

Narrator: Gen John W Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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(00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

TS: Today is Wednesday, 4 April 2012, and this is the second interview with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor.

General Vessey, when we left off last time we were talking about your high school experience at Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis and I want to ask you about something that you mentioned after finishing last time, which was about what you called the most important thing about your high school years. I'll let you develop that story from there.

JV: As I said to you last time, the most important thing that happened to me in high school was meeting my wife to be.

TS: Do you remember the first class that you and Mrs. Vessey had together?

JV: I do indeed.

TS: Talk about that.

JV: It was a chemistry class. We were both seniors in high school. It was in chemistry class in the second semester as a matter of fact. I remember that she was that absolutely smashing blonde girl that sat in the front row, and I sat in the back row. *(chuckles)*

TS: How did you get her to know who you were, General Vessey?

JV: I don't know the answer to that. I always thought she was out of my league *(chuckles)* and lo and behold, she passed me a note one day and invited me to a Sadie Hawkins Day party, which was the 29 February 1940.

TS: Do you remember that particular date?

JV: I do indeed.

TS: Tell us some details.

JV: It was at the house of another classmate who lived not too far from where I lived. Avis lived on the west side of Lake Hiawatha and the Hiawatha Golf Course Park. We lived on the east side of that park area, on the east side of Lake Nokomis. So it was a couple of miles. It was a good walk. Her father drove us to the party; I remember that very well. Her father

was a stern looking man of German extraction. Spoke in short, what seemed like gruff terms to me. *(chuckles)* I remember her father driving us to the party and the air in the car...although these words weren't spoken, but it was clearly young man, you'd better behave. *(chuckles)*

TS: Suffice it to say you still remember the air in the car all these years later.

JV: I do.

TS: Did you and Mrs. Vessey then date regularly after that particular event?

JV: We did.

TS: At the same time...this is the spring of 1940 and the war in Europe had begun the previous fall, in September of 1939. The Japanese were at war in China, and had been since 1937. As a high school student, how aware would you say you were of those world events?

JV: I'd say that we were intensely aware of it. Just we as a community. There were a number of Minnesotans who went to Canada and volunteered for the Canadian armed forces. I knew several friends who did that. Considered it myself. But I had already joined the Minnesota National Guard, so it was out of the question for me. My father, being a World War I vet, was intensely aware of it, and was convinced that the United States would eventually be involved. There was an air of inevitability I think, but at the same time a great hope that we would not be involved.

TS: Was it talked about...how was it talked about in school, in your classes?

(6:00)

JV: I think those two sort of conflicting views, that is the one the view that the United States would be involved, and then the view that we really didn't want to be involved in another European war, and certainly in a war in east Asia, that we didn't want to be involved in a war in east Asia. I don't know that anyone ever took a faculty census, but I could just think through the teachers that I knew and had and I can point to some that I knew had the view that we would be involved, and others who had the view that we should not under any circumstances be involved.

TS: So in a sense reflecting the difference in opinion there in American society as a whole.

JV: Right.

TS: How about among your friends, your age cohort group, young men sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old? What kind of conversations did you have among yourselves about this whole event, series of events?

JV: I think seventeen year olds, our conversations weren't very profound. The questions were, should you go to Winnipeg and enlist in the Princess Pats or should you not do that. We didn't...when you're seventeen years old and a high school student, you don't have any

idea what war is like. You read about wars and battles and the losses of lives and so forth, but the absolute cruelty and nastiness of war, you don't know about it, and it's sort of an adventure at least as I remember it at that time.

TS: Right and that's what we want to know, yes. Abstract almost?

JV: Yes. This followed the Spanish Civil War, and there had been quite a lot of publicity about the Spanish Civil War in this country during the '30s. There were good guys and bad guys. Curiously enough, the Communists primarily were the good guys in the Spanish Civil War, and I think most of the Americans that fought there fought on the side of the Communists and not on the side of the Fascists. On the other hand, the Fascists were the winners.

TS: Correct.

JV: Then we'd had the Czechoslovakian takeover.

TS: That's right, 1938-39. Were these events, General Vessey, would you say part of the process that led you to join the Minnesota Army National Guard in May of 1939, or was that a separate decision making process?

JV: Looking back on it now you'd like to say that yes, they were probably part of it so you can make the process... Frankly, there was another aspect of life at that time, and that is that it was the latter years of the Depression and we had lived through the Depression. Everybody was broke. That is, everybody that I knew was broke. It was a way to add a few dollars of income to a broke teenager.

TS: When you say that, talk about the Depression and money, when you think about Minneapolis is the mid-to-late 1930s when you lived there, would you say that you perceived or saw the Depression around you or the effects of it?

JV: Yes, clearly. But for someone who had grown up during that period, the contrast between the times we lived in and better times was probably far greater for someone of the age of my parents than for me. This is the way it was for a person of my age. It was just...a dollar was an awful lot of money. I remember to become a First Class Scout you had to have fifty cents in a bank account, and that was hard to come by. You remember the Depression. I remember the Depression. I remember the circumstances today and the contrast between those years and any of the following years, good times and bad times. And they were by far worse times than any of the following years. But at the same time, they didn't seem all that bad at the time. It was just the way it was.

TS: It's the contrast possibly between...if we could contrast then and now, the contrast would seem stronger, in other words.

JV: Yes. It's huge. Think of the education of the population at that time. Just amenities like plumbing. How many of us had indoor toilets? Once we moved to Minneapolis, we had indoor plumbing.

(13:00)

TS: You mentioned in Lakeville you didn't all the time.

JV: We did not, no. At lunch today we were talking about gardening and talking about how pervasive the idea of vegetable gardening was in those days. Everyone had a vegetable garden. I didn't know any families that didn't can a lot of vegetables to eat during the winter. Who does that today? Not very many people.

TS: Perhaps as a hobby, but that's about all.

JV: Yes.

TS: So you noticed this. Your parents of course might have made the contrast more strongly than you as a young person. How did your parents react when you brought up the subject of enlisting in the National Guard, because you were just seventeen?

JV: My mother thought it was a very bad idea, and my father thought it was okay.

TS: Can you imagine the discussion between your parents as far as whether you should be allowed to or not be allowed to?

JV: *(pauses five seconds)* No.

TS: Your father's arguments apparently won out.

JV: Yes. There was no real opposition to it.

TS: How did you come upon the idea in the first place?

JV: From a friend who had earlier done the same thing.

TS: He had joined. And what was appealing to you about joining the National Guard?

JV: Well (A), I was told I could be the motorcycle rider.

TS: So at a pure base level, that's what we're talking about here.

JV: *(chuckles)* That's right.

TS: Did you already know how to drive a motorcycle?

JV: Yes.

TS: So this was appealing. I take it there was some money involved too?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: Do you remember how much, Sir?

JV: When we drilled we got Federal pay for the day, which would have been like \$21 a month for a soldier in the Regular Army got at that time, so that wasn't much. Then you got a state stipend which actually added to it, so it turned out to be almost a dollar for a National Guard drill period. Then when you went to Camp Ripley in the summertime, two weeks at camp would wind up \$15-18, maybe \$20 or something like that.

TS: The way you talked about money, a dollar being a lot of money...

JV: That was a lot of money.

TS: Now correct me if I'm wrong here. You were a motorcycle rider in Headquarters, 59th Field Artillery Brigade, of the 34th Infantry Division.

JV: Right.

TS: Talk about that unit, if you can. The 34th Infantry Division and then the Field Artillery Brigade and what its responsibilities were as you understood them.

JV: The Brigade Headquarters was the artillery headquarters for the division. At that time the division was a square division, which had four infantry regiments and consequently four light artillery battalions plus a medium artillery battalion. The division artillery was commanded by a brigadier general, who was brigade commander. The duties of the brigade commander was to coordinate the artillery fires for the division. The wonderful thing that Americans had developed before World War II, which was probably the greatest American contribution to the ground battle in World War II, was the use of artillery.

TS: What was so special about that, about the Americans' use of that?

JV: The Americans recognized that you could move artillery fire simply by changing the direction and elevation of the gun tubes. You could mass artillery fire from...the division artillery, you could mass artillery from all five of these battalions on one spot as long as they were tied together accurately geographically, and you'd do that by surveying the locations of each of the batteries. It was a technique that we had mastered long before the Germans or others. The others would shoot more than one battalion at a target but... During the war in Italy, as a forward observer with an infantry company, there were times in some battles where I had as much as the fire from five or six battalions under my control. I was a second lieutenant supporting the company that I was the forward observer for. That was something that we did with regularity and great skill that was not commonly employed by our enemies.

TS: When you speak of light or medium artillery, what kind of guns are those specifically?

JV: When I joined the National Guard we were equipped with what was leftovers from World War I. The light battalions had the French 75¹, and the medium battalion had the 155 millimeter Schneider², as it was called. Relatively short range, 12,500 yards was the maximum range.

TS: Just to leap forward for a moment, were those weapons pretty quickly upgraded when the United States became involved in the war?

(20:35)

JV: Yes. The Americans had developed a new light artillery piece, the 105 millimeter howitzer, but it was not manufactured in sufficient numbers to equip the armed forces in the '40s, '41-42, right after Pearl Harbor. So the 34th was reorganized at Camp Claiborne [Louisiana] into a triangular division, with three infantry regiments and then three light artillery battalions and one medium battalion. We still had the French 75, and then when we went to North Ireland in early 1942 we were equipped with the British 25 pounder³ for the light battalions. The medium battalion kept the Schneider throughout the North African campaign.

TS: So into 1943 then.

JV: Yes.

TS: Was that a question of – you alluded to it a moment ago – of just literally being able to manufacture and equip these units?

JV: Yes. The American Army went from about 200,000 in the Regular Army in 1939 to around 10 million in 1944. So that's a huge change. There were probably three divisions in the Regular Army that were loosely organized as divisions. By the time that the end of 1944 came around, there must have been seventy divisions in the Army of the United States.

TS: From three to seventy.

JV: An exponential increase in size.

TS: So logistics must have been an ongoing challenge.

JV: It is an accomplishment that astounds those of us who think about it even today, what the United States was able to do.

¹ A 75 mm, quick-firing field artillery piece; used heavily in World War One.

² A French 155 mm heavy field howitzer, first used during World War One.

³ Standard field gun/howitzer, introduced into service just before World War II.

TS: In a relatively, a very short period of time.

JV: You figure that we had factories that produced cannons and tanks and trucks, shipyards that were launching a major cargo ship every week. I think in 1944, the United States produced 100,000 airplanes. 100,000 airplanes.

TS: Almost seems like that must be a misprint when you read those numbers.

JV: Yes.

TS: You, from joining the Guard...it was a year and a half really until the 34th Infantry Division was inducted into federal service, in early 1941. During that period of time you were a year and a half older. What were examples of the lessons that you learned from your time in the National Guard during that time?

JV: At that time, all the training was local. That is, you were trained by the unit that you joined for the duties that you were to perform. In contrast to today where a young man or woman joins the National Guard and they're sent off to basic training at a Regular Army installation and then come back from that training. Then probably go to another school for advanced individual training, training in the specialty in which they will serve. In those days it was all done in the units. You were trained by the people who would lead you. So the training was much more informal. Completely different concept. In some ways it was better than the way we do it today, because you were immediately a part of a team that you were going to play a role in, yet it wasn't the standardized training and perhaps far from as complete as the training that the soldier gets today.

TS: It may have been really dependent on the quality of the person doing the training.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did your time at Camp Ripley in the summer, that you mentioned a few moments ago, did that help to sort of even out the training or deepen what you'd learned?

JV: For me it helped put the whole thing into perspective, because we operated as the division artillery. In those days, as I said, we had four light battalions. Actually we had two regiments, two field artillery regiments, each with two battalions. But it put the whole concept of the role of the artillery in supporting the infantry into the larger picture for me, and I fast moved on to other things other than simply riding motorcycles.

(26:40)

TS: What did you move on to, Sir?

JV: The first thing I became was a communicator. I became a wireman, connecting the various artillery outfits by telephone, and learned that business. Then I learned that I could have a better chance of promotion by becoming a surveyor. So I had the good fortune of having had a wonderful math teacher in high school, and my trigonometry was pretty good,

and I adapted to being a surveyor very quickly. I could do the...basically in those days it was all manual surveying with a transit and stadia rods and measuring tape and so forth. Then a lot of computation with log tables and trigonometric tables.

TS: But you took to that work, you say.

JV: Yes. That was easy for me. I was able to do it and got promoted fairly quickly for doing it. Later on I learned that I could get another promotion by being a CW radio⁴ operator. The radios in those days that we had, most all of them were unmodulated continuous wave Morse code radios. You had to learn Morse code.

TS: Had you learned that in Boy Scouts?

JV: I had learned it. I knew Morse code from Boy Scouts, and I was just about to add that in both surveying and in communications my Boy Scout experience was valuable to me. I could read a map. I could do it very well and I knew the Morse code. And the artillery still communicated by flags as well as by radio. So it all fit in very well for me.

TS: Did you start to think that military service was something that you rather liked and were good at?

JV: I was at least good at those sort of fundamental things that got me a little more money immediately. The Boy Scout experience, having been the patrol leader and the senior patrol leader, the junior assistant Scoutmaster and so forth, my positions of leadership all sort of fit into what happened to me in the first couple of years in the Army. That helped a great deal, I would say.

TS: What's an example of a positive relationship perhaps that you developed here with somebody that you met in the National Guard, that made an impact on you?

JV: Headquarters Battery of the 59th Brigade was a good outfit. We had a lot of bright, dedicated young people, and some not so young, that were in that outfit. When I think back...we saw the picture in the other room of Joe Stewart and I and that horse that we bought in Northern Ireland. Joe Stewart was our supply sergeant, which doesn't seem like a big deal, being a supply sergeant for an artillery battery. But Joe Stewart always had things according to regulation and always had track of our equipment. He was one of those noncommissioned officers who knew his business and helped create an atmosphere of, you had to know what you were supposed to do. You had to be, today the word is professional – I don't think we ever used that word, but you had to be competent at what you were supposed to do. It was sort of an atmosphere where...I remember many a night both at Camp Ripley and later on when we were mobilized that you'd look around the squad tent that you were sleeping in and the soldiers were reading a field manual about their duties

⁴ Continuous wave radio.

and the skills that they were supposed to possess and trying hard to perfect those skills. So it was an atmosphere that seemed to permeate that particular outfit.

Many years later I gave a talk. It was the first in a series of lectures that was endowed by a friend of mine at the World War II Museum in New Orleans. I didn't know what to talk about. But I decided to talk about the people that I had served with in World War II, and it took me back to the early days of that outfit. Here was this outfit of 130 soldiers. The first batch was the batch that had been inducted into the regular army from the National Guard, and then the next batch was a batch of draftees who came into that outfit and they were primarily from the upper Midwest, many from Minnesota. Then the subsequent replacements through the war came from all over the United States. But we went through the war from late 1942 through 1945. We had one court-martial that I remember. I remember only one absence without leave. The discipline was superb. We didn't have any troublemakers. Those guys, after the war I don't remember any of them stopping at jail at any time. They went on to become doctors and lawyers, a federal judge, school teachers. You sort of tick them off by name and you remember competent young Americans that worked very hard to do what needed to be done serving the nation.

(35:45)

TS: What was that like, that experience of going back and bringing these people up in your active memory?

JV: In a way it was fun and nostalgic, and sort of sad when you thought of those that were casualties and didn't make it through the war. But that outfit continued to have reunions up until just a few years ago when we decided that there were too few of us to come anymore. There were more widows coming to the reunions than there were former soldiers. I don't know how many company, battery or troop outfits there were in the 10 million man United States Army, but there had to be hundreds of thousands of them. They were the outfits that made the war go. And I'm sure that there were many of them that were even more close-knit than ours was. You see movies like *Band of Brothers*⁵ and so forth.

TS: What contributes to that, General Vessey, to building the tightly knit groups that you just mentioned?

JV: Part of it is the common mission, but also part of it is, very much part of it, is the leadership and the general esprit de corps, the history of the United States and the United States Army. I don't mean to imply that every outfit in the United States Army is a good outfit, because that's not true. We've had some real turkeys in leadership positions, and we've had some terrible outfits that have done some terrible things. But by and large the Army is pretty good and does its duty reasonably well. But it is that leadership that's able to create this common bond among the soldiers, that is this, I've got your back and you've got mine. It is a bond that's not broken.

⁵ An 11-hour American TV World War II miniseries from 2001, based on the book of the same title.

TS: Does that suggest that you feel or have felt an affinity with that particular unit that wasn't the same as some other units you've served with over the years? Because you've served with a lot.

JV: Realizing that as you move on you have positions of different responsibility, but what you try to do is create that same atmosphere in whatever outfit you're in, that is, that you've got a team and you want the other people in the team to be a part of that team and be contributing members of the team and to help each other do what has to be done. It's the primary responsibility of leadership, creating the team and the team spirit, and the willingness to go to extraordinary measures to carry out the mission that you've been given.

TS: Did you see that? Because it sounds deceptively simple and yet we know it's not.

JV: No, it's not. But not only can it be done, it is done sort of uniformly every day. I'm sure it's happening in the armed forces today in Afghanistan, Korea, the Horn of Africa, or wherever we have armed forces. We've got marvelous teams being established. Every once in a while you pick up the newspaper and someone has been courageous enough to report the results of some of the work of those teams. But by and large you have to recognize that there have been battles in places that we can't find on the map, or never heard of, where that same sort of teamwork has gone by and has gone on and has not been reported. Only the people who were in the fight knew that it took place. But they come away with great pride in knowing that it has indeed happened.

(42:00)

TS: As a point of reference here, the 34th Infantry Division was inducted into federal service on 10 February 1941. You graduated from high school in 1940. What were you doing with yourself between graduating from high school and what became a change period?

JV: In the summer of 1940 the moves in the Congress to expand the armed forces, the debates were already taking place. The authority to mobilize the National Guard beginning in the fall of 1940 was already apparent. Our immediate commander told us that we would be mobilized. So we knew.

TS: You knew it was coming.

JV: We knew we would be mobilized. The date wasn't certain. So I debated with the idea of enrolling in the University [of Minnesota], but it didn't seem to make any sense. I wanted to do it but it didn't seem to make sense, so what I did is, I took a job at Sears and Roebuck⁶. Sears and Roebuck had a big mail order house down on Lake Street [in Minneapolis]. I think the building is still there, but I don't think it belongs to Sears and Roebuck anymore. Anyway, I wrapped packages for mailing, at Sears and Roebuck.

⁶ A nationwide department store chain and mail order company.

TS: Was it just a matter of hurry up, let's get this mobilization going? One of those kind of situations?

JV: Yes. In the outfit in the National Guard it was, let's get our trucks in shape and so forth. Get our equipment in shape and make sure we have all of what we're supposed to have and that the soldiers understood their duties. And there was a little extra push on the training and so forth. It seemed a lot more serious, and there was less dismounted drill which seemed like make work to most of us, and more emphasis on making sure that the communications equipment worked, that our surveying equipment was up to date, and that anyone who needed extra training was given the extra training, and so forth. So that sort of pervaded the atmosphere in the outfit for the months at the time. I think it was the Ohio Division was one of the first divisions mobilized.

TS: How did that make you feel? I mean, in a sense, joining the National Guard during peacetime, training, Camp Ripley, et cetera ... Being in the National Guard when the unit was facing federal induction and the war clouds were getting darker, how did that make you feel?

JV: It was the world in which we lived. You couldn't change it. You'd already enlisted, and you were part of it. It put a little urgency in what you were doing.

TS: It sounds like you just accepted this as a matter of fact, that it wasn't something you couldn't change and so...

(46:00)

JV: Right. Right. There was no question about, how do we get out of this or something like that. I do not remember anyone ever raising that point. I think that the commanders looked around at who they had and decided that there were some of these people that were too old. For example, the first sergeant that we had at the time, who was a contemporary of my father's and worked for the same railroad as my father and was a World War I veteran himself.

TS: So around forty, give or take a year or so.

JV: Yes, right. He did not come with us at mobilization. And there were several others in the outfit that didn't come. I'm not sure what the administrative procedures were, that didn't concern me at the time.

TS: But they weren't going along.

JV: Yes.

TS: Once the unit was federalized there was basic training at Camp Claiborne, Louisiana. The journey south to Louisiana, that was a long way in the 1930s and '40s from Minnesota. Had you been to the Deep South before?

JV: No.

TS: What do you remember about, was it a train journey down?

JV: Yes.

TS: Do you remember the journey?

JV: Yes. It was a couple of days on the train. It seemed like the slow boat to China. *(chuckles)* We got there, and it was immediately a matter of a lot of work.

TS: That was a new part of the country for you as you mentioned a moment ago.

JV: Yes.

TS: Visually, what impressions did Louisiana make for a young man who had grown up in central Minnesota?

JV: We arrived at Camp Claiborne in the wintertime. Camp Claiborne is in the middle of Louisiana near the city of Alexandria, and there were a number of camps around Alexandria at that time. So Alexandria was overrun with newly mobilized soldiers from other parts of the country, which must have been a terrible burden on the people of Louisiana. We had a lot of work to do. We had to set up the camp. When we got there the carpenters were just finishing the frames for tents. We lived in what the Army then called a 'tent, general purpose, medium'.

TS: I love those descriptions.

JV: Which was a tent that housed eight soldiers, and it was built for a squad. We had to set up the tent camp itself, which meant getting the tents and putting them on the frames and so on and so forth.

TS: This was not move-in ready, as we say.

JV: Oh, no.

TS: It's do it yourself, almost.

JV: Yes. Fortunately the frames had already been erected by contractors, so all we had to do was get the tents and put them over the frames and get the cots and put them up in the tents. Then each company battery and troop...we had a couple of cinder block buildings. We had one that was the mess hall, one that was an administrative building, had the office for the battery commander and the supply room and so forth, and we had a maintenance area, with a place to park the trucks.

TS: A big expanse then, it sounds like, the way you describe it.

JV: Yes.

TS: Was this your first time being away from home this distance, this length of time?

JV: I'd been at Camp Ripley for two weeks at a time, two summers. I had spent two summers at Camp Ripley. I think we discussed last time, between my junior and senior years in high school my dad took me on a train trip to the West Coast and through Canada and so forth.

TS: Just the two of you?

JV: Yes.

TS: You didn't talk a lot about that. Let's digress for a moment – what was that like for you, traveling with your dad?

JV: It was great fun. Looking back on it now, it's more important now than it seemed at the time to me. At the time I was a little bit torn, because I came back from working that summer and it was time to go to school, but he said, You're not starting school on time. I was a little bit torn by the idea of taking two weeks, the first two weeks of my senior year in high school, and goofing off someplace else. But my dad had gotten trip passes on the Great Northern Railroad and we went out to Spokane, where we changed trains; went to Portland, where he had enlisted in the Army at Vancouver Barracks at the time of the First World War. Visited some family, a cousin of his and their kids that lived in Portland. Then we went to Seattle by train. He wanted me to see the Seattle Navy Yard. We went by boat from Seattle to Vancouver, British Columbia, and took the train, the Canadian Pacific, to Banff and went by car to Lake Louise and spent a couple days around Banff and Lake Louise. Then back through Winnipeg and went on to Toronto, and turned around and came back to Winnipeg and came back down to Minneapolis-St. Paul.

(54:00)

TS: That's a long trip.

JV: Two weeks. It was a great trip, and I got to spend a lot of time with my dad talking to him. Got to know him a lot better. I'm sure he got to know me a lot better. A few months later we were mobilized, and then he died while I was on the boat on the way to North Africa from the British Isles.

TS: What month did your dad die, Sir?

JV: He died in September of '42. He had been wounded in World War I, and also was diabetic. I'm not sure what he died of. He was in his forties.

TS: So going away from home, you'd been at Camp Ripley and been on this trip. It wasn't clear when you left to go to Camp Claiborne when you'd be back again or when you'd see your folks again.

JV: No. I did see them at the end of [December 1941], right after Pearl Harbor. We spent the summer of 1941 on maneuvers. We left Camp Claiborne in May of 1941, and we did not return to Camp Claiborne until the day before Pearl Harbor, in December of '41. We went on maneuvers, first in Louisiana and then in east Texas. The big Louisiana Maneuver was conducted that summer, which was a huge operation.

TS: Hundreds of thousands of people involved.

JV: Right. Then we moved to the Carolinas. We were converted to the First Provisional Tank Destroyer Group. What had been the 34th Division Artillery became the Headquarters, First Provisional Destroyer Group. So we went to the Carolinas as part of a test of this concept of tank destroyers, and maneuvered against General Patton⁷ and his Second Armored Division.

TS: This is after Pearl Harbor now, right?

JV: No, before Pearl Harbor. Through the fall of 1941.

TS: So it's a continuous series of maneuvers or training, preparing for something larger.

JV: We understood well the concept of how to sleep on the ground. (*chuckles*)

TS: How did your folks take you going away when you did leave then? That it would be an undetermined amount of time before they saw you again?

JV: The idea was, we were mobilized for a year – that was the original plan. We were mobilized for a year. But by that fall the vote went through the Congress to extend the draft and the mobilization of the National Guard. I think it passed by one vote⁸.

TS: It did pass by one vote only. That is correct.

JV: By that time President Roosevelt had worked out some of his Lend-Lease agreements with the British, and we were providing them with war materials so that the inevitability of the United States becoming involved became more and more apparent through the summer and fall of 1941. Then, as I said, we got back to Camp Claiborne on the day before Pearl Harbor...the night before Pearl Harbor.

TS: Just before it happened.

⁷ George S. Patton, Jr. (1885 –1945); general in the U.S. Army. Commanded the Third Army in the European Theater during World War II.

⁸ On 12 August 1941, the Selective Service Act of 1940 was extended by the U.S. House, by a vote of 203-202.

JV: Yes. It happened on that Sunday [7 December 1941], and then we were immediately sent down to the Gulf of Mexico on guard duty.

(58:30)

TS: I was going to ask you about that. Let me back up, if I may, just for a moment. You mentioned being in east Texas, in Louisiana, very different parts of the country. You mentioned being in the Carolinas in 1941. These are all parts of what we can loosely call the Deep South, a part of the United States that had very different traditions and customs, including Jim Crow laws and segregation. How did you personally witness segregation, and how did you internalize that?

JV: It was a concept completely different for Minnesotans. It was in many ways disgusting and appalling but again, that's the way it was. I remember in the town of Alexandria there were clearly places that were whites only and so forth. You'd see signs in the windows. The signs were pretty primitive. Some of them said "Soldiers, Niggers and Dogs not allowed." It was not an uncommon sign. Black people lived in pretty deplorable conditions in the rural towns in Louisiana.

We had one black girl in our class in high school who was a bright, attractive, intelligent young woman, she was part of the high school and seemed no different from the rest of us other than her skin was a different color. Then going to Louisiana and seeing the water fountains labeled white, colored and so on and so forth was a strange world.

TS: Would you say it's something that stuck with you, that you took lessons from and that helped you later in your military career?

JV: The Army itself was segregated in those days. White units. I never saw a black unit until we got to North Africa, and there were some black units on stevedore duty in the ports in North Africa at the time we were leaving for the Italian Campaign. Then during the Italian Campaign the 92nd Division, which was an all-black infantry division, with a liberal sprinkling of white officers fought in Italy, with sort of mixed reviews of its competency. I guess my next real interaction with African American soldiers was when Harry Truman integrated the Army [in July 1948].

TS: Right. Not until after the war was over.

JV: Yes. I was with the 4th Division in Germany at that time. We had, I think, one all black infantry battalion in the 22nd Infantry, and the anti-aircraft battalion was all black. The day we got integrated we got about ten percent black soldiers in the outfits that we were in. By that time I was battery commander. My ten percent, five soldiers and one black officer...and it worked. From my point of view it went very smoothly. I got Gus Henning, who was an all-American basketball player at Indiana; he was the black officer that I got, so we had a pretty good basketball team. (*chuckles*)

TS: Things worked out for you, right, in that respect?

JV: Gus was a fine soldier and a fine man, and a great addition to the outfit.

TS: Excellent. These Louisiana Maneuvers you mentioned...in fact I read a little bit about them. They were a series of military exercises held all over north and west central Louisiana, Fort Polk, Camp Claiborne, Camp Livingstone. The ideal, as I was reading about this, was to test U.S. troop training, logistics, doctrine, commanders. As you look back on this from your military career perspective, did it work?

JV: From my perspective, from the perspective of a relatively low ranking soldier, those sorts of maneuvers, the way they were conducted in those days, the soldiers themselves didn't get much out of it because the training was still a bang, bang, you're dead training. There were umpires with the maneuver outfits that decided who won the particular engagement based on how well they maneuvered and how much theoretical fire power they had, because the fire power was never used except to shoot some blanks. So it was a lot of moving around, but I'm sure that the larger command or the higher commanders got a lot out of it in terms of learning to move large formations, because where the road network was inadequate and you had many thousands of soldiers to move, they had to do their staff work properly in order to get their forces to the right part of the battlefield at the right time. Clearly a lot of them didn't do that. When you look at the history of the senior commanders that were relieved and so on and so forth, it was clear that very senior commanders got a good look at people that were division commanders or corps commanders and so on and so forth, and the staffs. And I'm sure much was learned. But for cannon artillery, you didn't shoot anything.

(1:07:30)

TS: That's right. You couldn't really practice.

JV: Yes. You didn't shoot a round. So it wasn't particularly good training, other than training to move. And the surveyors got a lot of training because they had to survey and so forth. And the communicators had to communicate, so there was a question of whether or not you communicated. I'm sure we did all of those things better the longer we did them every day. But in terms of war fighting, for the lower ranking people it wasn't a particularly good use of the time. We learned that later. We developed things like, the years after World War II we developed things like the National Training Center where it was instrumented and you knew that if soldier A fired his rifle he hit or missed the target that he shot at, and you had some authoritative look at the outcomes of the military engagements.

TS: Did World War II lead to changes in the way the Army conducted training, pretty quickly?

JV: Not as quickly as it could have been. I think that you had different sets of leaders that came out of World War II. You had the people who moved quickly into battalion command - take the class of '39 out of West Point, for example. It was a very famous class because it produced many generals. Very good generals under whom I served and had great respect for. They almost went up too fast to understand what was needed for training. Now some of them did - guys like Dutch Kerwin who later became Vice Chief of the Army under Abrams, and people like that, who had a better understand of the training needs than many

of his contemporaries who continued to believe that the way we trained units for World War II just needed refinement and so forth. We didn't need a revolution in training.

I think it wasn't until during and after Viet Nam that we really had the people that came to leadership, senior leadership positions, who had been under different circumstances, who spent more time at the company level. You had people like the class of '39 who were battalion commanders before the war was over, six years out of West Point and there were battalion commanders and some even higher, and then you had the people of my generation who came out of the war as lieutenants or captains and so forth and were stuck in the post-war grades. We spent fifteen years as company grade officers. So we learned what the companies, batteries and troops were supposed to do, had a much better understanding of the training needs to train the individual soldier than these people who were in that group ahead of us.

(1:12:15)

TS: That really goes far in explaining why it took twenty-five years, like you said, until the end of Viet Nam, to really get to real effective change.

JV: And some of it was the circumstances under which we found ourselves. That is, you had the huge post-World War II reduction, and many people have forgotten how deep that reduction was. We went from, I don't know how many artillery battalions we had in the Army, but when the Korean War started, we had only two heavy artillery battalions left in the Army.

TS: Two?

JV: Two. Some were in the reserves, but in the Regular Army there were only two heavy artillery battalions – and that's a huge change.

TS: Right.

JV: Louis Johnson⁹ was the Secretary of Defense. He had been the chairman of General Motors, he had the famous saying, "What's good for General Motors is good for the country."

TS: Yes, that's it.

JV: That same thought permeated the Army and the armed forces. We were rendering lard from beef that we slaughtered in the company kitchen. We were spot painting trucks a hundred times over. The level of logistic support was pushed down to the lowest possible level. I was in a school troop battalion at Fort Sill. We didn't have a service battery or an ammunition train in the firing batteries, because the manning had been cut so low. We had two and a half sets of weapons.

⁹ Louis A. Johnson (1891-1966); second US Secretary of Defense, serving in the cabinet of President Harry S. Truman from 28 March 1949 to 19 September 1950.

TS: Two and a half?

JV: Two and a half. We were supposed to be a general reserve heavy artillery battalion, so we were basically a self-propelled Long Tom battalion, but every battery had a complete set of 105s to shoot for the school. We also had two 4.5 guns per battery, because there was a lot of 4.5 gun ammunition left after the war because it was a lousy gun and we didn't shoot up much of the ammunition during the war because the gun wasn't very accurate. So the school had plenty of 4.5 gun ammunition to shoot. So we had two 4.5 guns. Then every battery had a dog of some kind. C Battery had a 240 millimeter cannon. A Battery had a couple of Pack 75s.

TS: A potpourri, it sounds like.

(1:16:10)

JV: Yes. We were authorized only eighty-seven men per battery, which meant that we shot every day and the cannoneers had to get up early in the morning and go and draw the ammunition for the day's shoot. We'd go out and shoot for the school, and then on Saturdays we'd shoot our basic weapon, which was the self-propelled 155. That was the Army between the end of World War II and the beginning of the Korean War.

TS: Wow! So this being best prepared for war in Korea, sounds like we were back to before World War II in thinking about, were we prepared for war when it came in December 1941.

JV: We were better prepared for World War II in terms of the size of the units, the manning of the units, when Pearl Harbor came than we were for the Korean War when the Korean War came. Now when the Korean War came we were also, we were better prepared because we had an Army that was peopled with people who had fought in World War II, so they knew that.

TS: The Army almost had to learn the same lessons all over again about what it needed to have as far as to be trained on to be ready to mobilize and move quickly.

JV: Yes. I think there was the general feeling of "Hey, this really was the war to end all wars, and there's no need to be prepared for another one."

TS: By June of 1950 we learned that wasn't the case.

JV: Yes.

TS: At this point we're about at our stopping point, which is one hour and eighteen minutes, and the next subject I wanted to move to is Pearl Harbor and what happens after that. So, with your permission, I'll stop for today.

END OF INTERVIEW