(00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

TS: Today is Friday, June 1, 2012, and this interview number twelve with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor.

General Vessey, as we’ve done the last couple times, I wanted to open up our last topic of conversation, which was the Quemoy and Matsu crisis of 1958, and ask what additional information or insights you may want to add to that.

JV: I don’t think I want to add anything to that, Tom, but I do want to go back a little earlier, to the time at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, because there’s some important things that we didn’t talk about.

TS: Yes, Sir. So again, just to refresh us on the record, this is 1957.

JV: ’57-’58. Anyway, there were some officers – I may have mentioned it at the time – but I think there were a dozen Korean officers in the class. Of that dozen Korean officers, at least three of them were very important to me later on in my career, and in the security situation for the United States. I’d just like to go back and cover those. And also I should say that there were two Austrian officers in our class. They were in my section at the Command and General Staff College. Curiously enough one of them was named Osterreicher, which is a great name for an Austrian.

TS: Yes, Österreich being [the German word for] Austria itself. Right.

JV: Anyway, Karl Osterreicher served in the German 1st Parachute Division in World War II, and during one of the breaks or several of the breaks we did some serious map reconnaissance and finally decided that we probably shot at each other during the battle of Cassino [in 1944]. (chuckles) Sort of an interesting side note. But anyway, I just happened to remember Osterreicher, and that we hadn’t talked about it.

TS: I mean when you discover that that is indeed what may have happened, how do you talk to each other about something like that?

JV: By that time we had become friends already, and I think it was probably mid-year at Leavenworth when we got around to talking about World War II and where each of us had served. So it was one of those strange coincidences that come up in life, and we both got a laugh out of it and I think probably banged a beer glass together over it, over the story. But it was, as you recall from our earlier conversation, a very tough battle for the Americans.
and a very tough battle for the Germans. The 1st German Parachute Division of course was one of their top notch divisions, which had participated in the invasion of Greece [in April 1941] for Germany and had had a key role in the offensive in the spring of 1940 in Europe. Anyway, so much for that.

But among the Korean officers was General Kang Young-Hoon,¹ who was in fact the president of our class. We had two lieutenant generals in the class, Kang Young-hoon and Trujillo, of the Dominican Republic. Of course Trujillo was really an ersatz general. He was very young and I think he had been made a lieutenant general by his father [Rafael Trujillo], so that he would at least be equal to the most senior officer in the class. But at any rate, Kang Young-hoon was a very competent officer in the Korean Army, a hero in the Korean War. Was from North Korea originally himself. In fact, I think to this day his family is living in North Korea. But at any rate, Kang Young-hoon was then the senior officer in our class and the president of the class and a distinguished gentleman.

TS: You encountered him later as well?

JV: Yes. He went back to Korea. He had been a corps commander when he came to the class at Leavenworth. Went back to Korea and became the superintendent of the Korean Military Academy. Then in 1962 was the Park Chung-hee² coup,³ and Park Chung-hee wanted the cadets at the Korean Military Academy to march in a parade, sort of a victory parade, honoring his coup, in Seoul, and Kang Young-hoon would not permit that to happen. He was very much on the side of democracy for Korea, didn't believe that they should have had a military coup and he refused to let the cadets march in that parade. As such he became persona non grata for Park Chung-hee, who himself was a major general at the time of the coup.

Park Chung-hee put him in prison originally, but then because Kang Young-hoon was so popular in the Korean Army Park Chung-hee could see that he'd made a mistake, so he banished him to the United States. As the story goes, Park Chung-hee's query of his advisors was, “What state in the United States has the fewest Korean immigrants in it?” So it turned out to be New Mexico (chuckles) and Kang Young-hoon was banished to New Mexico where he got a Ph. D. in political science I think it was, at the University of New Mexico. Eventually went on to teach at Georgetown for some time.

Later, about the time I was the commander in Korea, in the mid-1970s, Park Chung-hee was having serious political problems and he asked Kang Young-hoon to come back and help soothe over the political problems in Korea, and Kang Young-hoon was appointed a minister in Park Chung-hee’s cabinet at that time. In fact, minister of transportation as I remember. He then later served the Korean government in a number of different capacities, including being the principal negotiator with the North Koreans when Rho Tae-

¹ Kang Young-hoon (b. 1922); Korean Army lieutenant general, later prime minister of South Korea, 1988-90.

² Park Chung-hee (1917-1979); Korean Army general and political figure; unelected and later elected leader of South Korea from 1961 until his assassination in 1979.

³ Park Chung-hee seized power through a military coup d’état on 16 May 1961.
woo was president and had what he called his opening to the North, trying to come up with some sort of a peaceful resolution with the tension on the Korean peninsula. Then Kang went on to head the Korean Red Cross for a number of years. But anyway, a marvelous man and a dear friend, and certainly someone who understands North Korea probably better than anyone either in the United States or South Korea.

TS: Where is he now?

JV: He’s still alive in South Korea, but he’s a bit older than I so he’s a little long in the tooth.

Another one of the officers there was Kim Gye-won. Kim Gye-won, like Kang, was a hero in the Korean War and a competent officer in the Korean Army. By the time I got to Korea as the commander of the forces there, Kim Gye-won was the secretary general to Park Chung-hee, then the president of Korea. We renewed our acquaintance, and in fact Kim Gye-won was very helpful. We were trying to stabilize the tours for Americans in Korea, but the housing situation was something that seemed almost impossible to handle. The troops in the combat units were living in old Quonset huts that had been built shortly after the cease fire [of 1953]. Their housing was terrible. Family housing was almost unavailable for families.

TS: So it was a contrast to the situation you encountered in Germany with regard to housing.

(12:00)

JV: Yes. And the Congress wasn’t interested in providing money for family housing for the troops in Korea, because they always looked on it as a temporary sort of thing and that we would be out of Korea soon. But anyway, after I explained this problem to Kim Gye-won, he and Park Chung-hee addressed it and found a way to inspire a Korean contractor to build some apartment buildings in Seoul that we would be able to rent to American service families. The contractor would rent to American service families for basically their housing allowance. So it turned out to be just like having U.S. Army military housing, except that it was built and maintained by a Korean contractor. So that was among several helpful things that happened as a result of Kim Gye-won being secretary general to the president.

Of course he met an untimely end when Park Chung-hee was assassinated. Kim Gye-won was in the room. He was the only one in the room who survived, and was later sentenced to prison because he did survive I guess. But as far as I know he’s alive today. He was alive the last time I visited Korea. I visited him. He’s out of prison by now, thanks to the help of some of us who had pressured the Korean government to do it.

The third one that I’d mention is Sohn Jong Nae, who was another Korean army officer, later seconded to the Korean CIA and in fact was the Korean intelligence officer in the United States for many years. Later on in an incident that came up much later in my career, Sohn Jong Nae will come up again, so we don’t need to go into it at length today. But at any rate, another important character to remember from that group of Leavenworth classmates.

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4 Rho Tae-woo (b. 1932); Korean Army general, later president of South Korea, 1988-93.
TS: So there were a number of relationships that you established during that time, people you hadn’t expected to meet but you did, and encountered them later on.

JV: Right. They turned out to be important relationships.

TS: Can I add the young man Trujillo from the Dominican Republic, or was he someone you never saw again?

JV: Never saw him again. *(chuckles)* Him and his pink Cadillac and his Hollywood [girlfriend] ... He had his wife and family with him at Leavenworth, but nevertheless he had some Hollywood starlet whose name I’ve forgotten came to visit him several times when he was there.

TS: We’ll leave that one sort of to peoples’ imaginations.

JV: Out of my ballpark. *(chuckles)*

TS: Very good. Okay, I was curious about Quemoy and Matsu because, as I was thinking about that episode, the whole concept of appeasement came to my mind. From your perspective, when we look at this, either the first crisis in ’54-55 or this one in ’58, how much was the idea of appeasement, or not wanting to make the mistakes of Munich\(^5\) all over again, part of our response in these crises?

JV: I think you’d probably have to ask the presidents at that particular time that question, and the secretaries of state, rather than me. Certainly we see it today: We’re in the midst of a presidential political campaign and you can see the importance of both the president [Barack Obama] and his challenger from the Republican Party [Mitt Romney] making sure that people who might be enemies of the United States don’t get away with anything, at least without some sort of censure from the candidates.

On the other hand, when you’re President of the United States, it seems to me with the presidents that I’ve watched who looked at the job sensibly, they don’t want to get the United States in a war if they can possibly avoid it without seriously damaging our own national interests. I’m sure that after the experience of World War II and the Korean War, and then certainly later on the Viet Nam War, that anyone looking at East Asia would be inclined to view East Asia as most of the U.S. Army had viewed it for years, as a place in which we don’t really want to fight a war. So you want to stabilize the area and be able to carry on commerce and have reasonably peaceable relationships with the countries in that area while maintaining your own principles.

At the time of Quemoy and Matsu and the two incidents that occurred there, the two times of greatest tension, Chiang Kai-shek was still heading the Chinese Nationalists [on Taiwan] and had a powerful lobby in this country supporting him. And that was something that the political leaders of the country had to pay attention to, and placate people who

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\(^5\) Reference to the Munich Conference of 1938, where leaders of France and Britain appeased Hitler’s demands for territorial gains in the former Czechoslovakia.
wanted to go heavily on the side of the Chinese Nationalists. At the same time, war with China never appeared to make a lot of good sense to most of the people in this country, I think. It was as true in those days as it is today.

TS: Moving forward a step then, your biography in the Joint Chiefs of Staff website says “1959, Assignment Officer, then Executive Officer, Artillery Officer’s Division, Office of Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, Washington, D.C.” This is a Pentagon assignment, just to clarify.

JV: Right.

TS: And the length of this assignment, from the biography looks like four years here in total?

JV: Actually I spent three years in that assignment in the Pentagon, and in the meantime I finished up my baccalaureate degree. Finally!

TS: I was going to ask you about that.

JV: You don't want my lecture on the tyranny of academia.

TS: No, but you’ve described a very full professional and family life a number of times in our conversations, and I’m wondering how and why you found time to complete this Bachelor of Science degree.

JV: (chuckles) With great skill and agility. It was a lot of work, and as you move from one school to another you find that requirements change and things that you thought you had completed, the mandatory courses at one school, you find a new set of mandatory courses at another school and so forth. In fact I wound up with far more credits than I needed for a baccalaureate degree, but finally got one from the University of Maryland. Actually I spent one semester on the campus at College Park, which was sort of interesting because most of the courses I had to take were for seniors, so the classes seemed a little more adult.

But I had one freshman course that I had to take. I had a lot of philosophy courses in my bag, but I didn’t have Philosophy 101 or whatever the basic philosophy course was at the University of Maryland so I had to take it in order to legitimize the advanced philosophy courses I had taken. (chuckles) So it was an interesting exercise with this forty-year old guy sitting in a class with a bunch of fuzzy cheeked freshmen.

TS: Now when you were on campus, in or out of uniform?

JV: Out. Wearing civilian clothes.

TS: What was that like being with essentially a younger generation?

JV: It was fun. Interesting. And of course in the armed forces you work with the younger generation all the time.
TS: True enough.  
(23:10)  
JV: I shouldn’t say competing with them, but you’re actually taking examinations with them. I had more than a few chuckles to myself.  

TS: At that time did the United States Army have education centers that helped servicemen like yourself?  

JV: Yes, indeed.  

TS: Can you talk about your experience with the Army Education Center?  

JV: They helped guide you and helped see that the Army paid its fair share of your tuition and you paid what the Army wasn’t going to pay. So they were as intent on their relations with the schools as they were with the relations with the members of the U.S. Army it seems to me.  

TS: How supportive do you feel the United States Army was in ensuring or encouraging that you completed a college degree?  

JV: They certainly helped, but I think that the responsibility was mine and mine alone, that if I didn’t do it, shame on me.  

TS: Was this something that you perceived or that the Army made clear to you was something that would make easier or encourage advancement in rank?  

JV: I think by this particular time it probably didn’t make any difference.  

TS: That would change later on?  

JV: I don’t know. It seemed to me that I needed to do it. It was something that had to be done.  

TS: And you didn’t stop there – I know from our very earliest conversations you earned a Master’s Degree from George Washington University in 1965.  

JV: Right.  

TS: What kept you going? Why did you not stop after a Bachelor’s Degree?  

JV: It became a way of life I guess.  

TS: Did you like school?
JV: The opportunity was there and certainly there are a whole lot of things in this world that I didn’t know then, and there are a lot of things that I don’t know now, and many things that I ought to know, that I should have known then that I didn’t know and should know today and still don’t know. So study is an important part of life.

TS: How did you decide what subject to study for a Master’s Degree? You had lots of choices.

JV: At that time I’d just finished the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, and of course the theme that ran through is it industrial mobilization for the United States and the importance of business administration. If you didn’t understand it before you went to the Industrial College, you certainly understood it by the time you came out. So it seemed to be an important thing to pursue. And looking at the jobs that I might have in the future, it was knowledge that would seem to be useful, and in fact it turned out to be extremely useful.

TS: So you were thinking ahead when you were taking or deciding what classes to take or what courses to study?

JV: I hope so.

TS: This assignment, Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel at the Pentagon, for a lay person, can you sort of tell us what that office does, or did when you were there?

JV: I can tell you what we did. Of course the Deputy of the Staff for Personnel covers all aspects of personnel from the Army, that is, from enlistment and recruitment, in those particular days also the draft. And although the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel is not responsible for training, he’s responsible to see that the people who need training get to the people who do the training. Then pay, health, retirement and so forth, from the day you look like you want to be a soldier until the day that your soldiering ends. But the particular office that I was in was the assignment section for artillery officers.

TS: What did this office do exactly?

(29:00)

JV: Made sure that the artillery had the officers that they needed, and managed the force of artillery officers so that it grew properly so that when you need X number of colonels to populate the field artillery in the United States Army, that you did in fact grow those colonels. The job I had was assigning full colonels. That meant having knowledge of the records of the full colonels of artillery, and who would be eligible for any particular assignment when you needed an attaché in China, or a commander for a given artillery unit, or a chief of staff for a division or something like that. Who had the skill and talents, and who would likely be not only successful in the job but could be promoted after the job?

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TS: So really it’s knowing the different pools, who’s out there.

JV: Who’s there, and what can they do, and what do they need to do to be more useful to the Army.

TS: So when need arises it’s not starting the scramble right then and there to decide, okay who do we need and where do we find them? Because we already know that.

JV: The idea is, it’s like farm system for a baseball team.

TS: A pipeline kind of thing?

JV: A pipeline. People to check off the right sorts of jobs in the pipeline and see if they’re ready for the next step, and if they’re not find a way to get rid of them or move them on so they’re out of the way.

TS: So you’re seeing people. If they’re not good enough, it’s time to move them out of the way as well.

JV: Right.

TS: And that means seeing them leave the United States Army?

JV: Right. Or go into sort of dead end jobs.

TS: Were you, prior to this assignment, were you aware of how really the system worked like you’re describing it?

JV: Loosely. Because you’re in the system yourself.

TS: True enough.

JV: And usually the people from that office, for example, when we were students at [Fort] Leavenworth, the assignment people from the various branches came out and talked to us and told us where we stood and what was likely to happen to us. We had an individual counseling session with the assignment people.

TS: So they were keeping you aware of where you stood and kind of what might come next after this.

JV: Right.

TS: And this office is essentially the larger picture of monitoring this for the entire United States Army, at the rank you’re talking about.
JV: Yes.

TS: It strikes me that you’ve described a number of positions already. Your tour in Germany, which did a lot of deployments you said; working with different types and different assignments with artillery...what you’re describing, this is a desk job.

JV: This is a desk job, correct. My first real non-operational desk job. The first time that I wasn’t concerned with what the cannons would actually do tomorrow. *(chuckles)*

TS: Tell me how John Vessey is adjusting to what you just described.

JV: *(chuckles)* With difficulty.

TS: Seriously? Flesh that out a little bit.

JV: It was sort of one of these eight to five jobs. At that time I got my recreation in the Pentagon Officers’ Athletic Center by skipping down there and playing handball. I would play handball at noon and play handball after work and when I didn’t have a class to go to. Some nights I had classes to go to. But from time to time I would tell my boss in the middle of the day that I was going down to play some handball. I know he was disappointed that I wasn’t at my desk, and I tried to make clear to him that there was no relationship between the amount of time I spent with my backside glued to a chair in front of the desk and the amount of work I produced.

TS: Can I read through that and pick up that you could satisfy the requirements of this job in fewer than forty hours per week?

JV: Sometimes you had to work longer. There were times of the year when you needed to spend a lot of extra hours at it. But a lot of it was letter writing and so forth that I could do faster than the actual eight hours in that particular day to get the work done.

TS: Can you talk about a typical week at work in this particular position? What kind of things did you do?

JV: Any particular day, first you had to deal with the crises of the day. When you had as large a sampling of people as we had, even dealing with only the full colonels, something had gone wrong the day before, somewhere in the world. Someone had broken a leg, or jumped out of an airplane and hurt himself, or did something stupid, or decided to get out of the Army, or something like that. So you had to kind of take in priority the things that needed to be done, to take care of the job that you had. Then you had all this pile of correspondence, the people that wanted to tell you what should happen to them.

TS: So they were suggestions?

JV: Right.
TS: What do you do with things like that?

JV: Write an honest, civil answer to them on what it is. Or you had senior officers writing into the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, suggesting that something happen to a colonel. You would wind up answering that letter for him. Then you had the sort of yearly scheduled movement of officers.

TS: Things that you can plan for.

JV: Right. And these are generally things...by January you needed to do such and such; in February you needed to do something else. To have a recommended group to go before a board for promotion to general, or a recommended group to go to a senior service college, or something like that. But that's the sort of work it was. A lot of writing. Writing things for somebody else to sign.

TS: That would go over their signature, not yours.

JV: Right.

TS: I was going to ask, if you're getting letters from colonels for example, people up the food chain from you, it took someone else above you to write back to them?

JV: Right. Usually.

TS: With difficulty adjusting to this job you said, what set of skills allowed you to be successful at a job like this?

JV: I think Nicholas Murray Butler's first evidence of an education was mastery of the mother tongue, and I would say being able to write clear, coherent, short letters in the English language was probably skill number one.

TS: What I take from that is that you saw those around you, perhaps others, without this particular skill?

JV: I think that all of us could be graded on that skill and few of us would approach a hundred percent, and all of us likely have some room for improvement, but it varies. (39:50)

TS: Graciously put. In the midst of this, of course, you're going to school. There are a number of situations around the world that involve the United States and the United States military that happen during this time. I'm curious how you formed opinions about them, or how you perceived of these at that time. The three things that I'd like to sort of flesh out a little bit is the Berlin Wall crisis of 1961, the Cuban Missile crisis of 1962, and the longer term but increasing U.S. presence in Southeast Asia. Now you may not have been involved with any of these directly, but these are, particularly at specific times, very much news items that are commanding the headlines and the television coverage and I imagine being – perhaps I'm wrong – talked about around your offices.
The Berlin Wall crisis of August 1961 and the military standoff with the Soviet forces in October 1961 in that city. How aware were you of this particular crisis that involved the United States Army?

JV: In the Pentagon there’s a marvelous system for going through all the major newspapers of the world and taking either excerpts or the article itself and putting them together. In those days it was a sheaf of papers that would come around. I’ve forgotten how many copies we would get, whether each officer got one or whether there was one for a batch of officers, or whatever it was. But it was something you read every day. Whatever was going on in the world at large that had any impact on the security of the United States, you had a chance to read about it the day that it was reported in the secular press. That would many times be supplemented by analyses by intelligence officers that would be attached to this particular thing. So wherever you were, in whatever job you had, you had every opportunity to be reasonably up to date. You may not have all the classified information that was available, but you had all the unclassified information. So there were always subjects of conversation either at lunch or whatever.

Now one of those you mentioned was the increase of U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. About that time the settlement with the…I don’t think settlement is the right word, but the quasi-agreement with the Soviets, that we would each stay out of Laos, came about. And there was a quasi-peace agreement within Laos itself, about how much of the government would be in the hands of the Communists, and the hands of those who wanted to lean more to the West. We did in fact at that time establish an undercover position in Laos for a colonel in the United States Army, who would be there in civilian clothes and supervise our support to the Laotians that leaned toward us.

TS: This is a public appointment, a military advisor, or an undercover position?

JV: Oh, no. It was undercover. In fact we took him off the roles of the Army. It turned out that they wanted a field artilleryman, or that they wanted a guy that happened to be a field artilleryman, to take that job and so it was my duty to convince him that he should take this job.

TS: He could have declined.

JV: Well, he could have declined, but his next option would have been looking for a job in the civilian community I’m sure. But at any rate, I did that and curiously enough later on I had the same job. (chuckles)

TS: I was thinking that, but okay, you’ve confirmed it already.

JV: And I should mention that during this time…I said I spent three years in that personnel job, and then I spent a semester on the college campus at the University of Maryland, and then I went to the Armed Forces Staff College, in Norfolk. So part of the Cuban Missile Crisis, I think I was at the Armed Forces Staff College at the time.
TS: How did you form your own opinions about these events? You’re getting briefings, you also watch television and read the newspaper, listen to radio. How were you forming opinions about what these episodes mean?

JV: Showed the information and seek additional information if you need it. Fortunately at the Armed Forces Staff College we’re there with senior officers coming to talk to us, with students, and mock planning exercises. So it’s a great opportunity to be at least intellectually involved in what’s going on in the rest of the world.

TS: Sure. I’m curious if you encountered a range of opinions when it came to the Cuban Missile Crisis, or the standoff in Berlin in 1961, about what was the appropriate response here and what should we do? I mean the Cuban Missile Crisis lasts for two weeks, and it’s very much up in the air as far as what we should do and what we would do as a nation.

JV: I am just trying to recall the differences of opinion among my contemporaries. They ranged from bomb them to make sure that we didn’t become involved in a war over this. So it ran the gamut of the same options that the President of the United States had in dealing with those crises.

TS: How did you form your own opinions? And what were they, I guess, is the more direct question.

JV: Certainly we didn’t want Russian nuclear weapons sitting in Cuba under any circumstances and making sure that the Russians, or the Soviets, got the message. Get those missiles out of there was uppermost in my mind. And the same with Berlin. It was one of those things, I had the feeling in both those cases that the Soviets were pushing the line just to see how far they could push the line, and that it was a place for us to draw the line in the sand and make sure that they understood that was in fact the line and that we would not permit them to go further. And it turns out that that’s what we did in both cases.

TS: Yes. President Kennedy, the president for both of these, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Berlin crisis, responded appropriately then in your mind?

JV: Yes. We had been in Germany and worked with the forces over there, we had prepared ourselves for exactly the sort of thing that the United States faced at that time.

TS: So this would have meant, given your experiences in West Germany already, a standoff in Berlin would have meant some kind of raised level of awareness...

JV: Readiness.

TS: Readiness, excuse me, in West Germany as well?

JV: Yes.
TS: And with the field artillery for example, what would that have meant? Would that have meant a deployment too, or simply heightened awareness?

JV: It would have meant moving forces to be able to run the blockade of Berlin and being ready to do that if required. Then for the whole United States, it meant reinforcing the forces in Europe, just as the Cuban Missile Crisis meant getting the naval forces out there for a naval blockade and making sure that the Soviet ships were found, followed and intercepted.

TS: This time at the Pentagon, I wanted to ask you about examples of positive leadership. You’ve been very good about mentioning people who were important to you. So I wanted to ask you who during this time at the Pentagon, this three or three plus years, who helped you? Who were the examples of positive leadership that you remember?

(52:40)

JV: A brigadier general headed the office that I was in. We had two different brigadiers there while I was there. They were both competent enough, and I think probably helped me but weren’t influential in my later career. A fellow that preceded me as the colonels assignment officer, his name was Ed Wendell, and I think I’ve mentioned him before, his being at Fort Sill right after World War II. He was particularly helpful to me, and later on he was the G-1, or personnel officer, at Fort Sill when I went through there after my third tour in Germany and was looking for a job. But I learned a lot from whoever was there, particularly on getting correspondence through the Army.

Probably the most helpful person was the secretary in the office of the brigadier general, who’d been there in the Pentagon for many years and was a smart cookie herself. Dorothy Daring was her name. But at any rate, she had a better feeling for what sort of correspondence would get through the system than I think any of those of us who were in the military did. (chuckles) So I probably learned how to write military letters better from Dorothy Daring than from anybody else.

TS: Speaking of women, being in the United States Army over twenty years now by the early 1960s, what roles do you see women in by this time in the United States Army?

JV: By this time the women were still nurses and clerks.

TS: How often did you encounter women in uniform, or were they an anomaly?

JV: My basic duty had been troop duty in a combat division up until then, except for the time at the 8th Army Headquarters and the Coordination Center in the Philippines and then this session in the Pentagon, so the women in the Pentagon were basically civilian employees. I’m sure there were some military women there, but I never saw any.

TS: So up until this time, what I’m hearing is, you’re not encountering women in the United States military.

JV: No. Other than when you’re a patient in a hospital and an Army nurse was there.
TS: This will change only later then.

JV: Yes.

TS: Learning and teaching. In this different type of environment of job assignment, what skills do you feel you're improving at during this period that will help you later on? You mentioned writing already.

JV: Again, it's team building. The team in the assignment office doesn't look like much of a team, but it really is a team. Understanding that you're a member of the team and have responsibilities for not only what you do, but in making the team work. It didn't make any difference if the colonels in the United States Army were all in the right place at the right time – if the majors and lieutenant colonels and captains and lieutenants weren't there, the team hadn't done its job very well. So trading ideas and getting advice and assistance from the others on the team and trying to help them as you could was important.

(58:00)

TS: You've mentioned team building consistently in our conversations. Is this something that the United States Army did well, stressed team building, or is this something that was a challenge and you felt that you were perhaps a little more careful with this than others?

JV: I'd say the answer to that is yes on both sides. The Army does it well, and I wouldn't pretend to be a proponent of it to the exclusion of the rest of the Army, but it's important that the people in leadership understand their role in team building and that foster team builders in the chain of command that they're involved in.

TS: Very well put. You're living here with your family in Washington for these years?

JV: Yes.

TS: This is a private question: what did you and your family like to do best in Washington when you had time?

JV: Again, pay was low at that time; with the Eisenhower administration we had a balance of payments problem with Europe. There were things that President Eisenhower did that were unpopular in the armed services. For example, going to Europe: you could ship a U.S. car to Europe. For many, when you got to Europe, the European automobile manufacturers made better cars than we did in the United States. So there was an opportunity to buy a Mercedes or something like that in Germany at a reduced price, but the president decreed that we couldn't ship that back without paying for it ourselves. You could ship your American car over there and the Army would pay to ship it to Europe, and the Army would pay to ship it back. If you bought a new car and bought an American car from a dealer in Europe, the Army would ship it back. But if you bought a European car, you had to pay for it yourself. And that was our contribution to helping President Eisenhower solve the balance of payments problems with the Europeans. As I said, pay was low. I don’t remember when exactly we had pay raises and what they were, but we were well below the comparable pay for the people in the civilian economy at that time.
TS: So you’re a major in the United States Army at this time and you’re at the Pentagon. Did you perceive and sort of feel the fact that you were underpaid?

JV: I don’t know that I felt that I was underpaid. I knew I wasn’t paid a lot of money. For example, when we went to the Pentagon the first time, I had a 1956 Ford station wagon. It needed some repair work, and I did it myself. I overhauled the engine in that thing in the automotive repair shop in the hobby shop on the post, with the help of some real good sergeants who really knew what they were doing. *(chuckles)* When my house needed painting, I painted it myself.

TS: So to those who might think a major in the United States Army pushing twenty years of service, this guy is living high on the hog...

JV: No, we weren’t living high on the hog. In fact we scoured the events schedule in the Washington area to see what was free. Fortunately Washington has a lot of free things. It was a good time. John was about twelve years old at the time, and the other children were correspondingly behind him. But each Sunday, for example, we’d go to church and we maintained a membership at the Smithsonian and continued to do that from those days until now. But we’d go to the Smithsonian Museum after church. We’d have lunch. They had a nice lunchroom there in the Smithsonian. Have lunch and spend the afternoon on the Washington Mall in some part of the Smithsonian Museum. It’s a place where you can go...I suspect you could go once a day for the rest of your life and not see everything there is to see. So it was a great experience. The kids enjoyed it. On the weekends the service bands in the summertime would give outdoor concerts at various places around Washington. Put a little picnic supper in the picnic basket, find out where the Army band or the Navy band was playing, and go sit in the grass and listen to the band and eat your picnic lunch.

TS: Sounds like a good time even today.

JV: Yes. Right. There are a million things to see in the Washington, D.C. area. At least in those days most of them were free.

TS: Would you say that, prior to this move to Washington you had an idea of what this might be like. Did your experience, both Army and private life, exceed your expectations, meet them, or lag behind?

JV: I was sort of torn in Washington. Professionally, I didn’t want to be there. In fact I would walk to my car in the north parking lot every night, and the airplanes taking off from Washington National fly right over the Pentagon parking lot. By and large, almost every night I’d look up at one of those airplanes and I’d think, I don’t know where it’s going but I wish I were on it.

TS: Why were you frustrated by this time at the Pentagon?
JV: The administrative stuff I was dealing with was not my particular cup of tea, or at least I felt it wasn’t my particular cup of tea. Something that had to be done, and I had the job and had to do it, but wished that I had a different job.

TS: Was this type of desk work fairly or unfairly seen as a dead end?

JV: No, I don’t think so. Considering the people who in those days worked in the assignment office, most of them that I knew went on to bigger and better things afterwards. So it certainly wasn’t a dead end. It was pleasant work. It was a good crew. We had a great bunch of people there to work with, and I played a lot of golf with the guys in the office. One of the officers there, Darryl Jones, was an ex-minor league professional baseball player before he got in the Army and like most baseball players was a whale of a golfer. Could hit the ball a mile. Darryl Jones set the course record at Fort Belvoir when I was playing with him. So for years I was very happy that I had a very good round that day and the score card was framed and on the wall in the clubhouse for many years. (chuckles) Fortunately I had one of my better rounds at Belvoir. Inspired by Darryl.

TS: But what I get from you too is that, no matter what the stop has been, you’re a fairly optimistic, upbeat person and you’ve found a way to make most or accentuate the positive in almost every place you’ve been. Is that your personality?

JV: I don’t know. (chuckles) Life would be pretty dull if you didn’t.

TS: There are nattering nabobs of negativism out there though, right, and we’ve all met them.

JV: Right. As I say, from a family point of view, it was a pleasant time. We had a wonderful church, St. John’s Lutheran, on Franconia Road. I was the scoutmaster of a scout troop while we were there and finished up my baccalaureate degree. Had a lot of fun teaching the teenage Bible class at the church. It was the days when Peanuts was first very popular in the newspaper. I remember that the Phillips version of the New Testament came out. It was a contemporary English version of the New Testament which the kids in the Bible class found very attractive as did I. I think I found the theme for the Bible lesson of the week in the Peanuts column someplace during the week. So all in all it was a good time.

TS: That’s the way you’ve described it here; you haven’t had much negative to say about it. I know that our time is limited today, so this is a good place to stop if it’s okay with you.

JV: Okay.

TS: Very good. I’ll turn the machine off.

END OF INTERVIEW

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