

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 Monday, 21 May 2012, and this is our next interview in the cycle with General John W. Vessey, Jr. on a beautiful, sunny day here in North Oaks, Minnesota. For the record, we're sitting outside, so the sounds are really not canned.

General Vessey, let's go back – again we have a little bit of overlap here just to sort of contextualize – to war's end, in summer of 1945. Remind us, in August of 1945 where you were when the news came to you that Japan had surrendered and you would not be going to the Pacific.

JV: I was a student at the Field Artillery School [at Ft Sill, Oklahoma] at that time in a course called the Officer's Special Basic Course, which was a course designed for people who were converting from some other branch to field artillery, or people like me who were battlefield commissions who hadn't been to schools before that in the basic field artillery branch.

TS: How big was this class you were in? Are we talking a few guys or a few hundred guys?

JV: I'd say there were forty-five or fifty in the class.

TS: Now was this class, as far as you could tell, designed for men who were to be redeployed to the Pacific?

JV: Yes. It was designed for people who were to leave to become replacements in the replacement system for combat units. I'm sure it was designed not specifically for the Pacific, but by that time the war in Europe had of course ended a couple of months earlier. The people in the class were, as I say, there were a number of battlefield commissions and a number of chemical corps officers who had experience with the chemical corps mortars, but were being converted to field artillery officers.

TS: When you considered the Army at that point, in August of 1945 and even before quite frankly, there were millions of men in uniform and there were millions of them who couldn't wait to return to civilian life, guys who were being demobilized and out of service, and yet you didn't. I'd like to sort of have you talk about the factor or factors that led to your decision to try to stay in the Army.

JV: At that time, in August of 1945, the war wasn't over. That is, it was over in August of 1945, but the need for the Army clearly wasn't over and there wasn't a great wave of discharges as I remember exactly in August of '45. They came quite rapidly after that. Of

course in August of 1945 I wasn't doing anything but following orders. But the prospect of getting out of the service clearly loomed and I thought a great deal about it. Quite frankly I was not sure what I wanted to do. There were a number of people advising me to stay in, thought I had conducted myself well during the war. So in August of 1945 it was still up in the air for me. I waited to see what the opportunities were, and came very close to getting out.

TS: When you thought of getting out, what did you envision yourself possibly doing?

JV: Going back to school on the GI Bill¹ was number one. Of course by that time I'd been married a month. Finding a job to feed myself and my family.

TS: Mrs. Vessey, Avis, how did she weigh in on this decision of staying in the Army or not?

JV: I thought she wanted me to get out. Many of our friends that had been in the service were getting out after August, in the fall of 1945. She'd been out of college for a year. Had taught school for a year in Rochester, Minnesota, and liked what she was doing. I really thought she wanted me to get out. So we just sort of waited and looked at that time. The Army had a program to move people who were wartime soldiers into the Regular Army. I had two problems at the time: one is I didn't have a college degree, and the second thing is that my enlistment date was inaccurate.

TS: How did you end up with an inaccurate enlistment date?

JV: I enlisted before I was old enough to enlist.

TS: How was that corrected?

JV: Congress passed a law in the late '40s. I don't remember whether it was '45, '46 or '47, but permitting the records of all people who had [been] underage enlistments, to have their records corrected without penalty.

TS: The other piece though, the college degree requirement, what kind of an obstacle was that for you?

JV: It appeared to be a fairly substantial obstacle. The two conditions obliged me not to apply for a regular commission at that time. So I don't know how much either one would have played. I'm sure that the false enlistment probably would have played a greater role than the lack of a college degree.

TS: So you officially stayed in the Reserves.

¹ Officially the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944; one benefit was payment of expenses to attend college or a vocational education program.

JV: I stayed in the Reserves.

(8:00)

TS: Talk about Fort Sill a little bit. From summer of 1945 until the end of 1950, so more than five years, you spent during this period at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Fort Sill's history, as the history books tell us, dates back to the 19th century frontier days, so it had been an establishment for a very long time by the time you arrived. How would you describe the post as you saw it when you arrived there in the mid-1940s? What did it look like in those days?

JV: I suspect it looked like most posts at the end of World War II, with the history that you've just described woven into this vast expansion that took place during World War II. Fort Sill had had what was called the Old Post, which was built in the frontier days. Sandstone buildings that had been constructed mostly with soldier labor. Then it had the New Post, which were buildings constructed during the late '30s, many with WPA² funds. Then it had the World War II expansion. Of course the earlier days of Fort Sill, the artillery was all horse drawn.

The World War II expansion consisted of turning those stables into usable buildings and then building temporary wooden buildings. Many of them. So you had these three distinct parts of Fort Sill. It is in southwest Oklahoma. It's quite an arid climate. Hot for much of the year. Dry. The city of Lawton at that time – I've forgotten what the population was – but probably the permanent population probably around 30,000, but much expanded because of World War II.

TS: Was there family housing for you and Mrs. Vessey?

JV: When we arrived there, no. When we arrived there, we were like many of the others that came there temporarily: the housing was in very short supply. In Lawton we found an apartment in a house where the landlord had converted half his house into another apartment. I used to jokingly call it a three room apartment: bedroom and two closets.

TS: We don't need to trot out the adjective spacious here, I take it.

JV: (*chuckles*) No. When we had guests we put up a coffee table and two people would sit on the bed. We had a folding card table that we used. Two people would sit on the bed and two people on the two chairs that we had. The landlord had also converted his old barn, which was out on the back of this property, into two apartments. There was an upstairs and downstairs apartment. He'd done quite a bit of work to make it livable. Had a screen porch up and down and so forth.

TS: Those are good examples of how the demand for housing during wartime was met by entrepreneurial people who were determined to rent things out if they could.

² WPA: Works Progress Administration, a New Deal agency formed in 1935 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

JV: Right.

TS: How long was it before you were able to get accommodations on post, or did you ever?

JV: We did. I think it was a year and a half. We were in the old World War II hospital, which had been converted into family quarters. It was a wooden barracks style building with little insulation. Certainly no air conditioning. Inadequate heat. When the neighbor flushed the toilet you didn't know unless you woke up and felt whether your wife was in bed or not, whether she was up in the bathroom, or whether it was your neighbor in the bathroom, in his bathroom.

TS: So thin walls as well.

JV: Thin walls. Right.

TS: So hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and thin walls all year round.

JV: Thin walls all year round.

TS: Now with the war over, how did Fort Sill change over the five years you were there? Did you notice it visually that the place was transforming from something into something else?

JV: First the Army was reduced dramatically during those five years. For example, a great part of Fort Sill during the war was an Officer Candidate School. It had about disappeared, because there was no longer any need for an Officer Candidate School. Many of the World War II barracks were emptied and became unused after that. So there was a great transition in Fort Sill and in the town of Lawton, the adjacent city.

TS: Did you notice that too about the town of Lawton?

JV: Yes.

(15:30)

TS: How was it changed?

JV: I suspect that many of these barns and chicken coops that had been turned into housing went back to being garages or chicken coops or whatever it was in the beginning. They were no longer needed for housing.

TS: Did you notice fewer people in town as well?

JV: Yes. Fewer soldiers in town certainly, by far.

TS: This transition is an interesting concept, because you started, when we picked the story up today, in the Officers Special Basic Course.

TS: This was the short course, right?

JV: This was the short course.

TS: And last time, you mentioned that you [then] transitioned to the Field Artillery School Detachment.

JV: After this course was over.

TS: Yes. So how do you describe for us what the Field Artillery School Detachment actually was, and meant for you?

JV: I think we discussed before, I didn't know what they were. When I finished the course a number of my friends from the 34th Division were in what were used as school troop field artillery battalions, but they were called training detachments instead of field artillery battalions. I'm sure the purpose of that was to disguise their existence from the War Department in Washington, so they wouldn't be shipped overseas. But they were an important part of training at the Field Artillery School, because they did the shooting for the students. That's what I wanted to be in.

I finished the course and was sent to the personnel office. The personnel officer told me that both the gunnery department and the communications department had asked for me to become part of their departments as an instructor. But I told him I would rather be in the detachments, because I had friends in the detachments. So his face lighted up. He said, "Yes, I have a need for someone in Field Artillery Detachment Number One or Number Two." I've forgotten the number. It turns out that there were two sorts of detachments. One was the training detachments, which were the school troop battalions, and the other was the field artillery school detachments, which were the housekeeping parts of the field artillery school. I thought I was getting into the school troops and I had just volunteered for the housekeeping detachments and suddenly found myself being assigned to be the mess officer in the student officers' mess. Not what I had envisioned and certainly something about which I knew absolutely nothing. (*chuckles*)

TS: You're laughing about it now. Were you laughing about it then?

JV: It took me a little while to find out where I was.

TS: How did you find out?

JV: I was told to report to a Captain Fetty in a certain building number. I found the building and the office of the captain. Went in. He wasn't there at the time, but he had a civilian secretary which I thought unusual. I asked her what caliber guns this detachment had. She said, "Guns? Guns? We don't have any guns." (*chuckles*) It was then that I realized that I was in the wrong sort of place for me, at least not what I had anticipated. At any rate, eventually I got to talk to Captain Fetty and was informed that I would be his assistant, and my principal duty would be mess officer in the student officers' mess, which was one of these big thousand-man mess halls built for World War II. It was the mess for the students,

unmarried students, attending school who lived in the barracks. The noon time meal fed even more people. We had about four hundred people I guess that ate there regularly.

TS: Now you're in charge of this?

JV: I'm in charge. With a total lack of knowledge, I might add.

TS: How did you turn this challenge, and what sounds like a disappointment, into something positive?

JV: It was something that had to be done. Whining and sniveling about it didn't appear to be anything that would help. I had a good sergeant, Sergeant Herman was the mess sergeant, and he knew his business. He and I had a little bit of a falling out at the very beginning, although I think it helped our relationship. The fellow I was replacing was leaving to go to civilian life. So the first thing we had to do was count all the property. He signed for the government property that belonged to the mess. I've forgotten exactly how it happened, but what was happening was we were counting chairs and I detected part of the crew hauling chairs from one side of the mess hall to the other, outside. We were counting chairs inside. I looked out the window and chairs were moving from one side to the other. So the fellow that I was replacing knew he was short a couple hundred chairs and he was arranging to have them counted twice! (*chuckles*)

(23:20)

TS: By kind of moving them around the door and bringing them in again?

JV: Right. (*chuckles*) So Sergeant Herman and I agreed that we would put all the given types of equipment in one pile and count it all. All the chairs would be in one place, all the silverware would be in one place, and so forth. Sergeant Herman explained to me that he had been instructed by my predecessor to have the equipment counted in a fashion that would clear his name and pocketbook. But we got along well. It was an educational experience for me, both in keeping track of the money that came in and making sure I could feed the people with that money and that they were satisfied with the food.

TS: Yes. There's something to be learned here it sounds like, and beyond the logistics of serving men. What other life lessons do you feel you're learning here, because you did this for a number of years?

JV: Please the customer; that's the first thing to learn there. If the people you're serving aren't happy with the way you're serving them, you're not successful. And of course, keep track of the money.

TS: Because your name is on this, right?

JV: Right.

TS: There are legendary stories of soldiers, or college students, grumbling about institutional food. How do you keep people from grumbling about institutional food?

JV: We could talk all afternoon about the lessons I learned about how to be a mess officer. Of course in the Army to start with, you have to have good coffee. If the coffee isn't good, you're already in trouble. So make sure that the people who make the coffee know how to make the coffee, and that the coffee machine is properly cleaned.

I soon learned to have something special. So we had a steak night – every Thursday night was steak night. We would buy hind quarters of beef. Sergeant Herman was a good butcher himself. He would personally cut it up. Of course in Oklahoma there's plenty of opportunity to get meat. So we served big T-bone steaks. (*chuckles*) Cooked to order for the customers.

I wound up buying a book. I think I bought it from Book of the Month Club. The book was about how to make pies. Curiously enough, the author was a fellow named Monroe Boston Straus. We had pie making lessons for the Army cooks in our student officers' mess. And we made what I continue to believe it was the best pie at Fort Sill. So the highlights were our Thursday night steak dinners with superb pie. I think we built the rest of the mess on those two things. We got plaques I think two years in a row for the best mess in the 4th Army, which was a large geographic area. It wasn't something I would choose to do, but it was fun trying to do it well.

TS: You had friends of yours also on post who had gone on to other things and who weren't involved in the food delivery business. How did you feel about watching them do what you sort of had envisioned for yourself?

JV: I certainly would have enjoyed much more being in one of the training detachments, I believe. But we used to get together often, particularly I mentioned I think Tom Young before, who had been our liaison officer with one of the infantry battalions, and Ken Goodell and his wife. We got together frequently and played some bridge. They had both been married much longer than Avis and I, so they kind of took us under their wings. But I would invite them to come to our Thursday night steak dinners at the student officers' mess, and they came often.

TS: It sounds like you had something good to offer. Your son John was born in 1949 at Fort Sill.

JV: Right.

TS: So you're building a family here. Career in the Army. What kind of interests did you have? I mean you have a job, but you've got a family. The private person – what interested you?

(30:05)

JV: Frankly at that time I had a couple of things in mind. One, I wanted to get on with getting a college degree, so I took courses at Cameron College, which was a junior college in Lawton. I also took courses from the University of Oklahoma. All of these at night school courses.

For recreation at the time I had one really good handball player on the post, and I was not really in his category, but I liked to play with him. There were a couple of halfway

decent handball courts on the post. Then Fort Sill, as most Army posts did, had a golf course. Then the other things for recreation at Fort Sill, hunting and fishing were pretty good. There were lakes on the reservation and if you didn't like those, immediately adjacent to the reservation was the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, which had herds of deer and buffalo and also had a number of lakes, with fish stocked. You could fish in those lakes. There never seemed to be any lack of opportunity to do things for recreation or education.

TS: This going to college suggests that getting a college degree was something that motivated you. You saw a commission in the Army down the road?

JV: I'm not sure that I connected the two at that time, but I was going to get a college degree no matter what.

TS: What professional relationships were important to you at this time?

JV: While I was at the student mess there, Colonel McFarland was the commander of the Field Artillery School detachments, which were the housekeeping detachments. A fine officer. He had to make sure that the administrative part of the Field Artillery School ran well, and part of that was making sure that the students didn't complain about their mess. So I got a lot of attention from Colonel McFarland and obviously wound up with him being happy with what I was doing. He knew that I wanted to get on into real field artillery work. Get back to it. He pushed me to apply for the field artillery advanced officer's course, which I did, and was accepted later on. By that time I had applied to take the examination for Regular Army warrant officer. I took the exam for a field artillery gunnery instructor, and I was one of two selected in the Army for that particular specialty. The other one selected was my handball playing buddy.

TS: What kind of test was this?

JV: It was purely technical field artillery.

TS: So knowing about the weapons and how to use them.

JV: Right.

TS: Did you feel pretty confident in your knowledge and your abilities at that time?

JV: I felt confident enough to take the test at any rate. Obviously had a good score.

TS: And your Joint Chiefs of Staff biography says that in 1949 you were a student in the field artillery officer's advanced course. What was the course designed to do specifically?

JV: It was designed, at that time, to prepare officers specifically for field artillery staff and command duty at the battery and battalion level and staff at any level of field artillery. So

there was a lot of field artillery gunnery, a lot of maintenance on the weapons systems. Everything that the field artillery had to do.

TS: You had to learn about actual maintenance of a piece as well as how to deploy it and use it?

JV: Yes. More on the latter than the former.

TS: Okay. It's 1949 when you're in this course. The war has been over for four years. What changes did you notice to systems or tactics since your experiences in Italy during the early to mid-1940s?

JV: I would say the Army was in the course of incorporating much of the lessons of World War II. Many of those lessons came out from the longest serving outfits during the war. Of course the 34th Division had more time in combat than any other division in the war, so people from the staff of the 34th Division by that time were on the faculty at the school. So many lessons from the 34th were incorporated in the training. So I felt fairly comfortable with that. When those lessons weren't incorporated in the training I felt comfortable challenging what was being taught.

TS: Was artillery, as far as what was used and how it was deployed in the field, essentially the same? Or did you come into this thinking, this is different – things have changed a lot in five years

JV: Things hadn't changed much in five years. But by that time the questions of the use of rockets and guided missiles were beginning to come up. The question of tactical nuclear weapons was being raised. But in '49 they weren't big issues.

TS: During World War II, one might say, training then we knew who the enemy or enemies were. It was the Germans in Europe; it was the Japanese in the Pacific, and one could tailor training specifically towards those engagements. In the late 1940s the United States isn't at war with anybody, so how does this impact how one trains and what one trains with?

JV: By and large the battlefield, it may change a bit with the nationality of the enemy, but most people in the world look at the history of their own country but they also study the classics. You've got Sun Tzu³ in the east and Clausewitz⁴ in the west.

TS: So there was attention paid to these kind of classic military strategists.

JV: Sure.

³ Sun Tzu (lived 6th century BCE); Chinese military general, strategist and philosopher

⁴ Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831); German soldier and military theorist.

TS: Without specifically defining that the United States, that we're training for X or Y.

JV: Right.

TS: We're just prepared for whatever?

JV: Right.

TS: By the time you finish this particular course, the associate advance course, we had not yet become involved in Korea?

JV: No. We were involved in Korea, but the Korean War hadn't started.

TS: Correct. Right.

JV: We had an Army of Occupation in Germany and Japan, Okinawa. Troops in South Korea.

TS: This is before June of 1950, when that conflict begins that you finished the course and had become the battery officer then battery commander of the 18th Field Artillery.

JV: Right.

TS: What were your duties as battery officer, warrant officer, then the battery commander for that unit?

JV: By the end of '49 the Army had another program for acquiring officers for the Regular Army. It was called a competitive tour. You applied for it and you had to be accepted based on your previous record and other qualifications.

TS: These one year competitive tours, essentially it was a competitive process, selection process?

JV: Right.

TS: So you knew about this competitive process and decided you wanted to do this.

JV: Yes. As I recall, you had to be assigned to four different duties during a one year period, that is in your basic branch. Four different raters, that is, who rated you.

(43:00)

TS: What advantages did you see with this competitive tour in your development as an officer?

JV: One, I thought this is something I could compete in, because it's basically how do you do as a field artilleryman. I thought I could certainly compete in that field. Of course this service in the 18th Field Artillery at that time was a joy for me. It was a busy time. The Army had been reduced drastically. The 18th, its basic role in the Army was as a self-

propelled heavy artillery battalion. It was a self-propelled 155 millimeter gun, which is a long range gun. But it also was a school troop battalion for the artillery school. So each battery had its basic four self-propelled 155 guns, and we also all had four 105 Howitzers, which was primarily used for the school. We all had two 4.5 guns, which was a World War II longer range gun. It wasn't a Howitzer, it was a gun. Then each battery had something strange: like A Battery had two Pack 75 Howitzers. B Battery had a 240 millimeter gun, which is a very big cannon. I've forgotten what C Battery had. Anyway, we had two and a half sets of weapons.

Our authorized strength was very low; we were authorized only 87 soldiers per battery. So it meant that the soldiers were very busy. The 155 gun battalions had only three officers per battery. I think we were authorized four, but most of us had just three. So we were very busy. We shot almost every day for school. That is, every Monday through Friday we had some sort of a school troop shoot for the school. Then we needed to be trained to do our basic wartime job, that is, the 155 gun. So we usually did that on Saturdays. So for a person that didn't mind working hard, it was a lot of fun. There was a lot of good artillery work.

TS: Did you see yourself as someone who liked to work hard?

JV: Yes. Particularly if I enjoyed the work, and I enjoyed that and it was fun. And I should add one other thing: the Army's budget was cut drastically, so support was very poor. This was during the Louis Johnson⁵ era. He was Secretary of Defense. We rendered our own lard in the mess hall. We made our own soap. (*chuckles*)

TS: So cutting support really means....

JV: ... cutting support. Right.

TS: Was there a reduced supply of ammunition or maintenance or these kind of things?

JV: There was plenty of ammunition left from World War II. There was no shortage.

TS: Even in 1950 there's plenty of stuff?

JV: Plenty of ammunition. Maintenance, on the other hand, was different. Much of the higher level maintenance was pushed down to the lower level units. So we did a much higher level of maintenance on things like our general purpose vehicles and so forth than ordinarily the Army had done in the past or in the future.

TS: It sounds like, the way you're describing this, you got a chance to do a lot of different things in a year.

⁵ Louis Johnson (1891-1966); Secretary of Defense under President Harry S. Truman, serving from March 1949 to September 1950.

JV: Yes.

TS: Was that the most significant part for your own development, the most significant of this year? Or would you add other things to what made this significant?

JV: We had a new baby at home. By that time I had decided to stay, or to try to stay in the Army. That was the whole idea of taking on the competitive tour.

TS: Would you say there was a time when you really can say, before this time I wasn't sure but after this time I was sure?

JV: Avis and I had talked about getting out, and I actually filled out the papers to get out before I had applied for the competitive tour. But I came home that day and told her how much fun I'd had that day and she said, "Well, why are you getting out?" We discussed this probably in more detail than we ever had before. So when it was clear that she didn't want me to get out if I didn't want to get out, then I didn't want to get out.

TS: So Mrs. Vessey weighed in and encouraged you to stay if you wanted to.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: How was she adjusting to being an Army officer's wife? I mean she wasn't from Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

JV: No. (*chuckles*) I could tell you jokes about her first encounters with people in that part of the United States. I remember her telling me that she had gone to the grocery store, or some sort of a retail outfit, and bought something and paid for it and the woman at the counter as she was leaving through the door said, "Y'all come back." And Avis thought she wanted her to return immediately, so she turned around and went back to the counter only to discover that the woman was just using it as a general greeting. So it was an educational experience for her.

TS: Do you feel it was for you too? I mean you've been different places before this now. Or did you find this an adjustment for you as well?

JV: No, not really.

TS: June of 1950, the Korean War⁶ begins. Did you see that as something that you could be involved in?

JV: Sure. There were only two heavy artillery battalions in the Army at that time. Of course when the fighting first started I think I, and I suspect that most of the people around me,

⁶ Korean War (June 1950 – July 1953); armed conflict between North Korea and South Korea. Both sides were supported by various allies. The U.S. supported South Korea.

assumed that the United States would stop the North Koreans quickly. When it was clear that we didn't, with only two heavy artillery battalions in the Army we expected that either one of us or both of us would go. We were in adjacent barracks at the far end of the Fort Sill parade field. The 17th Field Artillery Battalion and the 18th Field Artillery Battalion. We were a gun outfit; they were an 8 inch Howitzer outfit. For Korea the 8 inch Howitzer would be a lot more useful than the 155 gun.

TS: Why is that?

JV: The [155 mm] guns have a flat trajectory, which is less useful in mountainous terrain, and the gun is less accurate than the Howitzer. The 8 inch Howitzer is probably one of the most accurate weapons we built, at least during the World War II era. So the 17th got ordered to Korea, and we didn't. So we were even busier. We became sort of a replacement pool for people in Korea as well as we assumed more school troop duties that we had in the past. It was a very busy time for us the last half of that year.

(53:40)

TS: It's often said career trajectories can go pretty quickly during wartime. Advancement in rank, for example. You had a battlefield commission yourself in World War II. Did you view the 17th going to Korea as opposed to your unit as an opportunity lost for possible advancement for yourself? Or was this a conflict you were not disappointed to be far away from?

JV: I'd say neither of those two. I considered us to be a far better field artillery battalion than the 17th. We had a better commander. We shot better day in and day out for the school. I was disappointed that we didn't go to Korea. But at the same time, because of the different cannons, I understood why we couldn't go to Korea.

TS: It was not about the unit, but about the guns that you worked with.

JV: Right.

TS: So what it meant in the end was, you had more work to do and more training because your unit was still at Fort Sill.

JV: Right.

TS: And yet by the end of 1950, December 1950 or January 1951 to be exact, you were promoted to captain, and it's about that time that you are sent to Europe, sent to Germany. Your Joint Chiefs biography says, and I'll just put this on the record, "1951 – assistant S-3 and liaison officer, then headquarters battery commander, then assistant S-3 and liaison officer, 4th Infantry Division Artillery, U.S. Army, Europe."

A bit of context to talk about here first. This is occupied Germany, of course, in the aftermath of World War II. Germany itself was [militarily] occupied. By 1949 this had

calcified into the Federal Republic of Germany⁷ and the German Democratic Republic,⁸ with Berlin occupied deep inside of East Germany. This is the context that you're now moving to. How did you understand the U.S. military's role in Germany at this time, 1951?

JV: First back to the personal side for me. I was selected to be aide de camp for Brigadier General John Uncles⁹ before I was promoted to captain. He had known our battalion commander during World War II and apparently [he was] asked for some names of people who might be aides from his battalion. My name was put in the hopper and I was selected to be General Uncles' aide.

The 4th Division was being reorganized at that time, or reactivated I should say, at Fort Benning, Georgia. So I was put on orders to report to the 4th Division Artillery in Fort Benning, Georgia, early in 1951. January of '51. Before I was enroute I got promoted to captain. Brigadier Generals were authorized only first lieutenants for aides at that time, so I was promoted out of my aide job by the time I got to Fort Benning.

TS: You mentioned to me last time after we had finished taping, you weren't totally enthused about being an aide anyway?

JV: No. I had watched what the aides to our division artillery commander had to do during World War II, and I thought that it was a job for which I was not particularly suited.

TS: Why is that?

JV: The job is helping the commanding officer perform his duties. It's principally administrative. You don't give any orders to the guns from the post as an aide. I thought I was not temperamentally suited for that sort of job. But at any rate, I didn't have to serve. It probably would have been fine; General Uncles was a wonderful officer.

TS: You knew of him, or knew him.

JV: He was legendary in the field artillery. So I wound up with other duties by the time I got to the 4th Division Artillery, which turned out to be good and important duties. The whole time at Fort Benning was instructive, because we were getting replacements in from replacement depots, getting a new cadre in from other units, and many of the officers were recalled to active duty. They had been on active duty during World War II and had been discharged and were in the Reserves and were recalled involuntarily. So many of them were not happy with their circumstances. So it was a time of leadership challenges.

⁷ Founded in May 1949 from the occupation zones of France, Britain and the U.S. Also referred to as West Germany.

⁸ Founded in October 1949 from the Soviet occupation zone. Also referred to as East Germany.

⁹ John Uncles (1898-1967); U.S. Army lieutenant general, served in both World War I and II.

TS: You're dealing with, in a sense almost, drafted officers in a way, people who had moved on with their lives.

JV: Right.

TS: And may have stayed in the Reserves but hadn't envisioned this I imagine.

JV: Right. They didn't stay in the Reserves voluntarily; they stayed in the Reserves because the law required them to.

TS: Inactive Reserves they were in. Not active Reserves.

JV: Right.

TS: So here they are called back to service during the Korean War.

JV: Right.

TS: How long were you at Fort Benning?

JV: I think about four months. Four or five months, yes.

TS: It sounds like you had a chance to really do a number of things while you were there.

JV: It was full time work reactivating the division. Particularly with the people we were issued at that time, many of whom didn't want to be there.

TS: How do you deal with personal situations like that?

JV: Try to convince them of the importance of the job that has to be done. Whether they like it or not, they're there to do it. And then make life as pleasant, and the duty as satisfying, as you can make it.

TD: Were those cases more the exception, General Vessey, or were they more commonplace than you might have imagined?

JV: They were probably the exception, but you remember the exceptions because you get officers telling you, "I burned all my uniforms. I didn't want to come back." (*chuckles*) You couldn't help but sympathize with them a little bit.

TS: Five years is a long time.

JV: Yes. But we made a pretty good division out of it.

TS: Did you know you were destined for Germany when you were at Fort Benning here?

JV: Yes. Well, it could have gone either way I thought. I thought we'd probably go to Korea, but it became clear pretty quickly that we were destined for Germany because we had sent advance detachments to Germany to locate where we would be stationed.

TS: So you knew you were headed someplace, and now it looks like you're going to Germany with the advance units. How did you feel about that, knowing you were going to Germany?

JV: By that time Berlin was a crisis.¹⁰ Clearly the Cold War was on already.

TS: The Berlin crisis, '48-49, was very near in the past.

JV: Yes.

TS: As you said for context a little bit ago, how did you understand the Army's and military's role in Germany in this Cold War scenario?

JV: It was clear that we were opposing the Soviet Union, that is making sure that the western part of Germany remained free.

TS: Was there much emphasis placed, in your memory, in creating this context for officers and soldiers, of what the situation was?

JV: You have to remember that this is the time of the McCarthy¹¹ hearings in the Congress, and much anti-Communism rhetoric in the United States.

TS: Pretty strong rhetoric at that.

JV: Yes, exactly. In fact at that time the Army undertook what was called Troop Information and Education. We had to have a once a week lecture for all the soldiers in the Army about events in the world. Most of them turned out to be sort of anti-Communist material.

TS: These are things you had to attend as well?

JV: Yes. When you were in the troop units themselves, you were the one who had to give the lecture.

TS: So you had to give a lecture.

JV: Right.

¹⁰ Berlin Crisis, or Berlin blockade (June 1948 –May 1949); the Soviet Union blocked the Western Allies' railway, road, and canal access routes to West Berlin.

¹¹ Joseph McCarthy (1908-57); politician, Republican U.S. senator from Wisconsin (1947-57). Best known for bold but largely unsubstantiated claims of communist infiltration of the U.S. government and military.

TS: So what do you recall about these information lectures?

JV: At the time, when we went to Fort Benning, I was on the staff at the division artillery. So I didn't have to give any lectures at that time. But later on, when we were in Germany and I became a battery commander, I had to give the lectures. I guess the one I recall the most vividly was after the Army had integrated the African Americans with the rest of the Army. I had a young black soldier who had a good mind, but would challenge anything he didn't agree with, and some of the things on very shallow challenges. Some of his challenges had a pretty shallow base.

Anyway, I've forgotten what the specific weekly subject was, but it was in this theme of anti-Communist lectures. I had received a couple of new replacements the night before and I had greeted them in the morning and they were in attendance at the lecture. The lecture was part of the anti-Communist theme. I gave the lecture, and this black soldier challenged some of the things that I had said in the lecture, particularly about conditions in Eastern Europe. He said something to the effect that these people, perhaps they didn't have freedom of the press and so forth, but they had greater freedoms than we have in America. One of the two new replacements had raised his hand and in an eastern European accent said, "That's a lot of baloney." Then he went on to recite part of his own history. He was Polish and was from the town that was divided on the demarcation line between Germany and the Soviet Union when Poland was divided.

TS: In 1939, when they split the country.

JV: Right. Then he went on to say that his father was in the Polish Army and was taken to a Soviet prison camp, and his mother and him and his brother were sent to a concentration camp. He had a scar across his face and explained that he had escaped from the concentration camp once, and this was the result of his escape and beatings when he returned. He sort of broke up the lecture. I got him into the orderly room afterward to get the rest of his story. He had gotten out of Germany. He escaped from this concentration camp and had made his way all the way from north Germany or part of occupied Poland, as a matter of fact, to the Caspian Sea and had gone aboard a Caspian Sea steamer which was carrying supplies across the Caspian Sea and came into Iran. When it docked in Iran he ran down the gangway and ran to the British Red Cross guy and put his arms around him and asked to be rescued for asylum by the British Red Cross guy. And he was.

Eventually he made his way to the United States and came into the United States Army. I got a reporter up from the *Stars and Stripes* to have him interview him. He assumed that his father and mother had died because of where they went. He had had no contact with them. This is 1951 or 1952, mind you, probably '52 or so. His story was printed in the *Stars and Stripes*. His father and mother had been reunited. His father had escaped also and fought with the Polish II Corps in Italy. His mother had survived and had been freed from the concentration camp. They had joined again and were living in Britain. They read the story in the *Stars and Stripes* and got together with their son again. As a direct result of that challenge in the anti-Communist lecture at Headquarters Battery 4th Division Artillery.

TS: That's a wonderful story.

JV: It is indeed.

TS: The good that came out of that.

JV: Right.

TS: These lectures, kind of boiler plate stuff?

JV: Yes, yes. They were boring for the troops and boring for those of us who had to give them.

TS: Were they canned or were you supposed to ...

JV: They were canned. You got a four page sheet. This is the outline for the lecture. These are the points you need to raise.

TS: So the Cold War really manifested itself inside the Army as well in a very direct way.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: Germany, six years after 1945, you're arriving in Germany. What visual evidence could you still see that the war had taken place?

JV: There was still a lot of rubble in Frankfurt and Hanau.¹² We went to old Hessian barracks in the city of Hanau, which is just east of Frankfurt, on the Main River. Hanau had been leveled by Allied bombers. Still many relics of buildings and a lot of rubble and so forth in Hanau, right in the middle of downtown Hanau. We were put into caserns that allegedly had housed the Hessians that had fought for George III in the American Revolution.

TS: Back in the 18th century.

JV: Yes. They were clearly 18th century architecture, the barracks architecture, with plumbing that had been upgraded slightly, but not much.

TS: Rustic shall we say?

JV: Rustic.

TS: Had the Nazis also used the same facilities?

¹² Both cities are on the Main River, in central Germany; Hanau is located 15 miles east of Frankfurt.

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: So this just made a transition over the years.

JV: Right. Lamboystrasse in Hanau had one, two, three, four, I think five caserns that were battalion or larger.

TS: So a big area.

JV: Yes, right. Then they had several other areas around the city of Hanau that also had caserns. Then an old Luftwaffe airfield with barracks that were used by the Americans.

TS: Just to project forward, I believe the Americans used facilities in and around Hanau until after the 2000s, right?

JV: I think it was three or four years ago that the Americans moved out of Hanau.¹³

TS: The three years that you were there approximately, what changes did you see in the city of Hanau? I mean we know that of course Germany is reconstructing and its economy is booming in the '50s. Could you see this?

JV: The reconstruction was big, and bringing Hanau back to a thriving city was an important part of the community's activities. We were a huge imposition on the city of Hanau, with the number of Americans that we had there. So German-American relations was a big issue.

TS: Excellent. That's perfect – that's the thing I was curious to ask you about next, quite frankly, because it could be touchy, but also one could argue it's an economic bonus in the hiring of local nationals and the money injected into the economy. How did that play out?
(1:17:40)

JV: At that time we had eastern Europeans that were organized into quasi-military units. They wore uniforms and did such things as guard duty, haul the garbage, and so on and so forth.

TS: Eastern Europeans they were?

JV: They were eastern Europeans, and I think that these were people who didn't want to go back to their own countries because of what had happened in their own countries.

TS: These are Displaced Persons?

JV: Yes. Probably. I hadn't thought about this until just now, so I'm trying to remember these folks. But they did much of the labor around the caserns for the Americans, and the

¹³ The U.S. Army presence in Hanau ended in 2008.

Germans themselves were not hired for this. So there was a little bit of friction there. Probably more than a little bit, because the Germans themselves weren't offered the opportunity.

TS: So this changed later, because later I know the American forces in Germany and Berlin did hire local nationals.

JV: Right.

TS: But at this time it's not happening yet.

JV: Right. And of course the male population of Germany was drastically reduced by the wartime casualties. When we first moved there we lived in a requisitioned German house outside of Hanau.

TS: Did Mrs. Vessey and your son join you immediately?

JV: No. It took about a year for the family quarters to become available, before I was eligible. But we were accepted by the German community nicely. They were very kind to us. In fact we wound up having many good German friends in Hanau.

TS: When you first got there did you have a sense of trepidation or were you prepped about what to expect or how to deal with the local population?

JV: By that time the Army had been in Germany since the war. So they pretty well knew how to deal with the situation. We had good relations with the German police force. In fact the police chief in Hanau and I became good friends through the years.

TS: Do you recall any specific training, or what we might call workshops today, saying okay, Captain Vessey, you're going to Germany, here's some kind of workshop or training to prepare you for what to expect?

JV: No.

TS: You went over there, sort of had to figure it out, I mean as far as dealing with people?

JV: Right. Right. For us rebuilding the 4th Division into a competent combat division took all of our time and effort. We could have spent more time on German-American relations and made things easier, at least for our soldiers, because these are people who hadn't been overseas before.

TS: Part of the context here is of course the Federal Republic of Germany and the GDR, the German Democratic Republic, both founded in 1949; West Germany was without a military at the time. In fact it joined NATO only in 1955. So the whole time you were there there was no German military to liaise with or to deal with. So what kind of interactions or

cooperation did the U.S. military, did you have, with German authorities during the time you were there?

JV: The Federal Republic had organized what was called the Bundesgrenzschutz Polizei, which is the Border Police. They were a quasi-military organization. They were organized in battalions and had many of the supporting weapons that infantry battalions would have. We did have an official relationship with the Bundesgrenzschutz Polizei, because they were really the German border guards. Then we had cavalry reconnaissance battalions and regiments along the border, and then backed up by outfits like the 4th Infantry Division. So we had a relationship with the Bundesgrenzschutz Polizei. Then locally, while we were in home station in Hanau, for example for us, we had a good relationship with the local police force. It extended to our military policemen riding with the German policemen, particularly on Saturday nights or sometime like that when a lot of the troops were in town.

TS: How would you characterize the relationship between...you have a lot of soldiers, occupation troops, and you have a local population that, as you've described, isn't yet getting the fruits of this economically and is still struggling?

JV: Although we still qualified for the German Occupation Medal, I think calling us occupation troops would have been a misnomer. We didn't do anything about [that]; we had no duties as far as the occupation of Germany was concerned. We were there solely to oppose the forces of the Soviet Union.

(1:25:35)

TS: The de-Nazification, certainly that whole process was well in the past.

JV: Right. All of that was gone.

TS: Talk about you specifically. You had a number of positions here and you weren't in Hanau all the time as I know, as you mentioned earlier.

JV: No. In fact probably less than half the time. We were either in the training areas training, because there was no place to shoot artillery around Hanau – and there were several large training areas in Germany that were used by all the troops, all the American troops – or we were deployed into our battle positions along the east-west zonal border.¹⁴

My principal job as assistant S-3 of the 4th Infantry Division Artillery was to conduct the artillery battery tests. The field artillery for years has had a series of tests. These tests are routinely given by two echelons above the command level of the echelon being tested. For example, the field artillery batteries in the division artillery would be tested by the division artillery rather than the battalion to which they belong. It's an annual test. It's strictly a field artillery firing test. It's a live fire, tactically organized test. I and another captain named Frank Bullock, who also happened to be in the 18th Field Artillery when I was there at Fort Sill, Frank Bullock and I were the testers for the 4th Infantry Division Artillery. And if I do slip into a little braggadocio here, I would say Frank Bullock and I

¹⁴ Border between East Germany and West Germany.

were very good artillerymen. We would spend hours and hours trying to figure out where each shot was fired, why it hit where it did, and we could generally explain why it did. So we were the testers for the 4th Division, and we worked very hard at doing that, that is, giving a fair test but a challenging test to the artillery batteries. I'm sure that both Frank and I, both of us, found it very enjoyable and good duty.

TS: You liked that duty.

JV: Yes.

TS: When you were deployed, you mentioned positions along the inner German border. What did those positions look like when you deployed there? How were you deployed, and what were you deployed in preparation for?

JV: We would go to the positions that had been reconnoitered by us or the others that were part of our general defensive positions in case the Soviets would attack across the east-west zonal border. In the 1950s when we would be alerted – we didn't know why we were alerted but I suspect some intelligence reason came up and we deployed to those positions.

TS: Were these deployments as you've described them here in expectation or in preparation for a possible Soviet attack? Or were they ever offensive positions that said this is what we would do in the case of us attacking them?

JV: They were always in defense.

TS: When artillery, such as you were working with, deployed in defense of, what is the role for artillery in a scenario like that?

JV: It was all planning. What you do is plan fires in front of the infantry to protect the infantry, but you'd also plan fires on the avenues of approach to disrupt the Soviet attack.

TS: So you got to know certain locations along the inner German border fairly well I'd imagine.

JV: Yes, right. Intimately I would say.

TS: And what were some of these positions? Were they around Fulda or elsewhere as well?

JV: Yes. We were primarily Fulda Gap¹⁵ troops. In fact I had three tours of Germany, all of them Fulda Gap defensive outfits. Once with the 4th Infantry Division and twice with the 3rd Armored Division as well.

(1:31:05)

¹⁵ Fulda Gap, a Cold War term; named for the city of Fulda, an area between the East German border and the city of Frankfurt, specifically lowlands which Soviet tanks could use to cross the Rhine River.

TS: So you probably knew the way to Fulda.

JV: Backwards and forwards.

TS: During this first stint in Germany, two and a half, three years, what ways do you think you're developing as a leader, as an officer?

JV: For example, the testing role was a very important role for me, and I probably got a little cocky, maybe even a little too cocky, because I recall our commander, after Uncles left we had Brigadier General John Battle Horton¹⁶ take command, who was also an excellent artilleryman and a fine officer. I think he had a good appreciation of my capabilities. I remember once when one of the battalions was short an S-3, an operations officer – it was a major's job, but one for which I was certainly technically qualified, but I didn't hold the rank. Anyway, I think that General Horton had proposed me for that job. The word was that the battalion commander said something to the effect, I wouldn't have that smart aleck no matter how smart he is. (*chuckles*) That got back to me as sort of a lesson. You think you know the answer, don't brag about it.

TS: Was there a certain style you taught yourself to become?

JV: This battalion as a matter of fact was not a very well trained battalion, and it was as a result of the battery test that they made some foolish fundamental errors in several of their batteries. It wasn't just one battery making a mistake. It was sort of a uniformity of poor training in the battalion.

TS: Which you recognized.

JV: Yes.

TS: You mentioned weapons a little bit ago, and I wanted to ask about tactical nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons, since 1945 have become part of the arsenal. Were these something that were...

JV: No, they weren't. By '50 they were only beginning to be thought of. They were under development certainly, but not deployed to the forces.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

¹⁶ John Battle Horton (1901-94); U.S. Army brigadier general. Served in both World War II and Korea.

TS: Did you have expectations, or were you asked to have expectations that the Soviets might have such weapons?

JV: Yes.

TS: Is there a way to think about defending against that? Or how, if the other side has something like that, how did you think about that?

JV: By the time we left there it was becoming more... By 1954-55, when I was back in the States, it was becoming far more important, defense against nuclear weapons. Of course [nuclear weapons] tests were going on in the United States and in the western Pacific. So we didn't know much about nuclear weapons or their effects. So we were just beginning to face up to it, and there were great debates inside the Army and certainly far beyond my level.

TS: What kind of information or rumors trickled down to your level?

JV: You read it in the journals, the military journals, about the debates about reorganizing the Army for a nuclear age. The Army was considering something called the Pentomic Division. We moved from the square division to the triangular division, and the pentomic division was an outgrowth of the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons. Rather than a three pronged division, pentomic obviously five pronged divisions equipped with nuclear weapons. And those debates were ongoing at that particular time. In fact I went to my first nuclear weapons school in Germany before we returned in 1955.

TS: What was that school about?

JV: About the effects of nuclear weapons, what we knew about them, how to get people prepared for not only the blast and flash and radiation effects of nuclear weapons, as well as how to deploy the Army in a nuclear age.

TS: This is a massive shift then from the Army that you knew from the 1940s.

JV: Yes.

TS: Why don't we, with your okay, stop here. I want to ask you about Berlin and some other bigger questions. We can get to that next time.

JV: Okay.

TS: I'll stop this for today.

END OF INTERVIEW