to be real close with the guys, and everything, I really enjoyed that.

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE----------

SH: Who's your favorite professor?

JR: My favorite professor was Professor Ratner. He taught history, economic history. Oh, he was great, a great guy.

SI: Was he the one with the glasses who couldn't see the back row?

JR: Could be. It's been so long now, yes, and he used to work for the State Department, too, like he would say he just came back from Nigeria, or somewhere. They would send him to look at things. Great, great guy, I truly did enjoy him.

MF: You mentioned Ratner as your favorite professor…

JR: Right.

SI: What other professors stand out in your mind?

JR: I really enjoyed cultural geography and I can't even remember some of the professors names, but that was a great course. Had sociology, which I really didn't particularly care for, but there was Professor Toby, he wrote a book and everything. That's one name I remember and then we had Genovese, remember? Yes, oh, that was, let's just say, I didn't agree with him. He was against the war in Vietnam and, oh, man, there was a lot of controversy with him in the newspapers, wow.

SI: Were you here when he actually made the comment?

JR: Yes, and it's funny. I just got interviewed, maybe a year ago, about the World Trade Center by the New Jersey Historical Society in Newark, and the lady, Adele Oltman, who interviewed me actually knew Genovese personally, and had gone to his house and talked to him, and she said that he had turned completely from a liberal to …

SI: Yes, he is very conservative.

JR: Really? Do you know of him?

SI: I've read a little bit about him, I was told he made a total one-eighty.

JR: I was shocked. I was really shocked.

SI: Looking back it seems like a bombshell, those comments about wanting the Vietcong to win. Is that how you remember him?

JR: Oh, yes. I couldn't believe it. I felt like he should have been deported. He was an enemy as far as I was concerned, and a lot of other people, and that was, again pointed out the difference between the town and Rutgers. There was, "They're just a bunch of liberals or communists," or whatever you want to say and that really divided the town and Rutgers.

SI: Divided the state and Rutgers in many ways. It took a while I think to get them back together.

JR: Right, right. Interesting.

SI: Did that change your opinion of Mason W. Gross, …who was the president of Rutgers, when he didn't fire him?

JR: Well, I didn't like it, but Mason Gross was, like a fixture here. He was here during the '50s, right? I just remember him always being around and seeing him, as a kid walking up and down the street and everything. I remember going to a tea at his house as a freshman. All the freshmen had to go to his house, it was right off of River Road. It may still be there, I don't know, but right as you come over the bridge, now, not the Landing Lane bridge, but the other bridge, if you look up his house was right there. Everybody went and he tried to make you feel welcome, or whatever, Mason Gross.

SI: Did you ever see Mason Gross on television, or do you remember hearing him?

JR: Yes, in that quiz show, or something, right? Yes, who was it?

SI: *Think Fast* and *Two For The Money*.

JR: Yes, right, right. I do remember. I haven't thought about that in years, that's right, he was on TV, very stately gentleman, you know, obviously very intelligent. I do remember that.

SI: Did you ever take a course with him?

JR: No. I don't even know if he was teaching by the time I got there. He was the president then.

SI: What about other professors like Fitzgerald or McCormick, Richard P. McCormick?

JR: No, I didn't, and I don't know why. I assume he was here then, and I didn't know his son at that time. I am kind of at a loss to remember any other professors to tell you the truth. A lot of water over the damn, if you know what I mean.

MF: When did you join the fraternity?

JR: Well, when they were doing the pledging, the rush, yes, I just went around. I thought I'd like to join a fraternity, I didn't know which, I didn't know, actually, I did know a couple of people in Zeta Psi. So, I went down and met the brothers doing the rush and I liked them and I thought, "Well, let me try," and I was accepted. I think there were twenty-six of us in that pledge class.

MF: Wow, not comparable to today's numbers.

JR: No.

MF: No, actually the last couple of semesters we've actually had huge numbers.

JR: Really?

MF: Yes, we had thirty-four for the whole year, and that was huge.

JR: We only did it once. Yes, you only did pledging, I think, in the Fall or was it the Spring? I don't know, but we didn't do it both semesters, no.

MF: We do that now, both semesters, rush and, I mean, the year before that, when we had maybe like eleven or twelve kids, you know, and then this last year we got a big number. We had a pledge class of nineteen and then one of fifteen.

JR: Oh, well, that's good. Oh, great, thank God. It's a great pledge.

MF: Sure is.

JR: A lot of history there.

MF: Could you talk about your pledging experience? What kind of things you went through, not going in too much detail, for us?

JR: Define too much detail? There were the normal things in those days. They had the paddles and they would whack you on the butts and, you know, make you do push ups and sit ups and…

MF: I know Carl has one. Did you get branded also?

JR: Yes.

MF: Did you?

JR: Yes. Why? You don't do that anymore?

MF: No.

JR: That was quite an experience, but what they put you through to get to that point, I mean, I felt like if they told me, "We're going to take the Zeta Psi brand, we're goanna put it right in the middle of your forehead." I would have said, "Great," you know. Because you were that into it, they got you that excited about being a brother. But, yes, they heat up a branding iron, and they get three or four guys to hold you down and you're just like that, and they hit you right here. If you look close you can see it. But that hurt yes, and then you had Zeta Psi on your arm, and they took a jelly jar top and put holes in it and put it over that and wrapped it around so that it wouldn't upset the letters and you wore that, you know. Like when I went home, my mother said, "What is that?" "Oh, it's nothing. It's nothing; it's a jelly jar with holes in it I wrapped around my arm." That was like top secret, we were never supposed to tell anybody about that. I guess the secret is out. [Laughter] And I used to think that the room in the House, the meeting room, and I don't know if I'm talking out of school now, but it's in a secret place, and I'm thinking as a fireman, later in life, if we had a fire in this place the guys wouldn't even know that room was there.

MF: They still don't, for the most part.

JR: You'd have to see this thing to believe it.

MF: The third floor is getting re-done now, so when the fire inspectors came into check, he had to see those things, you know, he has seen them now. He said, "Has this always been here?" It's that well hidden, you know.

JR: Yes, it's really something. Still painted black?

MF: Yup.

JR: The whole place is painted black, giving away secrets.

MF: What was it like having a housemother?

JR: Yes, okay, that's a good thing, because we had a housemother and she was always there. She was ever-present and she lived in the basement and if you got caught with a girl upstairs, you're in big trouble. Now I think if you get caught without one you're in trouble. [laughter] I don't know, but, seriously, she was always around. She watched everything. When we had dinner at night, because all that stands out, I would eat down there with the guys, … and it was always by candlelight. You had to wear a tie for dinner and…

MF: You had to dress up, right, like a uniform, in a sort of way …

JR: Well, it was just a shirt and a tie as I recall, yes, and maybe a jacket, I don't know. But when she came in everybody had to stand up until she sat down and everything. Yes, it was fairly formal. It was nice, but she could be a pain, but that was her job to watch us. We didn't get in too much trouble. When we were pledges, Hank Daum, I think he grew up on a farm or something, he brought up this gigantic duck, and I had it in my car and he said, "We're going to turn this thing loose in the house." So we took it in the house and man, this dumb duck was big

and mean. So he turned it loose in the house, it was at night, and the guys would be in a room, and when they came out this thing would be biting them and chasing them around and everything. We got in big trouble over that. [laughter] Well, crazy things.

MF: I don't know when this happened or if you know anything about it, about the tunnel that they used to have, built leading to Queens?

JR: Yes, Corner Tavern. Supposedly that's there, I don't know. They often talked that there was an underground tunnel to the Corner Tavern and it's something about being built during the Depression, and built during prohibition, I guess, but I never saw it.

MF: I was wondering if it was still around.

JR: The Zeta Psi guys used to hang their mugs in the Corner Tavern. Like a lot of the guys that went to World War II, I understand, would hang their mug before they left and some never came back for their mugs, or whatever. I understand that's the case.

SI: They are still there now.

JR: Yes, there's still some.

SI: A lot of them supposedly from '41, I think.

JR: Really, yes, well, Vinny Inzano, who owns that place, is a good friend of mine, and he's on the fire department in New Brunswick, and we worked together on the Urban Search and Rescue team.

MF: I guess you were in the ROTC.

JR: Yes.

MF: What was it like with the fraternity?

JR: Yes, it wasn't really a problem because, I would say, almost all the guys were in ROTC, not all, but certainly more than half were on ROTC. I pledged with Kenny Reyfsnider and Dave Reyfsnider and you certainly wouldn't know them, but they were twins, and I was working in the funeral home, as I told you, and Kenny came across Landing Lane Bridge, right where College Avenue starts, and, I guess, they've been drinking over there. He got killed. They crashed into a tree and he got killed right there. Well, I didn't know and, I mean my boss at the funeral home was the county coroner, so he called me. He said, "We got to go," all right. So, I didn't know what it was, I went down, and you have to pick these people up, and do autopsies on them, that's what I did, and it was Kenny. I'm like, "Holy mackerel." Yes, it was a little rough, yes, yes. That's one thing I remember about pledge class. I don't think he ever became a brother, I think it happened, or maybe right around the same time.

MF: Was ROTC mandatory?

JR: Maybe the first two years, yes. I'm trying to remember. It could have been the first two years, and then the second two years they paid you $40.00 a month, and to me that was great. That was spending money, beer-drinking money, so that came in handy. Little did I know I'd have to kind of pay them back some day. They knew the deal.

SI: Could you talk about the training you received at ROTC, obviously, there's a lot of drilling, but what about in the classroom?

JR: Yes. Yes, there was a lot of military history, military tactics as I recall. Yes, I was in the Army ROTC so there was a lot of it that was geared to battles and things like that. I remember talking about how important surprise was in an attack and it's been so long, but I think it was like a one-credit course. You got one credit for it, or something, and then, for the training, we went to the park. We marched around. We learned how to dismantle the M1, we did a lot and then you had to go during your, between your junior year and your senior year, you had to go to six weeks of basic training, and I went to Indian Town Gap Military Reservation out there in Pennsylvania. That was a tough six weeks. I lost like twenty-two pounds, and I was skinny to begin with. It was a really, long, hot summer, and that was rough, and then, so that completed your basic, and then, when you graduated and you would be commissioned, then, from there, you went into your individual branch. Yes, it was certainly the Army, the Quartermaster Corps for me. I think they called it branch. So then I went to Fort Lee, Virginia, for another eight weeks of basic training, and then more quartermaster training, and from there, I stayed at Fort Lee for about a year, actually more than a year, maybe fourteen months, and I only had a two year obligation. I wanted to get to Vietnam in the worst way, and it was really, it was a tough time, because as I say, at the time I had one child, and another one on the way. So I just knew that my time was running out, and so I called, my wife would still kill me to this day, I called up the personnel department and I said, "Am I going to Vietnam?" In Washington, and the guy said, "No." So I started hemming and hawing and it was a Major, I'll never forget, and he said, "Lieutenant, are you trying to tell me you want to go to Vietnam?" And I didn't answer him and he said, "Lieutenant, you got it," just like that, and my orders came right after that. But I just felt like other people were doing things for me, and I didn't want other people to do things for me. I wanted to do it myself and looking back, having a wife and the two kids, that was really a selfish way to feel. I mean, because, but I just, and I hope they would understand, I just had to go. I had to go. So I went. I left her home with two kids.

MF: What made you join the Army ROTC rather than the Air Force?

JR: Shorter time on active duty. I wanted to go in the Navy and I could have, out of Perth Amboy since they had a Navy ROTC, a Navy OCS, but that was four years, too, and I really didn't want to, I wanted to just do two years. Do what I had to do and get out. In hindsight, I probably should have went in the Navy or the Air Force, they treated people better. They really did.

SI: Since your father and your uncles had been in the Navy, would they pressure you to go in the Navy?

JR: Not really, no, and I had been thinking, and, well, if I get into this, I really was interested in mortuary science and all that stuff, so I thought, "Well, the Army is the only one," that I knew at that time. I said, "I'd like to get involved in doing that." That's the way it happened.

SI: I'm curious about being a Catholic at Rutgers in this time period. First of all, do you feel like there was any prejudice against Catholics then?

JR: No, I didn't perceive any. It could have been. It could have been, but I never felt it. As I say, it was different for me because I'd never been around anybody other than Catholics. … But, we got to be friends with a lot of different people. There could have been. I think at that age, you know 18-19, you don't realize sometimes that maybe people think that way. Gary Christ from Zeta Psi was a good man. I was his best man; he was my best man, but you would say things from time to time, I would take it, kidding around like, "mackerel snappers," and stuff like that, talking about the Catholics. Yes, well, whatever. He was a Protestant, so they probably came from families who maybe felt that way about Catholics and my family, as I say, we couldn't even go in a Protestant church. Well, I'm glad that's changed.

SI: Were you involved in any Catholic organizations?

JR: No. I wasn't. They had a Newman Club, but, no, being that my church was right here, I always went to church on Sunday, still do. I didn't feel a need for that.

SI: Did you have any activities that centered around Kirkpatrick Chapel, anything mandatory?

JR: Mandatory? I remember being in Kirkpatrick Chapel like for Protestant services or something like that, or just…

SH: More about convocations to get out information, or lectures, or…

JR: I forget, Sandra, I really do. I don't remember anything like that.

SI: While you were at Rutgers, what were you hearing about the Vietnam situation?

JR: I read it in the paper everyday and watched the news, and I could see it was getting worst and then when Tet happened, it was, I believe February '68, I was actually, I wasn't in yet. I graduated in '67; I did that one year apprenticeship and I went in June of '68. I knew it was bad, and I actually looked at it from the standpoint that, looking at statistics, I figured out in my own mind you had a one in a hundred chance of getting killed, and you had a one in ten chance of getting wounded, just by looking at the statistics, I felt, "Well, that's something I'm going to have to deal with." The thing about Vietnam, too, is that, and granted the guys were out in the field, they had it the roughest, but it wasn't necessarily frontlines and rear lines, it was like, they were all around you. You could get attacked in Saigon as well as you could up in Dak To, or somewhere. In Saigon, during the Tet Offensive, they had guys that lived in Cholon, which was farther, I'd say if I recall maybe five miles say from Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Well, these guys, and I lived down there later, too, but they would come up on busses every morning to Tan Son Nhut, all Army officers, Air Force officers, regular enlisted guys, bus loads. So, during the Tet

Offensive, they had the Vietcong dressed up as the police. They wore white shirts and we called them the "white mice." They looked like white mice. Anyhow, the Vietcong dressed up like that, and they directed these busses down a side street where they were waiting with machine guns, and stuff, and they mowed those guys down so, I mean, that was bad. It could happen anywhere. It was just all around you. You never knew who the Vietcong were. I can remember being in downtown Saigon one day. We were buying something from a vendor woman, or whatever, and she looked up, and she said, "You go now, VC come, you go." I looked, and I see these three guys coming down the street, and they looked like tough guys, you know, but you don't have to tell me twice. So they knew who they were, the locals knew who was VC and who wasn't.

SI: Well before getting into Vietnam, can you tell us a little bit about how you met your wife and how you got married?

JR: Yes. We met in high school. We became high school sweethearts and went to proms and everything. When we graduated high school she went to nursing school in Passaic, she went to St. Mary's in Passaic. She's an RN and I went to Rutgers. So on the weekends and stuff, we would always be together. We wound up getting married in my senior year, March of '67, and we've been together ever since.

SI: Was it difficult being married at Rutgers or was that a factor at all?

JR: Yes. It was right before I graduated and I thought I might be going in the Army right away so, no, it wasn't. We lived over on Sanford Street, when we first got married, over around Douglass, had an apartment, and they were during the years of the riots in New Brunswick, too, you know, so that was wild times. We would be in the house and seeing people rioting outside. It was scary. They were setting fires, and stuff, around the house.

SI: Before the riots could you sense that there was this tension building?

JR: Yes, there was and, being in high school, you don't pay too much attention to that stuff. But it just broke out all over the place, in Newark and New Brunswick, Trenton. It was a shame, but it was scary. It really was.

SI: Was that around the time Martin Luther King was assassinated?

JR: Yes. You know mid '60s.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about that year of apprenticeship and anything you learned about?

JR: Sure. As I said, my boss was the county coroner so we got to see some crazy things. If somebody died violently or inexplicably in Middlesex County it was his job, with me, to go pick them up, take them down to Perth Amboy Hospital, and that's where they did the autopsies. So, I would do the, that could never happen today, here I was, eighteen years old, and I'm cutting people open, taking their brains out, and stuff, and honest to God, and I, what did I know? But these doctors, they were, it was different, there was the county medical examiner. I remember

him, (Dr. Willentz?) and he used to say, "Well, Jimmy, let's see if they were drinking." You're like, "Okay, Doc," so, before the days of all these sophisticated analysis, I'd open the guy up, cut the stomach out, cut the stomach open, and he'd go, "Sniff, yup, he's drinking." Yes, and even I can remember if, hey, if somebody drowned, you know, he'd say, "Well, we got to see if they were dead before they went in the water or if they drowned, so get a bucket, Jimmy." "Okay, Doc." I get a bucket of water, he'd cut off a piece of the lung, throw it in the bucket. If it floated the person, I forget which way, and afterwards, "Water in their lungs," I guess it's sunk and then, "They drowned," and if it floated they were dead before they went in the water. You can't make this stuff up, that's true and I enjoyed the business, but it was busy. I was working maybe eighty some hours a week, newly married, baby on the way, and I enjoyed it. But it wasn't conducive to a good home life, I was always gone. But it was a good bunch of people I worked with. I loved Dick Boylan, who owned the place, and we had a lot of fun, too. I mean we would, you're young, you work, say, you have a funeral in the morning, then you have viewings in the afternoon, and at night, and you maybe have to pick up a couple of bodies, and do some embalming, and you wouldn't finish up till ten, eleven at night. Then we'd go drinking. Drink 'til two o'clock, get up the next morning, and start all over again. Those days are gone.

SI: How do you think working as a mortician changed you or do you think it fit your personality? I mean, it takes a certain kind of person who works with the deceased.

JR: Right, right, right. Well, it wasn't the dead people that were the problem. It was the live ones. I mean, as far as doing the embalming, and things like that, that wasn't, I wouldn't say, it was difficult in some ways, but it was like an art. What I mean, you got to do this right, but some of the people you had to deal with, families and stuff, those were rough, because that's a bad time for them, I mean, and understandably. You become, especially with Vietnam, you become callous in a way, and you try not to let that show. You want to show your concern or your sympathy to people. I don't think it changed me, really, just to be always nice to people and understanding.

SI: Some people wouldn't be able to even go near…

JR: Right, right, yes. Well if I had started later in life maybe I would have thought about it, but so young, I was like, "Ah, go ahead cut them open, Jimmy." So that's the way it was. I like embalming. Embalming was not all that difficult.

SI: I have a question with the Indian Town Gap training when you were still at Rutgers in the ROTC. You mentioned that it was very difficult, but could you elaborate more, and, I guess, when Carl Burns talked about his going to his summer training, they really tried to rip you down.

JR: Oh, they did, they really did. They wanted to see if you'll break. The thing that bothered me, well, there was a couple of things. The heat, it was so hot, and there was never water to drink and maybe you'd have some water in your canteen, but it would get like 100 degrees, and the water would be so hot it wouldn't even quench your thirst. They'd like burn lips practically, you know what I mean? So, they had people die right on the firing range from the heat. That was one thing. The other thing I thought was lack of sleep. Oh, my God, three or four hours sleep at night, at the most, and I could never understand, if I'm here in this basic training you

want me to learn. How am I going to learn if I'm so doggone tired? I can hardly keep my head up. So that I didn't think was right. I was just reading an article the other day about the Marine Corps. It said even in Parris Island those guys get eight hours, and then, they beat the hell out of them during the day, whatever, that's okay, but they let them get enough sleep. So sleep deprivation I thought was rough. Other than that, it was the standard courses you had to run through, and being on the firing range and, gosh, I can't remember. Got to be real good friends with guys. You became very close with guys and I'll tell you a story later about one guy in Vietnam, if you want. No, I was glad to get through it, but like I said I lost a lot of weight. I was glad to get home.

MF: Do you think going through that, you know, vigorous training kind of prepared, not necessarily you, but, you know, the rest of the people that went over for combat?

JR: Oh, yes, yes, it would absolutely, yes, and I'm sure that the guys that went into combat branches, infantry and whatever, got worst when they went, but, sure, any training is good training.

SI: I was just correcting a transcript last night with a man who made a comparison that joining a fraternity prepared him well for OCS [Officer Candidate School] and all officer training, because he could handle anything that they threw at him. Did you find that was true?

JR: Going through the fraternity as far as the initiation you mean?

SI: Yes, he was talking about hell week.

JR: Yes, there were parallels, absolutely, absolutely. I was one of the last ones to go through, out of our group, and man alive, the guys who went through first, and I don't want to get into a lot of detail, but you're subjected to a lot longer time, literally hours and hours of some kind of torture and it is torture. Yes, I could see some parallels. It definitely toughened you up.

SI: You guys were commissioned in '67 then a year later you went on active duty?

JR: Yes.

SI: You went straight to Fort Lee?

JR: Yes.

SI: Can you talk about your duties in Fort Lee, and was there any kind of getting acclimated period or any training that you had at Fort Lee?

JR: Yes. We started off with eight weeks of more infantry training, you know, and then we got, I think, we got into another eight weeks of quartermaster training, and a lot of that was geared toward what a quartermaster normally does, which would be supply and stuff like that. So to become a quartermaster officer you had to know all that, and then I got into graves registration they called it, which was the mortuary, and I think, I'm trying to remember how long of a class

that was. I forget. Anyhow, then I became a teacher for that, so I stayed at Fort Lee. Now I was doing some graves registration teaching and, also got into developing some courses there. I forget what they were, but it was a desk job, and it was job I didn't like. I didn't like at all. But we lived in a trailer park right off the base, and, when we first got there, oh, man, having a baby and we lived in this trailer with no air conditioning, in Virginia. I'll tell you what, my poor wife, I don't know how she survived, because I would go off during the day and go to class with everybody. She was in that sweatbox, all day, with a baby. It was really rough for her.

SI: Did she work?

JR: No. Stayed home with our son at the time, yes, that was plenty of work. No, there was, I don't see how she could have worked at the time, down there, I guess, even if they had day care in those days. No, it was just me getting through Fort Lee.

SI: You mentioned earlier that you hadn't really left the New Brunswick area before. What was it like to go to Virginia?

JR: Yes, it was a little scary, a little scary, because being, say, twenty-two and having a child and a wife and going off on your own into uncharted water, uncharted waters, yes it was scary. I'm sure my mother and father were petrified about us going, at that age, and so, they worried about that. We got through it. She's a trooper, thank God, I'll tell you she's done a lot, worked a lot harder than I have.

SI: Was it a culture shock to go to the South?

JR: Yes, it was. No bakeries, no pizzerias, there is nothing down there, really. It was a totally different world, and something I had never experienced was this North-South thing. I couldn't believe it, people like, "Oh, you're a Yankee," and all this, "What are you talking about?" I had nothing to do with the Civil War, but these people were still living it, yes, and I still run into that to this day. Strange for us, we don't think like that, but I tell you a lot down South still do. I would never tell them I have letters from, I guess, a great, great uncle of mine from the Civil War. I have the actual letters, and, oh, yeah, and he talks about where he is. He was a mounted scout with Sherman, I would never want to tell any of these guys about him

SI: No, I don't think so. I learned that early on too. Some people in Savannah, you would think that Sherman had marched through their front yard that afternoon.

JR: I'm sure. I see that, and as I say, we aren't used to that. So that was a little bit of a culture shock with some of that.

SI: Did you see any signs of segregation in the South?

JR: Oh, gosh, I don't remember. I mean, most of our life was just geared to the post and I just don't remember. It might have been, now that you bring that up. There was a town right next to Fort Lee, I can't remember the name of it now, but I can tell you they used to have KKK and stuff over there, believe it or not. Yes, I think they had marches and stuff as I recall, crazy, yes.

MF: Was there any bigotry within the ranks of the soldiers coming from the South?

JR: No, I don't recall. I think the military was pretty well squared away then. I don't recall any bigotry at all.

SI: Of the training unit, were there a decent number of minorities?

JR: Yes, yes, for sure. A lot of the guys that I worked with in Vietnam were licensed funeral directors, and rightfully so, so they wound up kind of like the way I got in there. So, these were, for the most part, professional people, black and whites, we never had any problem like that, not where I was.

SI: Those eight weeks of infantry training that you first had at Fort Lee, was it basically a repeat of what you had at Indian Town Gap?

JR: Yes, a lot of that. We went into Camp Pickett and AP Hill, there were three separate camps that they took us to for training. Yes, same military type.

SI: Was it more intense?

JR: It was actually less intense, I think, because, again, we weren't in a combat branch, and the guys that were in the combat branches I'm sure was a lot more intense. But, ultimately, everybody is a foot soldier and you had to be ready to fight, so they do put you through the ropes.

SI: In all this training, you can go back to Indian Town or Fort Lee or even ROTC, were they actually focusing you towards what you would actually do if you wound up in Vietnam, or was it that kind of situation of fighting the last war?

JR: Yes. Right. I think it was more getting you ready for almost anything because when you got to Vietnam, you didn't know what you were going to do. You really didn't. I mean you could have been a quartermaster officer and if there wasn't any need for quartermaster, obviously, you could wind up doing some other stuff, you'd be in the infantry. But as far as the schooling, too, they put everybody, before you went to Vietnam, they put you through what they called POR, preliminary to overseas replacement, and I could remember sitting there watching, and they would be talking about camouflage. You would have to watch the way these people camouflaged themselves, may be a couple of hours later, you've been sitting for a couple of hours, and they would point over here, and this guy gets up out of the weeds! He'd been lying there the whole time, that's pretty good, quiet and not moving for that period of time. So they taught you that kind of stuff. They set up a village, a little mock Vietnamese village, and they said, "When you walk in this, this is what you got to watch for," like kids with grenades, and stuff like that. But the guys were always the guys. They would spend a couple of hours talking about trip wires and they'd say, "Okay now we're going to go into this Vietnamese village, remember what we told you" and the guys would go in and trip on the wires. They'd be dead. "You weren't paying attention." GIs are always GIs.

SI: That was real-world information, feed back, with these training programs?

JR: Oh, yes, absolutely, absolutely, yes, and there would be people there who had just got back from Vietnam talking to you about what to expect.

MF: When you went overseas, how did you receive the new environment?

JR: When you got to Vietnam, you mean? For one thing I remember getting off the plane and just got, you got hit with a blast of fire, or something. It was hot, wow and you think to yourself, "I'm really here now." So you're down the steps and into a center there. There is one thing I remember, they made everybody brush their teeth with this super-duper fluoride, or something, because for some of the guys, they didn't know when they were going to get to brush their teeth again; so I guess, I don't know, but that was one thing you did. Then you went through a lot of processing, and then, I guess, you spent a day or two. I was in Cam Rahn Bay. Stayed in Cam Rahn Bay for two or three days and then about three o'clock in the morning, we moved out on a C-130 aircraft from Cam Rahn to Bien Hoa. So at the time, I realized, they still didn't know where I was going. I was hoping I was going for mortuary, because that's what I've been trained for, and I had talked to some people who were there, and, anyway, we were heading in that direction. So it's about three or four o'clock in the morning, we are coming into Bien Hoa Airbase, and the pilot comes over [the intercom] you're sitting in this airplane, you're up against the side of the plane, like in those type of seats that just have a jump seat with straps, and stuff, sitting up against there, and there's only a cubby hole you can look out; the pilot says, "Bien Hoa Airbase is under attack, we're taking evasive action," "What?" So the C-130 starts going like this, [Editor's Note: Mr. Riley makes noises to simulate the attack] "Holy mackerel," so you look down through this hole and you can see tracers, "Oh, this is real." So he did that evasive action for a while, and then, we landed, and that was one of the first things that I really remember, and then, I guess, a few hours there and I wound up going to the mortuary. They picked me up from there, somebody from the mortuary, I wound up over there, which is Tan Son Nhut Air Base.

SI: Some of the veterans I have spoken to had the same reaction they don't realize they were going to war until they actually see bullets flying. …

JR: Right, that's for sure, and, really, I was not exposed to a heck of lot of it during my time there. I was fortunate in that regard. I saw results of it, as you know. But maybe a couple of rockets coming in occasionally, or something like that, but I was never shot at directly.

----------END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO----------

SI: This continues an interview with Mr. James J. Riley on April 22, 2005 in New Brunswick, New Jersey with Shaun Illingworth and …

MF: Mark Friedland.

SI: So up to this point we talked about your flying into Tan Son Nhut Air Base. This is where the mortuary was?

JR: Yes, yes. I should have flown into Cam Rahn Bay first, went to Cam Rahn to Bien Hoa and then went by jeep to Tan Son Nhut. Tan Son Nhut Air Base was at that time the busiest airbase in the world. So replacements like me weren't going through Tan Son Nhut, they went through Bien Hoa.

SI: What was the facility that you were sent to first? When were you first assigned to mortuary services in Vietnam? Can you describe what it was?

JR: Okay. When I first got to the mortuary? Yes, I'm trying to remember, they picked me up in Bien Hoa and we went down Highway 1, and it's funny, when you said, "In country," I obviously heard that before, but, yes, then we went down to the mortuary and, I guess, they just introduced me to everybody. Then I'm trying to figure out where I was going to stay, so they said, "Well, you're staying at the," I can't remember the name of the hotel now, "Down in Cholon." Cholon was a Chinese section of Saigon, and the officers and some of the enlisted men lived in these hotels in Saigon. So there were hotels closer to Tan Son Nhut, but there weren't any vacancies, so I had to get down to Cholon and you went down Plantation Road. I think I mentioned before, Plantation Road is where they ambushed people during the Tet Offensive. So anyhow, I went down, got this room in the, I can't remember the name of the hotel, anyhow in Cholon, and I didn't like it down there because it was really isolated and I was kind of by myself. I wanted to get with the guys who were already there, who I was working with that were farther up, closer to Tan Son Nhut, so that took a while. Anyway, while I was there somebody put a shopping cart full of explosives right under my room, and if that would have blown up, they would have blown me to 'kingdom come.' Well, the doggoned thing didn't go off, thank God, but it was a shopping cart full of explosives. They wanted to blow up this hotel. So anyhow after that, I guess, maybe a week or two, I did get a room farther up, in a hotel closer by the mortuary. So everyday we would go in by bus, we worked twelve hour shifts, twelve on, twelve off, and seven days a week, processing the remains. That's what we did.

SI: How often would things like that happen, this kind of insurgent attack. What did you call the men? Now we call them terrorists, or insurgents.

JR: Well, let's see, what do they call them? Sappers I think, was one term, they were just the Vietcong coming through the wire is what I remember. They were very good at that. I remember they captured a Vietcong once, and they turned, supposedly, turned to be on our side and I think the term for that was *Chu Hoi*. But they took this *Chu Hoi* guy and they set up all the wires, elaborate, the concertina wire, the barbed wire, the whole bit, and they said, "How do you get through this?" and the guy crawled through that, like it wasn't even there, so they were very good at that and a lot of the Vietcong, I guess they found out later, actually worked on base during the day as barbers and other things, and during the night they were coming through the wire. So, yes, there was a lot of that. You mentioned the insurgents or terrorists, I'm trying to think, I can't remember what terms were used.

SI: That's another point, a lot of Vietnam veterans bring up, you didn't know who to trust.

JR: No, no you didn't. I can remember getting a haircut, the guy who'd be giving you a haircut, he'd have a razor and he's shaving here and I'm thinking, "Man all he's got to do is just go down." So you really didn't know who is who. I think it's very, if we haven't learned anything else, it's very hard to fight anybody on their own territory. Even us, I mean, God forbid, but, you know, the Revolutionary War, whatever, when it's your territory it's tough to beat, and they were, I mean, I think anybody in the military would admit they were good, really good.

SI: What were your first few days on the ground like?

JR: I think it was just getting acquainted and seeing how the operation worked. I had been trained in the mortuary so I knew that you had to have the system. There were collecting points around the country so if a GI got killed, they would go to these collecting points where they would get preliminary information for identification, put them in a body bag, and ship them down to us. Now they could ship them to us by truck, or by helicopter. In some cases a CH 47, Chinook helicopter, would be full of them, full of bodies. It was very unbelievable. Or sometimes maybe an UH-1 Huey helicopter would bring in one or two. So my first few days, I guess would be getting to know how, when, the body comes in, where we do the initial processing, finger printing, dental charting, things like that; then move over to embalming, and then, hopefully, if you have the proper identification, to sending them home. That was the biggest problem, getting their identification processed. For instance, if they were with the 101st Airborne, their fingerprints would be with 101st Airborne so we would have to call them and say, you know, "Such and such guy got killed, we need his records so we can positively identify him and send him home," and if there was a delay in that, then the person didn't go home until we could positively identify him, and we didn't want any mistakes.

SI: You were in an area where they were sending you remains from all over the country so would be any kind of ebb and flow in relation to actual operations?

JR: Oh, yes. Yes, definitely. When the, the one thing that comes to mind is when we invaded Cambodia, the count increased a lot then, and I believe that was in 1970 somewhere around April or May. Yes, depending on the battles, right. There would be days, maybe, we would only get a couple, and there would be other days when I want to say as many as a hundred, I don't recall whether it would be that many, but it could be I suppose.

SI: How many men worked in the unit?

JR: Total, I would guess, maybe sixty, seventy. It was two shifts, and the embalmers themselves were civilians. They weren't military. That was their only job. They did the embalming, but our guys, the military guys, made sure that everything else got processed through.

SI: Were the embalmers Vietnamese or Americans?

JR: No, Americans, they were Americans, contractors, I guess.

SI: How often would you not be able to identify someone?

JR: It didn't happen that often, but it did happen. If we had remains that we weren't sure of, we wouldn't send them home, we would give them an X number. As I recall, when I left, I think we had maybe twenty two remains that were X numbers that were human remains, but we weren't sure, because maybe it was just a rib or a leg bone or something like that. So, I don't know what the final disposition on those were.

SI: Would they go for a second round of an attempt to identify them?

JR: Oh, sure, they were constantly, constantly, trying to identify them. But, there wasn't DNA so you either had to get dental charts, fingerprints, or positive identification by somebody saying, "I saw him." I mean, "He was right here, and I saw him get hit," and, you know, "he just more or less got blown away," and there's very little to identify. The dog tags were something that we used to kind of say, "Yes, this could be him," but we never use them as positive identification, because if you had to have your dog tags to go out on patrol at night, for instance, so say if I was going out on patrol, I didn't have my dog tags, I'd say, "Let me borrow yours," just so I don't get in trouble. So I put them on; I get killed, dog tags say I'm you. So we tried not to do that, but we did use it as an additional ID. Again, in many cases when people are incinerated or I can remember a guy coming in one day and saying, "I got another one for you." I'm like, "Okay, go around the back," so he put an envelope on my desk, like "What's this?" and he said, "That's all there is." A guy had crashed in a, I don't know if it was an F-4 or what it was, but he had just burned and burned and all they were able to do is scrape out some pieces of bone that they found in the seat. But there again, we knew that was his plane, it went down, so you could extrapolate that out to say, "Yes, that's him," and we would send home something like that.

SI: When were you trained in this kind of investigative work? Was that in the Army or was it something that you learned working with the county coroner at Boylan?

JR: I really didn't do the investigative work that much. We had some people there that were identification specialists and these guys were civilians also. One of them that comes to mind is Wesley A. Neep and he's still alive hopefully, he's in his nineties, but a smart guy. Anyhow, he was a physical anthropologist so he could take, if you had five guys killed in a tank, or something, and they were all, what they called co-mingled remains, he could take those and he'd set them out on a big table and say, "This leg goes with him," and, "This arm goes with him, these teeth go here," and this and that, so he was the best in the world in my view. So he would do a lot of that identification stuff that they make in a final determination. He could tell male or female. He could tell a lot of things from the bones. So me personally, I mean, my job was, I was, I guess what you would call the mortuary officer, and I was only a first lieutenant, so I just kind of made sure that things flowed all right and made phone calls to get records, and kept accurate records on our end, so that we had the remains we were supposed to have and we didn't get mixed up. You can't take it too personal because if you do you'd probably go crazy, you know. We had one young guy who had gotten severely wounded, and apparently his family found out about it, he was at the hospital right by us I believe. So anyhow his father came over, actually came to Vietnam, to be with him when he died. So, his father was with the body and that kind of put a human face on it and I didn't like that. I was like, wow, wow, you know to try to block that out, and here we are with a relative. But other than that, our guys were extremely professional. Like I told you a lot of them are licensed funeral directors, and they were very,

very dedicated and they really did a fabulous job. I believe that is the only job in the military that if you don't want to do it, you don't have to do it. Makes sense, right? Why would they subject somebody like that?

SI: Were all the cases you were dealing with the result of combat then?

JR: No, we had guys die from other things, accidents, sickness, no, not at all. Probably most were combat deaths. No. I was just going to say most were very young. The average age was nineteen or twenty of the guys that got killed, mostly kids.

MF: Did you or any of the people that you were stationed with, have dealings, if any, with the Vietnamese or the Vietcong?

JR: No.

MF: I know a lot of other combat soldiers that were in there they really, like the soldiers of World War II, were towards the Japanese, cynics?

JR: Oh, yes, absolutely. There was a lot of that. We knew that the average Vietnamese didn't even want us there. I remember talking to a lady one night, in broken English, she said, "Why are you here? Why you here?" I'm thinking, "Oh, good question, you know. I don't think there was a great love for the Vietnamese people. Individually, there were some really nice people, and as far as the Vietcong, well, there was a lot of hate there. These people are trying to kill you.

SI: The question may have been asked before; did you have to perform autopsies while you were there?

JR: Yes. I did not personally, but we had a doctor there. He was a major and if we were not sure of the cause of death he would do an autopsy and find out. So, yes, there were autopsies done, and in cases where there were some hazy circumstances, or something, too, then you always had to be careful of that. There were things like [fraggings].

SI: Would you have to work with military investigators if it was something of a crime type?

JR: Yes. I can't remember working with them personally, but I know that happened. There was talk, and I think it was true, that somebody at our mortuary was sending home drugs in the bodies. So I know we had a CID, which is a criminal investigation detachment, one or two people that were working with us. I'm not sure who they were, I think I know who they were, but I think they were there to find out, and I think it was happening, from what I heard it was happening. They wanted to find who was doing it. Whether they ever did or not, I don't know, but I can't imagine anything lower than that. You know what I mean?

MF: Was that viewed kind of a big deal, because I know that drug use in Vietnam was pretty extensive?

JR: Yes, yes.

MF: Was that a big deal to everybody? Were they being sent home? or was it viewed as just some guys trying to send some stuff?

JR: That was a big deal. That was a big deal for somebody to put it into one of the bodies, one of the American GIs who had been killed, and have a contact on the other side, either Dover or Oakland Air Base whichever to take the drugs out. I mean, that's about as low as you can go. So I understand that was happening, but I really don't know if it ever was found to be true or who did it.

SI: Was part of your job there to prepare the bodies for an eventual funeral or was that left to the families?

JR: The only thing we did was embalm them, so they were sent home in a metal transfer case and then when they got back to either Dover or Oakland, that's where they were put in uniform and then given to an escort. An escort would take the body to the family and stay with it the whole time. I understand that if the family was told that we preferred, the Army, being the Army, not to open the casket, but it was their son, so if they insisted on opening the casket, the escort was to leave. Because what they were going to see in there was, in many cases, really, really horrible.

SI: Alluding to that one father who came over to visit his dying son, did you ever have any interaction with other relatives?

JR: No, other than, before I went to Vietnam, I had the detail of the burial detail, so I used to have to take six pall bearers, six riflemen, the bugler and a sergeant and we would go off, into West Virginia in many cases, for the funerals.

SI: That was providing funeral details for men who had been killed in Vietnam from the local area?

JR: Yes, that's what we did, and West Virginia, as I recall, some of the people were so poor. Oh, my God they were so poor, but they always treated us nice, and, I can remember one time taking the casket up to the top of this hill, to bury him, in the back of a pickup truck, that's what they had. Yes, that was hard duty in a way, but I mean, you know, it had to be done. The only thing, thank God, I never had to do, and I think I was on a duty roster for it, was notification. I would not want to do that.

SI: In general, it sounds like you got a mix of not just Army remains. did they try to segregate the forces, was there an Air Force component, and a Navy component?

JR: No, there were only two mortuaries in Vietnam. One was ours, and we took care of II , III and IV Corps, which was three- quarters of the country, and I Corps, which was another mortuary up in Da Nang, so they got a lot of the Marines, because that's where the Marines were, for the most part up in I Corps. We were, I mean, I guess we got some Marines, as I recall,

but we got Navy from those River Division boats, yes, but I would say mostly Army. We also got other countries. We got Australians, Thais, and Filipinos, as I recall.

SI: Was your unit all US Army or did you have representatives from other groups?

JR: Our unit was all US Army, yes.

SI: Were there enlisted men there or was it all officers?

JR: Oh, yes, no, it was mostly enlisted men, even the guys who were funeral directors on the outside they were enlisted guys.

SI: Can you talk a little bit about what that was like being an officer in charge of them, essentially?

JR: Yes, I guess I was, yes. It was a great relationship though, because we just looked at it, "Hey we have a job to do here, and we worked well together. I never disciplined anybody or anything like that. Over me at the mortuary was a captain and a major, so, they took care of a lot of that, too, but we were tight, we stayed together. Lots of times if we would go to the mess hall and other people in there knew where we were from, they'd get up and leave, like they really didn't want to associate with us, which I guess I could see.

SI: So there weren't any of the maintaining the officer enlisted men split?

JR: Not really, no. They as I said, they were all great guys. I always had a problem with that, they used to tell you, as an officer, you're supposed to be, you could be friendly with them, but not friends. I always thought that was baloney.

SI: In general, what did you think about the war at that point? What did you think our chances were for success in Vietnam?

JR: I don't think we did…. The general thing in Vietnam, when you got there, and I was fortunate, I only did less than nine months because that's all the time I had left on my two-year obligation, but I think with most guys, the main thing in your mind was, "How many days do I have left? There was very little talk that I remember about, "This is right, this isn't right." It wasn't looked at that way. It was there, you were there for a year, you had a job to do, and you were going to do it and go home. I don't recall a lot of discussion about whether it was right or wrong. I guess we had to think it was right in some way and I did. I mean, I believed in my country, I believed in my leaders, my president, and if that's what they wanted me to do that's what I was going to do. You don't know if that's right or wrong.

SI: Did you still see that it was a winnable war then?

JR: Doubtful. I really don't think, I mean, you didn't have to be a rocket scientist to realize that, hey, we're going, we're going, we're hitting these people, we're winning this battle, we're losing a lot of guys, we're leaving there, we're going over here and they've just moving back in over

here again. What were we doing? How are we going to win? As I said earlier, fighting somebody in their own territory it's tough, because they can be some of them were nice to you, whatever, but in their mind, I'm sure they're thinking, you know, "What are these guys doing here? This is our country."

MF: Were you yourself involved in any combat situations?

JR: No, nope.

MF: I know you were talking earlier about a friend you had a story about?

JR: Oh, yes.

MF: Would you mind telling us about that?

JR: His name was Bob Young. He was a captain and we had been in basic training together up in Indian Town Gap that I was telling you about earlier and we got to be good friends. I'm walking in downtown Saigon one night and I just bumped right into him. I couldn't believe it. I'm like, "Bob how are you doing," you know. He said, "Hi Jimmy, I'm blah, blah, blah." He was going from one unit to another. I forget where he had been, but he was going up to Cu Chi the next day. So I was like, "Hey, man, we'll go, we'll have a few beers," you know a good time, so just the next morning he got on a helicopter to go up to Cu Chi, which I guess is about fifteen miles, and the helicopter was shot down and he was seen being led away by the VC. They saw him, and the Vietcong must have been trying to move him quick and they must have been looking at his wallet, or whatever, they dropped it, or something, but anyhow, they brought his wallet in as I remember to the mortuary and I was like, "Oh, my God." So he was captured, and, as you probably know, they had the tunnels up around Cu Chi and, I guess, they took him into there and I remember them saying that they were getting a lot of pressure from his family to get him back. It's a little bit vague right now, but anyhow they didn't get him. I came home and I frequently thought about him, I wore his bracelet, I wore it for years and years and years and when I retired from the fire department, it was bothering me. I said, "I got to find out whatever happened." Well, as it turns out, it was right around the same time, he lived up around Pittsburgh, that they actually found his remains and the story came out. As I heard that it this guy, this other military guy, who was with him had survived and Bob had apparently been in the tunnels and been in captivity for years, years, but he actually died like right before, somehow or other, they got repatriated, and this guy who I should really try to track down or whatever. I guess they had a funeral for Bob. So I'm like, "Holy mackerel," so I was able to get in touch with his daughter and she didn't seem too much to want to talk about it. I just wanted to tell them that I was the last guy that had seen him that he actually knew anyway, and then God knows what happened from there. So I asked my wife if she would go with me to his grave, so we went and the funeral director said that the wife she just really didn't want to talk about it. So all right, so I said, "If he would just give her the bracelet, I gave her a picture that I had of me and Bob in basic training and just some information on one of my cards, if she wanted to talk," and that was the end of it. Never heard a word. But, I think about what horrors he must have went through, oh, my God, to live that long under those conditions, and then die right before. So that's the guy I was telling you about.

SI: In the news this past week, there was a report about how POWs were treated in Vietnam and used as propaganda tools. Did you remember that at the time, hearing them on the radio?

JR: Yes. I remember them talking about Hanoi Jane, Jane Fonda and that stuff. I don't know. I see her in the news now and she says she's sorry, but, boy, that's a hard thing to forgive, especially for the people that she probably hurt more like some of the POWs, they say got hurt by that because then they realized they could do more things to us or whatever, I don't know.

SI: Do you remember them being used as propaganda tools?

JR: The prisoners? Yes, I guess they did. There was a lot, of I guess, Hanoi Hilton and all that. There was a lot of that in the news. I don't remember a lot about it in Vietnam, other than I had some documents, that I had signed for, that I think were, not top secret, but they were secret. What they were, were the documents in regard to the people that had been captured, and there was like their footprints on it, if they were pilots, because that's, lots of times that's where they identified pilots was by footprints because they would burn up if they crashed, but if they had boots on, you could still get a print that you could match against a footprint, which would give you an idea who it was and there was also in that document, there was a question that they asked each one of those guys that nobody else would know the answer. Like, if there was some question about, "Is it really this guy who's talking to us?" "What was your first car or your first girlfriend's name?" or something. That was in that document. So we had it, I guess, because of the footprints, but that was something. That was the only experience I had with any kind of POW stuff.

MF: What kind of activities did guys in your unit, or people in your unit, that you know do to let off steam, or do in their off times? Those who weren't involved in combat or doing mortuary jobs?

JR: About the only thing we could do would be, we had barbecues, when we're cooking out and drinking beer, that was about it, and I know lots of stuff about drugs and stuff and I know one guy in our unit that really was bad on drugs, but, for the most part we really didn't have that problem. It was just hanging out together and trying to forget about what was going on.

MF: Did you have any interaction with some of the local people?

JR: Yes, yes, we had people that worked at the mortuary cleaning and things like that, sure and every room when you lived in these hotels, you had a "mama san" as they called it, and she did your clothes up and stuff like that. I remember one mama san she had six fingers on one hand. It's really something. That was about it. We didn't get overly close with them. They were ever present they were everywhere. I remember when I first got there, they told me, I was living for a while in this hotel, (Hialeah?), they said, "Well, you got guard duty tonight," so you just had to walk around the place. I think I had a .45 with me. So I go up on the roof and they had these clotheslines up there, which I didn't realize it. I go up on the roof, I'm walking along, I feel this metal thing on my neck and I feel like, "Oh, man, VC got me," or something. It was just a metal

clothesline. That's where they hung our clothes up, and stuff like that. In the dark. you don't know any better.

SI: How often would you have to do what I would consider general officer duties, guard duty or something like that?

JR: Yes, once a week, something like that, yes.

SI: Something like officer of the day?

JR: Yes, exactly, exactly, and then you'd have the guys, you'd have to either, you'd have guys on the guard posts around the wire that you'd have to go check on, or you would have like a reactionary force. We stayed in this one bunker where we would have maybe twenty guys sleeping, and, if we were attacked, we were supposed to respond to that area or something. Thank God, we were never attacked.

SI: You told us the story about coming under fire when you were flying in, and then you said that there were some rocket attacks once in a while. Was that ever actually near where you worked or was it just like around town?

JR: It was on the air base, but it wasn't that close. One thing I recall was, they put this giant star for Christmas on top of this chapel, or something and lit it up. Well, hell, I think it was either New Year's Eve, or Christmas Eve, this rocket came in and took that out.

MF: Painting a big, "X marks the spot."

JR: Yes, exactly. They apparently used these Chicom rockets that were like six feet tall and they would just wind them up on a couple of bamboo sticks, or something and just wherever it landed, it landed. Yes, we had one guy one time brought a body in and as the guys took the body and put it onto the table, stainless steel table, it went clang, "Oh, oh, what was that," you know. A body doesn't go clang. So they figured maybe it was booby trapped, so they called EOD, the Explosives Ordnance Demolition people, so they came over and what it was, was this poor guy had the entire head of Chicom rocket, which had blown off when the rocket blew up, it was a big bolt and then it was all shards around here. Well, it went into his head like a cap almost and with his hair you couldn't see it, so when you rolled him over, it was the bolt of the head of this rocket that hit the table. So, they pulled that out, but I thought, "Oh, my God, look at that. That's one clang," anyhow.

SI: They trained you to look for booby- trapped bodies?

JR: Yes. Well, I guess, it was always a possibility. I never experienced it, but it would probably be more at the collecting points that they would run into that, you know, than we would, because they usually check them out before they came to us. But this thing you wouldn't even see this. His hair just covered it up. The biggest problem, one of the things that was the hardest for us, was the bodies in Vietnam decomposed so quick, you know, and oh, man, I'll tell you, when they brought them in and you opened up the body bag, it just gagged you, and they would have

maggots all over them. We used to call them, "mechanized rice," that's what it looked like, like rice moving all over the place. But I remember the problem was how to kill these things? and you didn't like pouring gasoline on them and stuff. It didn't kill them, they used to swim right through it. So somehow or other somebody found chloroform; Open up the bag, dump in chloroform, close it back up, when you open it back up, they'd all be dead. Of course, chloroform, as I found out later in life, is a carcinogen. There were some crazy things that happened.

SI: Were there any other things that you can remember that you'd improvise on the job like that?

JR: I mean, by the time I got there in '69, the mortuary had been operational for a number of years, and, I mean they were great. The guys knew what they had to do. Improvising, I can't think of anything. I remember saying, when we would leave there at night, I think, "Oh, my God, the poor guys, when we come back in the morning they were going to be waiting here for us." Right now they don't know it, but inevitably when you come in the morning they'd be stacked up like cordwood.

SI: You mentioned earlier to blow off steam you had barbecues and beer parties. Were you always well supplied with things that you needed?

JR: Yes. Again, we didn't have much recreation. Guys who played baseball once in a while, but, when you're working those shifts, too, by the time you get back, get cleaned up, have something to eat or whatever, go to bed, it's time to get up again. But as far as food, like in any Army unit, you would trade stuff. We had sheets, naturally, and people would want sheets. We'd trade them for filet minion, or something like that you know what I mean? Silly stuff you would do.

MF: Something different from your normal rations?

JR: Yes, exactly, exactly. The food wasn't that great. We had one sergeant that, he apparently was running a house of ill repute on the side, and he apparently called them, as I recall, because we were the only unit in Vietnam that had blue sheets. Well, guess what this house of ill repute had? Blue sheets. I don't know, that's what I heard anyway.

SI: Anybody I interviewed in any war said VD was always a big concern.

JR: Oh, yes, yes. We had one guy that got it twelve times. The doctor told him, "Buddy, I'm not guaranteeing you I can cure this all right? [laughter] The guy would be standing by the water cooler popping tetracycline, that's what they gave him, tetracycline. He says, "This may not work, you're really killing yourself." But, yes, that was readily available especially where we were because downtown Saigon was right there, so the guys would go down at night, do whatever. Yes, places, "You buy me Saigon tea?" That was what they asked. It's $2.00 for Saigon tea. All it was, was like colored water or something. You were just giving money to them to talk to you, or whatever. They would say, "Where you work?" "Where you work?" Often you wondered what are they looking for, but with the standard sign, with the Vietnamese

of death is this. [demonstrates] So it would be like, "Where do you work? "Oh, oh," then they'd leave you alone.

SI: The sign for death was dragging your hand down the body?

JR: Yes. That's the way I recall it. Then they wouldn't bother you.

SI: When you would go into Saigon, were there designated areas for GIs to go to and areas you couldn't go to?

JR: There was a curfew for one thing. I think it was nine or ten at night. You better not be on the street. But I think you can pretty much go anywhere, but there were areas that, if you had a half brain, you wouldn't go. There were some real, real, bad areas and there were guys in Saigon, who had deserted for years, that lived in these huts, or whatever, right in the middle of Saigon, actually GIs that deserted, and they were, they wouldn't think anything about killing somebody. So, yes there were some real, real, bad areas.

SI: Were there still French in the area at all?

JR: Not that I recall, no.

SI: Were you able to maintain contact with home the whole time with letters or phone calls?

JR: Letters, yes. I tried to write every day or two, and she would try to write everyday or two, too, but with two kids it was rough. But the one thing, it seemed strange, I'm sure anybody would think, but me knowing the system, any letters I got from her are nearly all tore up because I knew that if somebody, when somebody got killed we had what they called a personal property depot and all these guys did was go through the personal effects. They didn't want to send anything home that would hurt your family, you know what I mean? and a lot of guys had a lot of wacky stuff. So I just thought, "If I get killed, I don't want these guys reading my letters." I just didn't, so I tore them up. So as far as contact, though, that was the only thing, there was one phone booth outside the USO that if you stood in line for a long time you could call home. So one day I had some time, I thought, "Let me try this." I go down there and stand in line. I get up to the phone booth. First of all I thought, "Oh, my God, what's my," I had forgot my number. So I finally remembered it, anyway, and I called and I talked to my wife, Kath, and I think with the kids a little bit and we probably couldn't have talked ten minutes. Well, it was just like a couple of weeks ago, she says, "You know I still have that bill." I'm like, "Bill, what bill? She said, "Oh, we got a bill for that phone call." I'm like, "You got to be kidding me." It was $40.00, which I thought it was for free. Now $40.00 in 1969, that was a lot of money. I thought, "Those son- of- a-bitches," I just had the impression, "What little money she was getting from the Army, she had to pay out $40.00 for a phone call." Well, I didn't think that was right. So that was the only contact that I had. I did go to R&R in Hawaii, which was, it was rough. I mean, I see her for a couple of days and I have to go back. I mean, it was nice to see her and all. I remember a quick story. We're getting off the plane and they put you on busses and they brought you into this center where all the wives were. So maybe there's a couple of GIs and a couple of hundred wives, round eyes, as we called them, and I haven't seen round eyes in a long

time. Anyhow, to get off of this bus, this chaplain gets on the bus and, I guess, his job was to get you revved up about seeing your family, or your wife again. So he gets on the bus, and he starts hollering, "Come on, you guys," well, this captain in the front seat stands up and says, "Don't you holler at me you mother, he's going off, and he says, "I'll slit your throat, I'll cut your heart out." I was just sitting there thinking, "Oh, my God." So the poor chaplain, he just put his head down and got off the bus. He was trying to do the right thing, but he just flipped this guy out, and I could understand. I mean the guy had probably been in the field, you know. He's coming, you know, it's such a transition, you're here one day next day you're in Hawaii, you're meeting your wife, you haven't seen her in eight months, and then your back after a couple of days, and there's some second lieutenant standing there, when you get off the bus, telling you, "You guys be back here in four days."

----------END OF TAPE TWO, SIDE ONE----------

JR: The only other thing I was going to tell you about, is my poor wife, who I told you is salt of the earth, and I said was working so hard, she had it a lot worse than I did with two kids. Well as you get off the bus, and you walked down, there's all these women lined up, beautiful American women, nice dresses and everything. I'm walking down going, "Wow," I walked right by her. She had lost a lot of weight, with the kids and everything, and she was trying to get my attention, or whatever, I went right by her. That was, I thought, "Oh, boy what a shame." So anyhow, we did have a few nice days in Hawaii.

SI: Were your children there or just your wife?

JR: No, just my wife. Yes, they were too small.

SI: Your daughter was born just before you went over to Vietnam?

JR: Yes, yes, she was three months old when I left, so when I came back, it was funny, I got into Fort Dix, and I called them, and I said, "I'm back, I'm in Fort Dix." Oh, my God, my mother and father came down, and as I'm waiting, I figured, "Let me go in the bar, get a drink." So I go in the bar and I say to the guy, "Give me a beer," he says, "You have to buy everybody in the bar a drink because you walked in here with your hat on." I'm like, "I just came 13,000 miles, I don't care who I have to buy a beer. Give me a beer." I thought that was some kind of tradition in the Army. My son remembered me a little bit, but my daughter was like, "Oh, who is this?" "Oh, my God." She wouldn't come near me. So that took a little while.

MF: How did the public receive the troops as they were coming back?

JR: It was rough. It was really rough. If you said, like somebody would say, "Hey I haven't seen you in a long time, where have you been?" You'd say, "I was in Vietnam." They'd be like, "Yeah well good to see you," and it had to be it. Nobody, I don't know, it was like nobody cared, nobody really cared. So I just got to the point where I didn't bring it up. Because everybody had their lives, and their own opinions, and I just didn't want to talk about it either, then forget it.

MF: What did you do after you came back?

JR: After I came back I got a job at Rutgers Oil Company. I worked there three years, but I really didn't like it, so, and that was a hard transition. Here, I get back, I had made arrangements with this guy before I left that maybe I would need a job, on the way, when I got back and my father talked to him. So this is Friday, I just got home. He says to me, "Can you start Monday?" Oh, my, with two kids I figured, "Oh, I guess I better." That was a big mistake, that was a big mistake. I should have taken a week or two to unwind a little bit, get to know my family again. So I shouldn't have done that. Anyhow, I did, because I thought I had to, and I just got into a job, which again I didn't like, and I didn't like the circumstances, and I really went about that the wrong way. But we got through it.

SI: One thing that people bring up, and it always strikes me when I interview World War II guys, is this decompression period, whether they're in the field or in country, and then they're on a ship coming home. They had time to process it, or unwind, but with Vietnam, they put you on a jet, and one day you're in the field, the next day you're expected to be at the Ford plant.

JR: Exactly, and, as I just mentioned, that's what I did and how that was really bad, because you should take time, I think, not only to decompress, but get to know people again, or relax , or like you said, or get your thoughts together, but I did not do that. That was some major mistake, but, yes, how can you do that with anybody, really? Send somebody for a year somewhere, bring him back, and just throw him back in. Whether it was a war or not, you shouldn't do that, and, hopefully, they learned from that with what's going on today. I see these guys, actually, from Iraq; they come home for a week or two. I don't know, that will be a little rough. I mean, it's great to be home, but then you have to go back. It must have very difficult. But, hopefully, they have psychologists to learn to figure this stuff out. But there were a lot of guys from Vietnam that flipped out. A friend of mine told me she was out at Thanksgiving dinner and the guy, he had just got home, and the things were, and he just flipped out. He just picked up the whole table with turkey and everything on it, and pushed it all onto the floor. I guess, I could understand this you decompress too quickly.

MF: I know you've gotten into the fire department in New Brunswick, what happened after that? Where did you go from there?

JR: Well, once I got on the fire department, I realized that I really loved it. I was still working part time at the oil company, which I had to. At that time I had four kids, or soon to have four kids, I had to work part time. When you went on the fire department, we're working fifty-six hours a week, and I was making $8000.00 a year, so, and people would say to me, "You're a Rutgers graduate, why are do you want to be a fireman?" "I don't know, I just do," and it worked out fabulously. So, thank God I did, and I think that for anybody in life they should really follow their gut. I would advise you or anybody to do the same. If your gut tells you do something, do it. So, I was a fireman for seven or eight years, I got promoted to captain, and three years later, I got promoted to deputy chief, and I was a deputy chief for ten years, and I got promoted to director, which I didn't like because once you get into the top job, it's like you can't win. You can't win. The guys don't, they got complaints, the administration has got complaints, so that's why I left after twenty- five years. I thought, quite frankly, they would have to pry me

out of the job because I loved it so much, but I made a mistake in taking the director's job, and that was. So I did that for three years, three and a half years, and I retired and I went on to do something that I really love. There, again, I would tell you, "Follow your heart, do what you want to do and it will work out."

SI: I have interviewed a few police officers who some had college degrees, some didn't, but it seems like there's a movement in the police departments to get more college graduates. Is there a similar move in fire departments?

JR: Not really.

SI: Does it help?

JR: No, but I think that the reason you're getting more college graduates in fire departments and, to a large degree, in police departments, too, is the money is a heck of lot better than it used to be, and, quite frankly you can't make, going into business today what you could make by going on the fire department.

SI: And benefits.

JR: And benefits, pension, that is really nice, so I think that's more the reason and maybe kids have, young guys have more education today than they did years ago. For the most part, the average fire guy is, I don't think he is a college graduate.

SI: You told us some of the stories from your career in the fire department, are there any other stories that stand out?

JR: Oh, gosh, I have so many.

SI: We have a lot of tape. [laughter]

JR: I always think about the night the projects blew up, we talked earlier about the projects down here. Well, somebody, and I think I was only a fireman at that time, yes, I was, I was tillering that night. You know what a tiller is? A tiller is the guy that drives the back of the truck; the ladder truck, like Cramer did on *Seinfeld*, like that. [laughter] So anyhow the projects, if you remember them, they were four nine-storey buildings. I think they were brick buildings. Anyhow we go down there and it was at night, it was February, and here the projects are totally dark, you know, and I'm like, "Why are they dark? What's going on here?" Well, somebody had poured gasoline down the chute, the garbage chute, and gasoline under certain circumstances is like dynamite, you know. Well, it lit off and it blew this place apart. I mean, serious, serious damage. Knocked out all the electric and knocked out this water main coming into the building, which was like a ten-inch water main. I mean, the water pressure down there was unbelievable. So it's coming out of there like incredible. So the chief, who was a great guy, Frank Hary, he said, "Let's try to shut this valve off." So we go over and we're standing there trying to close this valve in this water that's coming out on us. I really thought I was going to die, really, I couldn't breathe. We were in this water, it was so cold, and we're trying to turn this valve and,

finally it started to turn and get the water to shut down. So that was an interesting experience. You know being in situations, like I mentioned to you earlier, to save a life is something that's really special, you know, and I've been fortunate to be able to do it a couple of times and it really makes you feel good and that's what that job is all about. I mentioned earlier about money, and it is nice money nowadays, but people shouldn't do it for that. They should do it for the love of the job, in my view, and that's what I did it for. Other stories, God, there's so many stories.

SI: How did the technology involved in firefighting change in the course of your career?

JR: Tremendously. I mean, when I first went on, the more snot you had running out of your nose the better fireman you were, you know what I mean? You just breathed in the smoke. You didn't wear the air pack because that's for wussies or something. Now the guys don't go anywhere without air packs, and rightfully so, because that stuff will kill you, getting in your lungs and stuff. You can't breathe that stuff like we did, and a lot of guys suffered and died earlier because of it. That's one thing. Other things they have, like, they have thermal imaging cameras now, which actually show the heat of a fire, where you can see, actually, where the fire is and you can see a body in there, too, even when it's pitch black, as it is in the smoke. So that's a great innovation in the fire service. There's a lot more rescue-type training. People today as some of these guys are, really, the guys I work with now on the search and rescue teams, are some of the best in the world, in my view. They really, if you're in trouble, these are the guys you want coming to get you. I'm telling you, they're great. But the fire service, the rigs have changed, oh, boy they're so much more efficient. The gear that you wear is so much more protective. We just had Jimmy D'heron killed here in New Brunswick a couple of months ago, deputy chief, in a fire, so, it can happen. What I enjoy now, I'm not only working on the search and rescue team, that I told you about, but I'm also an instructor at Middlesex County Fire Academy. So for me to be able to teach these recruits and some of the things that I've been in and when I see their eyes light up and say, "That's good, that's something I'll remember," that could maybe save their lives someday. So I do enjoy that. I enjoy teaching.

SI: Has prevention always been as highly promoted by the fire department as it is now?

JR: No. You take countries that are really into prevention, as they should be, like Japan. Fifty percent of the firefighters are in prevention, fifty percent are in suppression. Here, maybe, two percent are in prevention and the rest are in suppression. So the effort is not given to prevention that it should be, but that's not the glory part, see. The guys didn't want to do that. They want to fight the fires. They don't want to go talk to a bunch of school kids and talk about, "Stop drop, drop and roll," you know, so that's the problem with prevention. But if we had more prevention there'd be less fires.

MF: I guess next stop is your experiences with 9/11. You were there at Ground Zero for the most part.

JR: Yes.

MF: What was that like?

JR: Well, as I mentioned earlier, I feel like I went to war twice. That was really, it was some day. This is what, that type of work is, what this urban search and rescue team that I am the task force leader for now, and we have two hundred members, that's what we train for, that's what we do. We train for the big ones. When local resources are surpassed, they can't handle it, that's when we come in. So that day, personally, I was in our office in the Lakehurst Naval Station, and we didn't have TV there. Somebody called up and said, "A plane just went into the World Trade Center, it's an accident or whatever," so as it progressed, as you all know, our advance team, myself and four other guys, we got in a car and we went. We went to the city to see what we could do, and that was an eerie feeling. We went through the Lincoln Tunnel, because we were part of the State Police so we were able to go places where normally you wouldn't be able. So going through the Lincoln Tunnel when there's absolutely nobody else in it, I mean, that was something and then seeing the plume, and everything. I guess, we got there by maybe eleven o'clock. The second building had come down, but not too long before, and then we, the sergeant from the State Police that I worked with then, he and I, we did a 360 of the whole scene, and all. Seeing it now was, just to be right there, and see what was going on, the fire and the devastation was unbelievable. So, one thing I remember particularly was on the back of the rig, lots of times the guys, they don't put their boots on, we call it their 'quick hitch,' or 'bunker gear,' you know, until they get there, till they see. So on the back of this one rig were three pairs of shoes, and, I mean, it was obvious those guys weren't coming back for their shoes and it just struck me to think, "Oh, my God they had their off, and went in there, and that was the end of them." But we worked closely with the guys from the search and rescue part from NYFD (New York Fire Department) so, we hooked up with them, and they said, "Look, we're going to use the Javits Center as a base for operations," so, that's where we sent the team. At that time, we had one hundred and forty guys, but we're two hundred now. So, we went up to the Javits Center and we set up our base and we worked at the site for ten days in hopes of finding, but that was the frustrating part of the operation, I think was that there was nobody to save. You thought that "Well, maybe we could do some good here." But, in that particular incident, you either lived, or you died. It wasn't like you were trapped, maybe a few people, but, mostly. But, to see it and to be down below in the, where they had the Path Station, and all that, that was really something. But, fortunately, those people, I mean they knew something was happening so they evacuated that. Those people were gone. Those trains were there, but there was nobody in them. There were a lot of bodies there that we recovered, and the bodies, the thing about the bodies at World Trade, were like they became part of the landscape. You could be standing right next to a body you wouldn't know it because they're all covered with dust, you know. But, we have canines with us too, that helped. It was just a crazy ten days, you know.

SI: Did the presence of all the remains impede the operations, the search operations?

JR: No, not really. The remains were quickly picked up, taken over to a temporary mortuary that they had set up, and there weren't too many, the remains that you found. Again, those buildings down below had been evacuated so the remains that you were finding were those people that were in the top that just came tumbling down, you know. Some of them were just squashed, and there were other bodies that had fallen out, I guess, and really there weren't that many. We got to, I got to fly in a helicopter to survey the site, and I'm thinking to myself, as I'm up in this helicopter, "Wow, what I'm looking at right now is the last thing that those people in those planes saw before they hit the building. I'm looking at just where they were. But we got

to meet the president. I was standing maybe fifteen feet away when he got up on the pile and he had the loudspeaker whatever you want to call it, the megaphone right, and the guys were saying, "We can't hear you," and he said, "I can hear you." I was standing right there. Oh, my God, like one of the news guys said not too long ago, he said, "That was really the point where President Bush's presidency started," when he got up there and he said, "We're going to let them have it," or blah, blah, blah, whatever. It was something to see.

SI: It's an event that just shocked everyone so greatly, but you're in a position where you have to respond, did your training just kick in?

JR: Yes, it really does, it really does. We train constantly for that. As I said earlier, that's what we do. You know, we make mistakes, too, but we are designed to go to these things, and to do what we have to do to take care of business, and we can do it. We really can. We have doctors that we bring with us that treat our victims. It's hard to find a doctor who's willing to crawl into a rubble pile, you know what I mean? but we have them. As I mentioned, we had canine specialists. "We have specialized equipment that we can hear people underground, if they're tapping, or scrapping or anything like that. We have cameras; special weapons of mass destruction specialists that really know when we're in a place where we shouldn't be. It's a specialized team, it's not used that often, but when you need it, you know it's there.

SI: Had you had any training exercise before that was anything on this scale?

JR: No, never on the scale, no, not at all. But, again, we've been doing this for seven or eight years and we try to make it as realistic as we can. We go to a tunnel in West Virginia where we practiced on disasters inside tunnels and hope to God it never happens. But like the Lincoln Tunnel or the Holland Tunnel, or one them, if it happens, it's really going to be a specialized thing, so we train on that.

SI: Was that the only time that the unit got called out?

JR: No, we were called out to the Tropicana in Atlantic City. Remember when that collapsed, the parking the deck, that killed four people? We got their bodies out. The lightly-trapped victims, or the surface victims, the fire department is going to get them. It's the people that are really entombed in the collapse, that's what we do. The difference was, I would say between those two incidents was that World Trade was so huge and so impersonal, it was just so big, but Tropicana was right there. That was personal, because the families are right there, "Get my husband out." So it was a little bit different in, that regard, but that was another thing. We responded to a lot of smaller things. We just went to the Petco explosion about a month or two ago. We got that woman out, the one they were talking, I don't know if you heard about it, but we're talking on the telephone. We got her out. She was messed up. I mean, we had to fill her full of morphine before we could even move her. She was in a lot pain. Yes, that's what the team does, and for me, it's been a labor of love and, you know, it's just the camaraderie, is I guess, what I like. People that are willing to risk their lives, or whatever, right alongside you.

SI: Are they drawn from fire departments and rescue…

JR: Yes, yup…

MF: Did they apply or do they…

JR: Oh, yes. No, they have to apply and they have to go through an evaluation, and it's a stringent evaluation, and based on how well they do in that evaluation, that determines whether they get on the team or not.

SI: Do you work more closely with the Department of Homeland Security now?

JR: Yes. Yes, we do. We just went up to Connecticut for that Top Off exercise. Are you familiar with that?

SI: They did some of that here.

JR: They did some here; here was a biological thing. It was plague, as I recall, but the building collapse part was up in Connecticut and we worked with the FBI and the ATF and all of them. That was pretty cool. So I hope we never have to go anywhere, but it's there if we do.

SI: It sounds like you were pretty prepared before 9/11, but do you think things have gotten better since then?

JR: Oh, yes, absolutely, yes, for sure.

MF: Do you think we still need further steps?

JR: I don't know. I mean there's just about every State is developing an urban search and rescue team now, there should be plenty out there.

SI: I remember watching all the news coverage that day and there were so many false alarms that kept going off. I don't know if there were a lot, but they thought there was a bomb threat called in to the Empire State Building and then … they all raced uptown. Did that sort of thing like impede your work at all?

JR: No, not that I recall. I heard about things like that, but no. The hard part initially on World Trade was everybody ran there. There were people on that pile that had no business being there and it was just handing debris out in a bucket or something. "Come on get out of the way." But you couldn't; it was almost impossible to control the first couple of days. It was just so huge, but after a while, they started putting in the security zone and if you didn't have the proper ID you didn't get in and things got more organized. But the first day or two, oh, boy, that was a mess.

SI: I still have one or two more questions about Vietnam. You mentioned that there was a USO club. What kind of USO presence was there? Were there any shows that they brought in?

JR: Yes. There were shows. Good one. They were bringing in, as I mentioned earlier, round eyes, so they would do these shows, and, I mean, I only went to a couple of them. But, Bob

Hope, I didn't go to that, but he was there. The USO as far as that building in Saigon, I mean, that was no big deal. Again, to the shows. We were at this show one night in this building and this American band is there, some girls and stuff, and they're doing a great job. This is cool, we're having a great time, drinking beer, people got loaded weapons, and this is really something. So finally the guy said, "Okay guys, that's it." Well, a lot of the guys said, "No, that's not it. You keep playing." I'm like, "Oh, oh, this is going to get ugly." So I'm thinking, "How is this?" because people are obnoxious drinking and, again, with weapons. So finally, the guy said, "Okay," they played *God Bless America*. Well, I'll tell you what, everybody just turned and walked out after, you know, they listened to the song, sang it, whatever, and, just as quiet as you could be, everybody just left. I thought, "Now, that was the way to do it," because, otherwise, I don't know. So it brought out the patriotic part and that solved the problem. That's my experience with USO.

SI: Another thing, a few years ago, there was the big controversy with the identifying of the Unknown Soldier through DNA evidence. Now, they're going back and try to identify more people through DNA. Since you worked in that area … what do you think of that, and what's your opinion?

JR: Oh, I think it's great. Oh, my God, it would bring some kind of peace, or closure to the families, and I think they should do it if they can, and I don't know what the status of things are now. I told you, as I recall, we had maybe twenty some X numbers, but all of that was taken to Hawaii, I believe, after Vietnam and I don't know, I guess, they're still working on it.

SI: I guess there were some people on the other side of the issues that said the "Unknown Soldier should remain the Unknown Soldier."

JR: Yes. Gosh, I don't know. I mean, they identify them anyway, right so what can you say? But I guess I could see that, but, I mean, think of the person himself, wouldn't you want to be identified, for Pete's sake?

SI: We talked a little bit about how people reacted to you as a Vietnam veteran when you came back. How do you think as a Vietnam veteran, the general view of them has changed over the last thirty years?

JR: I don't know. Has it changed? I mean, I see some of the guys, and I respect it because God what some of the guys must have went through. But I see them at the Wall [Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC] still in their fatigues, and stuff. I don't know, "Man, you got to move on." I mean, the wall is a hard thing to go and look at, but who are we to speak about what's going on in somebody's mind and … what effect that had on them? How would you like to be overrun by the VC, or something, you know what I mean? Your buddy is killed. It's got to be horrible. I respect it and if people don't like what they did, then that's on them, but, I think, the guys deserve the respect and admiration for what they did. It wasn't easy.

SI: Do you think there's more respect now?

JR: I guess maybe Iraq helps that a little bit, because they're doing a great job, too. I can't speak for other people really.

SI: When you were in Vietnam, did you hear about the protests? Did that affect your morale?

JR: Yes, yes. I really didn't like that and, I remember, I was there during Kent State and it's not funny, but it came out in the *Stars and Stripe*s, the newspaper, that's the paper we got, and I'm like, "Holy mackerel," they're killing them at home, too. You know, that was my first thought. "What the heck is going on?" I think that was May of 1970, if I'm not mistaken. Yes, here you are, over there, and here's these other people dedicating their lives to stopping what you're doing and who knows who was right? I don't know.

SI: What did you think of the anti-war veterans groups?

JR: I didn't like it. I really didn't like it. No. It wasn't deserved, and it shouldn't have happened, really. I mean, we were doing what we thought was the right thing, and serving our country, and other people didn't see it that way, but that's my view.

SI: I meant specifically the Vietnam Veterans who were starting these anti-war groups?

JR: Yes. You mean now, or then?

SI: Then, like the Vietnam Veterans Against the War.

JR: I didn't like what Kerry did. I don't think any of them should have done that. But, I guess they figured, "Well it would help to get the war over and get the guys home." I might just look at it just the other way.

SI: Were the GIs stationed in an area like Saigon, were they subjected to North Vietnamese or VC propaganda?

JR: No, not that I recall. I guess there was something on the radio, with Hanoi Hanna, I think they called their Vietnamese woman that gave like a Tokyo Rose type thing. Yes, I think it was Hanoi Hanna. I just remembered one of the guys said something about what she said one night, "Beware of the chicken soldiers," and that was the 101st Airborne, you know, they have the eagle on their patch, and they didn't know from eagles, so that they thought it was chicken, and I guess they were fighting them well, or something. That's the one thing I remember about propaganda.

SI: Is there anything that we skipped over or

JR: No, really, I mean, I'm sure I'll think of something when I leave, but right now, no. I mean, maybe someday my kids or my grandkids will listen to it. Yes, that's about it.

SI: I was curious, you said your two sons became firefighters; did you encourage them to become firefighters?

JR: Oh, yes, sure. "Got to be firefighters." No, they both wanted to be, they really did, and I'm just as proud as I can be. They're fifth generation firefighters and yeah, that's what we do.

SI: It's almost like a stereo- typical, Irish Catholic firefighter and I'm sure it was very much like that in your father's day, but what was it like in your day?

JR: Oh, it's changed. That's changed, sure, everybody now, yes, sure. Well, I think, that came from, when they came over or whatever, they couldn't get jobs and they said, "The Irish, they took those kinds of jobs."

SI: If there's no other questions, then thank you very much.

JR: You're welcome, my pleasure. If I think of anything else, I'll give you a call.

SI: This concludes our interview with James J. Riley on April 22, 2005 in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Thank you.

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

Reviewed by Diane Watson 11/7/05
Reviewed by Sandra Stewart Holyoak 11/30/05
Reviewed by James J. Riley 1/9/06