YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War Experiences

Personal Experience

O. H. 1268

JOHN SLAGER

Interviewed

by

Douglas C. Senseman

on

July 21, 1987

JOHN SLAGER

My interview with John Slager took place at the Warren Public Library on Mahoning Avenue in Warren, Ohio. I had asked the library if they had a room available in which I could conduct some interview. They assigned us to a very nice wood paneled room in the rear of the library. Portions of the room had large windows so that you could see what was going on in the library.

John and I conducted the interview in the Summer of 1987. The exact date was July 21, 1987. John was younger-looking than I had expected and was dressed in comfortable summer clothing--loose shirt and shorts. He wore sunglasses, which he rotated to rest on the top of his head as the interview began. During the interview, I was impressed with John's knowledge of the early history of Vietnam and his concern with making certain points clear; he seemed eager to convey the correct information. The interview lasted over one hour and after it's conclusion, John and I walked out of the library and parted company.

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN SLAGER

INTERVIEWER: Douglas C. Senseman

SUBJECT: North Vietnamese Army, Viet Cong, Pleiku

DATE: July 21, 1987

DS: This is an interview with John Slager for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Vietnam War Experiences, by Douglas Senseman, at the Warren Public Library, on July 21, 1987.

John, could you tell me what you were doing prior to the war in Vietnam?

JS: I had just graduated from high school in June of 1968. At that time, you heard most all of the news, major, 6:00 news, the happenings of Vietnam. That was pretty much the highlight for about a year. My whole senior year in high school, basically all you had to look forward to, was going to college, and getting drafted, or just getting drafted. There wasn't much of a disparity between that. It was just one way or the other. There was a time in the middle 1960's when they restricted the draftees. I don't know whether you are aware of this, in 1965, they said if you were going to college, then you were exempt. Then, they changed that and said you had to be married, so then there were a lot of people getting married then to avoid that. I think that was in 1966. Then, in 1967, they said you had to be married with children. Then, by the time 1968 came along, it didn't matter. You were getting drafted if you had children, or married, or going to college, if you were an honor student or if you were a drop out; it didn't matter, they were drafting anybody.

So my senior year in high school, I just looked forward to going to college and getting drafted, getting a job and getting drafted, or just getting drafted. They instituted a lottery program, after I went into the service in September of 1968. They instituted a lottery, so perhaps if I would have waited and rode it out, I would never have been drafted. Maybe I would have gotten a real high number. For example, number one was a date and those people were all drafted immediately and then it went on 365 days a year. The 300's didn't get drafted and the early ones all got drafted. So they took their quota. My senior year in high school, this is all I had. I graduated in June and went in the service in September of 1968.

DS: When you were in school, you mentioned hearing about what was on the news. What had you been hearing about it? Had you formed any opinions about the war?

JS: Personally, I did not. My parents were not real clear one way or the other. As a matter of fact, my father was a World War II Veteran. He was a first generation American. So I grew up in the 1950's and 1960's with Walter Cronkite in the 20th Century and programs like this. They were pro-American. It was propaganda to inspire people to admire their patriotism, to excel as Americans. My father was the kind of man where I'm afraid what he said was, "Hey, be good, you're an American, that's enough." He was born in America, his parents were born in Rumania. My grandparents moved here in about 1909 and my father was born in 1911. For him, there was a lot of freedoms in this country that they had never experienced in Europe and as a result of that, I was just supposed to be good on the basis of being an American Citizen.

DS: So you entered the service in September of 1968. How old were you then?

JS: I was just eighteen. I turned eighteen in June of 1968. I went through basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky and that was two months. I went to Virginia in the Army and then went to a Quartermaster School. I enlisted and so I went in and then got this school. They rank extremely fast. At that time, I made corporal. At that time during the war, rank was more available than it is now. Rank is very hard to come by. Well, you know, you have certain losses. These positions needed filled. During that time, I made rank extremely fast. I had two more months of specialized training and then our graduating class got our orders. In my particular graduating class, there were about 200. I think 100 of them, or betweem 100 and 150 got orders for Vietnam and around fifty of them got orders for Korea and all the rest went to Europe. No one

stayed stateside. We were all replacements for people who had already been in before us, so we were going over there as replacements.

DS: Could you detail exactly what kind of training you received?

JS: Yes. I was a supply clerk. My job was...I suppose you could go to the auto parts store and liken that. But in the military, you have an artillery parts store, or maybe you have a tank parts store, or maybe you have an armory parts store for weapons, handguns, rifles; maybe you have a truck, automobile, truck parts, refrigeration units. So the school that I went to, we were able to go in and fill any position as long as we worked with parts. Later on, I started off in the motor pool, ordering parts for trucks and jeeps, but the unit that I was in was fully support, so I also had shower units, bakery parts (hard to believe you ordered parts for the bakery, cranes, oven parts, refrigeration units to store food) also there was petroleum, oil and lubricants. Also, we had the gasoline dump, where you went and you had to have the pumps going. You had to use big ladders. They looked like big rubber balloons, filled up, very thick. Of course they were filled up with 10,000 gallons of aviation fuel or helicopter fuel, regular gasoline, and diesel fuel, etc. So there was the maintenance of all these things. I, more or less, was in charge of ordering all of those.

DS: When you went in in September 1968, how long was your training?

JS: My basic training was two months and my specialized training was four months. After six months of training, I received a thirty day leave. That was from February to March of 1969 and I was in Vietnam in March of 1969.

DS: The four months of specialized training, was that in part, special training to go to Vietnam?

JS: There was only a week of special training to go to Vietnam. It was what they called In-Country Training. You were more or less associated with things like bazookas and mortars, 120 milimeter mortars, and you got some association with the bazookas, you fired an M-16, an M-60's. You got some association with 50 caliber machine gun, which was a very, very, large powerful weapon. So you just got some association.

DS: What did you hear about Vietnam while you were in training?

JS: While you are in training, you don't believe anything you hear about whatever they are telling you, you don't believe in anything while you're in training. You don't get much association with people that are really willing to tell you the truth. You more or less go and learn on your own. While you're in training, you just get whoppers, stories that really basically aren't true.

DS: Could you give an example of a story that maybe you heard that you knew wasn't true?

JS: Yes. My First Sergeant in basic training told me that he went out in the field and wasn't able to brush his teeth for seventeen days. Anybody could pack a tooth-brush. Another example, on a Search and Destroy (S&D) Mission, you hear one thing where they found women in booby traps stacked together, or children in booby traps on ammunition dumps. Things like that.

DS: After you got over to Vietnam, did you feel that your training in the United States had been adequate?

JS: For what I was doing, I think it was, yes, for me. I don't think that anyone in infantry, basically in a rifle unit, I don't think that they ever get enough training. I think that rangers do and green berets, I think they basically get a pretty good idea of what is going on. Recon (reconnaissance) units, LLRP (long range recon patrol) units, which are five and six men teams going out and setting ambushes; and SRRP (Short Range Reconniscence Patrol) those are ranger units and so they go out and I think they are very well qualified to do their duty.

DS: When did you first find out that you were going to Vietnam for sure and how did you feel about it at that time?

JS: You find out after you graduate from your advanced individual training; AIT, they call it. What you do is the class graduates and then all of the sudden, you're standing in line there, and the NCO, Non Commissioned Officer, comes in and calls you name and tells you where you're going. They go right down the list alphabetically, and hand you your orders, and then you find out at that moment where you're going. So certain places, like Fort Lewis, Washington, in the Army, and Oakland, California, meant that you were going overseas to Vietnam. Places like New Jersey, and there was another place in New York that meant you were going to Germany. It said right on the orders where you were going if you were going to Vietnam or something like that. So that is when you found out.

I'd like to also make a comment about the men's reactions. The younger guys that were my age--eighteen, or nineteen or so--were pretty much expecting to go. So in our minds, it was just another stride that you knew you were going to have to make. The emotional reactions came from the older guys who were married. By the older guys, I mean guys who were like 26, maybe they graduated from college. I can remember two men, especially, one guy who graduated from the University of Virginia, he was a CPA and he was married and he did have children and he got orders for Vietnam and he absolutely broke down and wept because he had already assumed that it was automatic death, whereas I didn't have that opinion. For me, it was a look, go and see, find out, kind of a thing. So I didn't have any expectations. Even the news didn't bother me. If you remember any of that at that time, in 1968, we went through the TET Offensive, which was one of the turning points of the lowering of the activities of the Vietcong, the VC, then it became an NVA War (North Vietnamese Army) and they were regular soldiers. That was the difference there. We got a lot of that. Then there was the siege at Que Son, I don't know if a lot of people remember that, that happened I think in January, February, and March, which got a lot of public exposure, which really got a lot of bad press and they likened that to Dien Bien Phu, which in 1954, when the French were conquered by the Vietcong, there was a lot of that. It didn't turn into that. Que Son received a lot of political publicity.

DS: Going back to when you got your orders, how did you get to Vietnam, the trip over?

JS: You flew on a commercial airlines, Pan Am or Trans World (TWA). I don't know, either one, I suppose. We flew in as commercial jet and it was a nonstop flight. We didn't stop at all. We flew straight over there from...I went out from Washington. I had a friend who flew out from Oakland. He stopped at Okinawa. Sometimes they stopped in Japan. I went straight across.

DS: Could you tell me a little bit about the trip over there?

JS: Well, the trip over was basically like this: all the officers sat in front and then the NCO's and then E-5 and below, they all sat in the back. It was just a regular trip. It was regular. There weren't any dramatic experiences. A lot of people couldn't sleep. The plane was air conditioned of course. We were served two snacks or a breakfast, if you want to call it. We landed at Cam Rahn Bay, that night, like about 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning. First thing we felt was the humidity and the heat.

I'm 5'10" and I think I went over weighing around 145, 150 pounds. I was very trim and in good physical condition. I got off the plane and I remember as soon as you took that first step out, there was a blast of heat and humidity, you knew you were going to stick around there for a long time. I got there just as the monsoons were coming in. The monsoons come in for a season of about four or five months so that was another dramatic point. Everyday it rains like at 3:00. It will rain for five minutes. Then, the next day, it begins at 2:59 and rains until 3:06. Until then, finally it peaks out and rains all day. There is just no getting by it. Everything is wet. You are wet. If you are out in the field it's worse. Everything is wet. This is the monsoon and I was just coming in the country.

DS: This is early 1969 when you were coming in?

JS: This was March of 1969. I'd like to make another comment also. On the plane, we had an officer, I think a lieutenant who came in and said that he wanted all the combat MOS's (Military Occupational Specialty) or what your job was supposed to be; he said that he wanted all of the 1100's which was Infantry, 1200's and 1300's which was Armor and Artillery, he wanted those people off the plane immediately. They went up and they were put into an isolated area and they were processed very quickly. They took a head count and they needed more people. So then they started at the E-5's and then they went down and selected every person with a less favorable MOS, like say truck driver. They would take him and put him over here, and then they took a cook and put him over here and everyone who didn't have a non skilled occupation and they took these people and made them infantrymen. All of these people were sent immediately. They were processed immediately and sent up country to this place called Pleiku. They were sent to replace two companies that had just been totally annihilated. We found that out, so that was my welcome to Vietnam.

DS: Did those people realize what was going on?

JS: I think that there was some realization of what was really happening. They went down, you gave the guy your job and gave him your records. Once they told you and then they checked your file to make sure that you weren't lying and then they took so many people and sent them up there to become infantrymen. So here these people were trained in one field and now they got there, and all of a sudden, it's surprise. So they were put in a rifle company and that was with the 4th Infantry Division at Pleiku.

We stayed in country for two or three days and they were trying to find us a place to go. Guess where I went? Pleiku. I didn't go with the 4th Infantry Division. I went with a field service company that supported the 4th Infantry Division. So we worked right with them. We were separate from them. We were logistics and they were infantry and they had most of their own guys but when they had something big, then they came to us. As far as being out in the field, we took care of them.

DS: Going back to that incident on the plane, if you were going to become an infantryman, or a cook, did they receive different training or did they both receive the same training but one was designated to go on to become a cook and they gave him a little extra training?

JS: Well, the way it worked, Doug, was that everyone receives a basic combat training where you learn to fire the weapon, you learn to crawl, you learn to keep your head down and wear you steel pot, flack jacket or whatever. That is technically, I think, what the military says is "sufficient" combat training. Then, everyone who is infantry goes to two or three places. They received more Vietnam training, where they go through and maybe they will do a S&D (Search and Destroy), a recon through a mock Vietnamese village, or maybe they will go through the swamps. So they get more of that. The cook would have just gone to cook school and learn to cook or bake and now here he comes and now he's over here with this same guy. So he maybe would not have had as much of an advantage in that but I think that he had an advantage because he may have been more cautious.

DS: But he was at an obvious disadvantage?

JS: No, I would not say that. It was up to the person. I would say it was up to the individual. I think you're missing the point here. The point is that some people have more intuitive notions than other people when you are in the field, and especially if you're subject to being ambushed, if you're subject to anything, the actions that take place. Like just say if we're sitting here in this room and all of the sudden we start receiving mortar fire. You may get up and run. Well you're the dummy because I'm going down. So you've got infantry training, you get up and run, you're a real idiot. I'm down on the ground and haven't had any infantry training. So nobody has the advantage. It is the individual and I think that that is what you have to make your shift on. You will have to see that that does not give you the advantage.

DS: When new arrivals came into Vietnam, were they treated differently?

JS: Yes. You were FNG, you were a fucking new guy and you had dark green fatigues, new clean boots, you had a cap on, and you were a real sight. You didn't know how to flague your fatigues, you didn't know how to talk any of that in-country talk which was a combination of Vietnamese and French and American. You had to know pretty much certain sayings and certain mannerisms to get your point across. So they knew that you were new by the way that you handled yourself and the way you talked and the way you dressed. You were at a disadvantage in a field unit, in a rifle unit. Now, I can say this because I knew those guys, I was with them pretty much most of my time. I was with the 4th Infantry Division and then later on our company was transferred and we went to this placed called Bong Son which was a fire base Blackhawk, which was where the 173rd Airborne Brigade and the 101st Airborne Brigade were. So we stayed in the same kind of conditions. I was always with combat units. I was always with those guys.

Unless if you were new coming into the field as a rifleman, as an infantryman, if you didn't express yourself well and if somebody didn't pick you up right away and take you under their wing and tell you what the hell was going on, your percentages were real low for survival. Because there was just too much to learn too fast to be a survivor. I think that there is a couple good movies that don't show the other side. The "Platoon" movie, now that showed a rifle company in which those guys didn't pick anybody up. That was bad. I disagreed with that. "Full Metal Jacket", now they picked those guys up if you have noticed. They told them what to do and how to do it. You see what I'm saying here? So, as a new guy, you were at a tremendous disadvantage in a rifle company. You weren't allowed to go do anything radical until you got seasoned.

DS: So someone did pick you up?

JS: Yes.

DS: When you said that new people didn't do anything radical, I've heard about new people walking the point. That wouldn't happen then?

JS: I'd say no. I'd say you probably wouldn't get to be on the point because the point is too valuable. If your NCO had a hard on for you and he wanted to get rid of you, if you really pissed him off, he might put you on the point in hopes of getting rid of you, but everybody

would know. We would all know. We would all know that this guy was trying to kill you and we would not like that, unless we didn't like you either, then we would be willing to get rid of you. That could happen, I suppose but most of the time, with a new guy out on the point, there is just too much going on out there. Everybody's life back here we are talking with a squad, or maybe even a whole platoon, which would be about thirty or forty guys in a platoon, maybe they'd be broken down into ten man squads. We just can't lose fifteen guys because some asshole is up there that doesn't know what he's doing. He's not an asshole but if he doesn't know what he's doing, it's the same thing. So they were very, very careful about who they put out there. Especially when you were on an S&D (Search and Destroy). You were making a sweep and you didn't want any "Jack" up there who didn't know what the hell he was doing. Somebody who knew what to look for, maybe he'd spot a booby trap. He would stop and then set it off and get rid of it. He was good at finding those things. Those things were passed on. They were like tricks of the trade. So he was a very skillful man, very important.

DS: Could you describe what a typical day of yours in Vietnam would be like, if you had a typical day?

JS: Yes. I'd like to say that you got two days off a year. On my job, you got two days off. The only days I got off: I got my birthday off and then either Christmas or Thanksgiving off. You got to choose. The more rank you had, you got first choice, and then whoever the second guy down was got his choice, and then what was left would have to fill in on the alternating days. So you got two days off a year and that was it. You worked basically seven days a week, got up at 6:00 and had formation. Or maybe you got up at 6:55 for a 7:00 formation. Then you went to work right after that, you were there, you got an hour for lunch, and then you worked until 5:00 or 6:00, basically. That was the normal day. Then you were on your own until then. I was in a hot spot. The guys back in base camp a lot of times were in a compound right in the middle of a city so you had a lot of liberty. You could go out into the city and mingle. You could go to the Vietnamese restaurants, you could go to the Vietnamese theater. My position, mostly we just came back and played basketball or volleyball. A lot of guys gambled. If you were fortunate enough to have an NCO club, you could go up there and get drunk and fall down. You know, "drink until you drop." A lot of guys went and smoked pot. Maybe five or six guys went off in a bunker or some place on the line and just got buzzed and just partied all night. So pretty much from that time on, you could do whatever you wanted.

DS: Your rank at this time was?

JS: E-4. I was a Corporal.

DS: You are doing the logistical support for the men, you are at a location where the men come back and then you give them the supplies?

JS: Right. Like on the fire groups or an LZ, like where I was stationed. Fire base Baker we were at, which was 4th Infantry Division. That was in Kontum. Kontum, Dak To, they had that region in there. That was kind of hot there for awhile. They would go out and sweep, maybe the infantry guys would go out for a week or two and then they'd come back and maybe want a shower. We had eight shower units there. You are there, you make sure they had hot water, the boiler is working, the heads are working. Well, everything is working. The bakery was back in base camp and we'd bring out fresh bread everyday for those guys and we'd keep their food supplies up. Our trucks would bring them in. So pretty much, that's what we did.

DS: Did you have any encounters with the North Vietnamese?

JS: I didn't necessarily have encounters with North Vietnamese. I was in base camp and there were several times where they would try to come through the wire. They were sappers. Mostly what they did with us was they would just shoot rockets and mortars at us and then, stay away. They felt that they could do more damage that way. Maybe they would do ten rounds one night and that would be all for a week. We would get five rockets one day. The difference between the rockets and the mortars were that the rockets would "woosh" where the mortars would whistle. So you could tell the difference. You knew what was coming in. That's what most of our experiences were. As far as the sappers, we really had only one hot time to where there were several that got through and that was real pandemonium.

DS: What exactly is a sapper?

JS: He would be a Vietcong and he would be stripped down to his underwear or trunks, and sandals or bare feet and they would slither through the wire. They might have ten or fifteen hand grenades and an A-K 47 with four or five magazines. They were just going to come in. That is pretty much a suicide mission. They are just going to try to come in and blow the place to hell. I don't know if they had any specific targets. If they could get through without getting spotted, because sometimes guys would just fall asleep on guard. If they could get through without being spotted, they could run down

a line of barracks or tents and just throw hand grenades at every damn one of them; do a lot of damage; just ruin a lot of people's day. So they could have been effective.

DS: You mentioned that one incident where there was pandemonium. Is that an incident where they went down and threw the grenades?

JS: Well, they got through the wire. I don't know how it worked out. Maybe you might have four or five strands or roles of wire. So you have the bunkers with sandbags stuck up and you might have about two or three guys pulling guard. They were basically infantrymen who had come back from the field. They had been in the field for about two weeks or thirty days and now here it was night and they had to pull guard. So you might have those every thirty or forty meters. As a result, it would be totally dark and these guys would try to crawl through the wire. You had cans and stuff on the wire and trip flares and things like that but if they could wiggle through, they could get in. So that's what happened. It was a little bit more than that because they got up in there and blew some of the place up. They knocked out the two bunkers and there were about ten or fifteen of them, just like ants. They'd come in all over the place. It was a little scary.

Your sounds are really good. You know the difference in sounds. Then you have automatic weapons that fire right away. Everybody knows the sound of an AK 47 going off. It is just one of those things where your heart is going about 160 beats per minute and you're all eyes. It can be dangerous. A lot of times, G.I.'s shot themselves because they were so terrified. Unless you are really careful it can be dangerous. So this happened one time. Most of the time it was just rockets and mortars. Also, our convoys used to get ambushed. As a matter of fact, I guess the Lord was with me on that night. I'd like to say that everybody believes in God at one time or another. I was on a convoy and we were coming back to Pleiku and the truck in front of me was just absolutely blown away by a rocket. I'm talking about fifty or seventy-five feet in front of me. But that's the way it was. It could be right there in front of you and no even get to you. That could have been your war. Right then and there, it was their war. Naturally everybody opened up and was looking for everything. We just got a couple rockets and then we left. Things like that would just throw you off balance.

DS: What would happen if something like that happened, the convoy would stop or just keep going?

JS: The trucks in front of it would immediately take off, then if it's possible, then you try to get around that vehicle some way, and if not, then the next truck has to push that thing off so the convoy is backed up and they're all sitting ducks. So in other words, at that point, they try to get somebody up in front. Most of the drivers are told that in coming around this, you go to the side of the road so that if you are hit, then you won't block the rest of the convoy. There is a procedure. Good drivers will do it. Bad drivers won't.

The ideal thing was to be in a recon unit in infantry, where you were a long range recon patroller or a short range recon patroller. You work with five or six guys that had their end of it together. So you would go out and set ambushes up, you would go out in a helicopter. It would take you maybe 20 kilometers out and drop you off and they'd say, "We'll see you in about ten days." Maybe they'd been getting a lot of activity down this trail. So you were going to go up and put a surveillance out, and set up ambushes. That was the best you could be. In a rifle company, a lot of times, those were screwed up really bad. You had some real assholes in there that you couldn't trust. Your life is dependent on this person and it's easy to get the "I really hate you" feeling in that kind of a situation. Also, the upper echelon-- majors, colonels, and generals-- they liked to sacrifice rifle units. They would say, "Okay, well we will sacrifice 3rd platoon, now we'll sacrifice the 1st and 3rd platoon." If they sent the 1st and 3rd platoon up against a battalion sized NVA force, you know that they are going to get their asses kicked. So, for a company sized NVA unit...The NVA were very, very good. They had the respect of the common soldier. So they would just get creamed and they would be gone, probably 95% casualties. I mean death. The other 5% would be wounded. So you have a 100% casualty rate, to some extent, with 95% death. The upper brass would sacrifice the rifle companies but they never sacrificed recon units as a rule. Sure they were sent on missions and screwed up, or maybe they got caught, or trapped. As a rule it was the rifle units that got the shaft most of the time.

DS: Is that because the rifle units were people who were less technical, less skilled?

JS: Well, a lot of draftees, sure. The thing about it was that you could get into it. If you could get into it, then maybe you went to jump school, airborne, and then maybe you would say, I'm really into it. I'm going to go to ranger school, that is getting into it. It was really up to the individual whether they wanted to go on. It was up to the individual how much you want to

put into it. The Green Berets received eighteen months after two months of basic training. They received at least a minimum of twelve to eighteen months training. I had a buddy who was a medic but he was almost a doctor. Just the idea of performing surgery. He could amputate your arm or leg or foot. He could perform surgery on you, even on a heart. I'm talking about some really technical stuff here. He was a Green Beret Medic. So this is what I'm trying to say, the difference between the ranger units and the rifle units. That is why a lot of guys when they went into rifle units, they saw the difference and then they applied for rangers. So there was a difference.

DS: How about race relations? You talk about Rangers and the other units, did race come into it in Vietnam?

JS: I think that there was more of an acceptance when I was there. Especially for what I was doing, there was more of a dependency upon the individual. So race wasn't...We were with a lot of "brothers" from Philadelphia and Chicago. They called each other "Nigger" more than we ever thought about doing it. They would just bad mouth each other left and right. I'd never talk to anybody like that. The way they talked to each other, that was their business. I think it was mostly the individual. Sure the "brothers" hung around the "brothers" most of the time. The white guys, the guys that drank a lot, they hung around each other. The guys that smoked pot, they hung around together. It didn't matter if they were black or white or Hispanic or Puerto Rican or Mexican. It didn't matter. They were in that crowd, they all drank, they all smoked pot and that's what they did. They were in this crowd, and they all wanted to go downtown and get laid every week, they did. They were into that. It didn't matter if they were black, or white, of from the street, if they had a college degree. They just got into it. It wasn't a race issue.

When I was in Germany for a couple months, that was a big race thing there. I was totally upset because my best buddy was black, from New Orleans. Of course, we were both pretty much exceptions. He had just come from Korea and I had just come over from Vietnam and we didn't want anything to do with those guys. They were crazy. The race issue was...We laughed at them. We used to go on our own and we would laugh and talk about them. Those guys were absolutely nuts. Of all the things to make war about. They were stabbing each other and having some serious problems in a few German cities. We used to laugh about them. It was absolutely stupid to us. I think that's pretty much the way most everybody came out of the country feeling. You're ass was hanging in the balance. You didn't care what

he was. Could he shoot? Is he going to run or is he going to hang in there with you? Very rarely did anybody run. Most of the bad mouths ran.

DS: What would happen to somebody later if they ran?

JS: They'd probably get set up.

DS: Some of the other interviews I've done, they've talked about that. They've talked about enlisted men setting up officers, they called it fragging. Was it common?

JS: It wasn't common but it could happen. It wasn't common? What do you call common? What is your occurrence rate, one in one hundred?

DS: Something that would happen more than once or twice in a year's tour of duty?

JS: Well, it could happen. Usually what you had was a platoon of forty guys, then you had a 1st Lieutenant or 2nd Lieutenant in charge of that platoon, then the company commander was a captain, the battalion commander was a lieutenant colonel with the executive officer as a major. So the captain had to trust the lieutenants, the lieutenants had to trust the men. So, as a result, there was a lot of looking out for the troops. There was more looking out for it, sure you were sent into a bad place, sure you knew it was going to be hot, sure you knew you didn't want to go, sure if we would raise our hands we would say "Who wants to go?" and nobody would raise their hands. "Who wants to run away? Let's go back to camp!" Everybody's up. But what could we do. You had to do it. If you didn't, you didn't have any Army, you didn't have any discipline, you didn't have any purpose. So I think that there was more looking out by the lieutenants looking out after their platoons than there was the other way. I would like to say that it would be like 1000 to 1. What you would do was you would hear about it. Two guys would have an argument, well that was between them, this is what I'm trying to say. Two assholes are over here arguing. Maybe two guys go out and get drunk one night and want to have sex with the same whore. That is between them. Well they want to bring it back over here. Most of the guys would never tolerate that. They would just address the issue right away and try to straighten it out. If those two guys would eventually get into something more, one could turn that around and say this. Do you see what I'm saying? But it didn't have anything to do with the platoon. That was between two men. I'm talking of all of the platoons. Four or five platoons in a company, five to eight companies in a battalion, three or four battalions in a regiment, four or five regiments in a division. We are looking

at eight or nine divisions here. We are talking lots and lots of companies.

DS: So the men would be fairly close to their lieutenant?

JS: Yes. There had to be a lot of trust.

DS: If someone really was up on the line with the men, it would probably be the lieutenant, or would it be higher up like a captain? Who would the men have their gripes out with most of all?

JS: Yes. They would bitch at the lieutenant. He would try to work things out. But you've got to follow orders.

DS: When you say you have to follow orders, I've heard of men (a PBS special) where men simply refused to follow orders. They just said, "We're not doing it, we're not going." Did that ever happen?

JS: Not that I know of. The NCO's that I knew were pretty hard line. I'm talking like guys that have been on their third tour in the infantry company, E-7's. E-6's would be on their second extension, so we are looking at two years straight in a combat unit to make rank. They would never tolerate that.

DS: You mentioned people grass, marijuana. Was there a lot of drug use?

JS: Sure. Alcohol, nicotine, pot. The second tour I was there in February 1971 to September 1971, at that time, they moved on to heroin. They were smoking a lot of heroin. They would take out a cigarette and they would mix with the tobacco, some of the white powder put it back in the cigarette and then smoke it. So they had moved on. Grass was not as popular now. They were all buying two grams of heroin, 95% plus heroin for $5. You'd get $1,000 worth of junk for $5. There were a lot of heroin addicts there. Not too many of the guys shot it that I knew of, but I know most of the guys smoked it or snorted it.

DS: This is only when they are at the base camp?

JS: Yes. At that time, I was in a base camp area, it was a in helicopter unit. I don't know what was going on out in the field I couldn't say what was going on because I wasn't there but I know that maybe they smoked a little pot, but they did that back in camp. They didn't smoke pot out in the field. A lot of them didn't smoke a lot of cigarettes out in the field because you could smell it. It got real murky out there. Back in camp, guys smoked and got drunk.

DS: What kind of friendships did you form over there, or did you form any?

JS: Very good friendships. Very trusting friendships. You knew pretty much about guys' whole lives. You knew where they were from, what happened to them, things that happened to their ex-wives, their old man, their dad, mom, family, sister, things that broke their heart, things that made them happy. There was a real dependency there so there was this tremendous opening up. You would be ready to open up in a minute. You'd share a few hours. It was a commodity.

DS: Have you kept in touch with any of those people?

JS: I got some cards and letters from some guys in California. I went to see one of my friends for few months in 1972. I had a couple friends in Michigan that I went to see later on. I had some friends in Canton and Akron that I went to see later on. Now things have changed a lot and you just kind of lose contact. So I guess I haven't kept up, no, not to this point, sixteen years later.

DS: What changes were the most dramatic between the cultures, the Vietnamese and the American culture, do you think?

JS: The two hour lunch. The Vietnamese took the two hour lunch or three hour lunch and slept and that was great. The idea that it is 110 degrees out, you have no business being out. Their pace was a lot slower, they were laid back, they didn't care. I'd say the majority of them didn't want the communists to rule them. They were making enough money off the "Yanks" to where they were enjoying it. Naturally the communists, if you had land, you were God, if you were wealthy, you were God, if you were rich, you were God. So the rich people, more or less the capitalists, supported the Yankees. There was that.

There were a lot of whores, a lot of club owners, prostitutes and drug dealers that wanted the "Yanks" to stay also. There was a lot of money being made off of the Americans. So as far as economics go, they really missed the G.I.'s. I'll guarantee you that.

DS: They became real capitalists?

JS: I guess.

DS: Did you have any relations with the Vietnamese adults? Did you work with them?

JS: Well, they worked for us but the idea was that I got into the cities. I got into the people. Very briefly, I'll give you one incident that may describe just exactly what kind of guy I was there. I was on a single mission. I was just going to this city to get some artillery parts; when you need them, you got to go right away. I went and got the parts and I'm on my way back. I passed this little house. The houses are fifteen, twenty feet from the road. This family was just getting ready to eat supper. I had been in the country for eight or nine months and I saw this family getting ready to eat supper and I just stopped the truck and backed up and asked them if I could eat with them. That is a very rare thing. There were enough of us that did that to where naturally they were more than gracious, they enjoyed having us. We'd do little things like let the kids where your hat and give dad a pack of cigarettes, that was the Vietnamese people. The hustlers, the whores, the pimps, those people were not the Vietnamese people.

I would go to the whore house with my buddies and they would all just get right into it, pick out a girl and go and I would just sit down and talk to Mammason and just kind of check the place out. I was more or less interested in the people and what it was really like. Pappason, the old man, chewed his beetlenut and smoked those damn cigarettes, which were disgusting. But I would be sitting down there, drinking tea with him. All my buddies are in there having sex for a couple hours, but this is the way I looked at it. I went over at the age where I was ready to learn. I saw that there was more to Vietnam than just that trashy side that people liked to glorify. They give it the color of the flare. That is not the Vietnamese people, and it's not. I had dinner with a lot of people and I had the respect and the trust of a lot of Vietnamese people. That is something that you earn yourself. You just make that yourself.

DS: Now when we talked initially, you said that you were there in 1969, 1970 and 1971.

JS: Correct.

DS: So you went in for... You signed up again?

JS: I went back for a 2nd tour. I went to Germany for two months. My father became ill. He had cancer and eventually died. I was brought home on emergency leave and then I restationed at a missile base in Cleveland. I didn't like stateside duty at all. It was too much bullshit for me. I had been used to other things. It seems like a soldier is out of place if there is no war. You were just a freak. I'm not pro-war, don't

get me wrong, I'm not a hawk. I'm just saying that a soldier is really a misfit unless he's in a war. I felt that and I just went back to Vietnam. I called a buddy of mine in Washington who worked at the Pentagon. I made the decision on a Monday or Tuesday, called my buddy on a Wednesday and within ten days I had my orders.

DS: Did your friends and family think you were nuts?

JS: I don't know. What they thought wasn't important. They weren't on my case. They didn't want me to go. The lady that I was seeing, who I eventually married, she didn't want me to go but you have to understand. I just wasn't stable here stateside. I wasn't used to it. I was not low key. I was low key when there was tension.

DS: So you went back in and did basically the same job?

JS: Yes. Basically, only this time it was a helicopter unit. So we worked with helicopters.

DS: How would you say that your participation in the Vietnam War changed you, if it did?

JS: Just basically there are three lessons that I've learned over there. One is be fair to yourself, number two, is tell it like it is, and number three is come out of it. Basically at the time, it meant be alive.

DS: Well, thank you for doing the interview. I appreciate your time.

JS: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW