

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 Tuesday, 5 June 2012. This is interview number 13 with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor.

General Vessey, today we agreed the first topic of conversation would be your posting to Germany. Just from your JCS file: "1963, Commander, Second Battalion, 73rd Artillery, 3rd Armored Division, U.S. Army Europe." I think we mentioned before, this is another posting to Hanau. Is that correct?

JV: Indeed.

TS: Okay. As a bit of context, in January of 1963 the record indicates you were promoted to lieutenant colonel.

JV: Right.

TS: Being promoted to lieutenant colonel, did you feel that being promoted to lieutenant colonel in 1963, you're forty years old at that time, timing-wise about right? A little late? How did you see this in your ongoing trajectory in the Army?

JV: At the time it was a welcome promotion obviously for me. Looking at it in retrospect, I can see that I was promoted a little late in life in terms of years but simply because of the late in life time that I had been commissioned a second lieutenant in the Regular Army, which was actually six years past my original commissioning time. But it didn't bother me at the time. I was still vigorous, healthy, not concerned in any way that I might be a little older than my peers at the time in the Army.

TS: Didn't cause any frustration because you were a little older and you saw younger people than yourself being promoted?

JV: No. Not really. And it was a good time to get another tour in Europe. The 2nd Battalion of the 73rd in the 3rd Armored Division was to be a newly organized artillery battalion in the 3rd Armored Division.

TS: What does that mean, to be newly organized? Is it start from scratch?

JV: Starting from scratch. At that time, up until the day I took command of it, it didn't exist on the roles of the Army. I'm sure that at some time earlier it did – the 73rd was an old artillery regiment, certainly during World War II it existed. ... I'm sure it existed before World War II. But anyway, 2nd Battalion, 73rd was organized as an Honest John rocket battalion. The Honest John rocket was one of the early attempts to provide battlefield nuclear weapon capability for the Army. The range was relatively short, but it exceeded the range of the cannons that we had at that time and of course could carry a much bigger load. The warheads were close to two thousand pounds. But it was a free rocket.

TS: Meaning?

JV: It wasn't a guided missile. It had no guidance. Once you shot it, it was a ballistic rocket that went on its way. So you had to pay particular attention to good gunnery to hit a target. And most people considered that you couldn't be very accurate with a free rocket, because surface winds had a great effect on the rocket once it leaves the launcher. It's going very slow and surface winds as well as the winds aloft would have a considerable effect on it. So that was basically a new experience, although I had been in the gunnery department at the artillery school before.

TS: Did you have to get yourself up to speed on the Honest John rocket?

JV: Yes. But the Honest John wasn't new to me. At any rate, the Honest John had been a part of the divisions but only as one battery of the eight inch battalions in the organic divisions up until that time. So when the 2nd of the 73rd was organized we got this one battery that had already been in existence and then had to organize a second firing battery in the battalion headquarters, and support.

TS: What challenges are inherent in starting a unit from scratch like this?

JV: First it's the people.

TS: Do you have to pick them all?

JV: The people had already been picked for me. Most all of them came from the 3rd Armored Division. So the other battalions in the division artillery had been tapped for officers and soldiers. I must say that my fellow battalion commanders, although I admired and respected all of them, they weren't necessarily very kind to me in picking the officers and soldiers that came to the battalion. (*chuckles*) But I must say that I came out fine.

I came out much better with the officers and soldiers than I did with the general purpose equipment. The general purpose equipment also came from the other battalions. Just the utility trucks and so forth. The Honest John equipment itself either came from the existing Honest John battery or we got new equipment from the States for the other battery. [REDACTED]

Improved Conventional Munitions. These were cluster bomb type warheads for the Honest John. [REDACTED]

(8:00)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TS: Right.

[REDACTED]

TS: Were the scenarios that were discussed or thought about still primarily looking at some kind of conflict between the Soviet forces in East Germany and Allied forces in West Germany?

JV: Yes. I don't think there were any plans that I know of for the Allied forces to attack the Soviet forces in East Germany, for any sort of an offensive operation by the Allied forces. The basic assumption was that the Soviets would attack the NATO forces and we would defend ourselves.

TS: How has the role of artillery changed in the ten years since you were last stationed in Germany?

JV: The changes in the Army as a whole dictated changes in the artillery. When I was there before it was with the 4th Infantry Division, which was primarily a foot infantry division. The Soviets, even at that time, the major forces opposing from the Soviets were mechanized forces. From the time I was there in the '50s until now the United States Army, along with our NATO allies, had become much more a mechanized force itself with many more tanks, much greater battlefield mobility. And by this time the new German Army¹ had been organized.

TS: Right. That's one of the things I wanted to ask you about as well, with the context of the 1955 establishment of the Bundeswehr and West Germany being militarized and incorporated into NATO in that year 1955. What kind of interactions or cooperation did you have with the Bundeswehr?

JV: Along the NATO front the division on our immediate left would have been a German Panzer division. Generally the 3rd Armored Division had good relations with that German Panzer division. We exchanged visits tactically during training. We exchanged visits socially during the holiday periods. So it was a good, healthful relationship.

TS: How would you size up or characterize the professional abilities of this re-established German Army at this time?

JV: They were good. Generally their senior officers were World War II veterans.

(telephone ringing, voice in background)

TS: So these units, did you feel confident that if there were some kind of crisis that these units would be dependable allies?

(17:30)

JV: Yes.

¹ The post-1945 German Army, known as the Bundeswehr, was established in 1955.

TS: This is only 1963, less than two years after the major Berlin crises, the building of the Berlin Wall² and then the standoff in October of 1961 in Berlin. What impact did you notice of the kind of ongoing tensions relating to Berlin?

JV: Again, as before, the plans included plans to reinforce Berlin, make sure that the road to Berlin stayed open. But the Army had been considerably strengthened from the mid-1950s until the early '60s. So I think there was a great deal more confidence in the U.S. Army. In the late 1950s, I must say, there was a general feeling, more among the families than the soldiers I think, that we were sort of hostages in Germany, that is, that they faced an enemy that looked to be considerably more powerful than ours. But by the 1960s the Army had better tanks, we had a lot more tanks. The nuclear weapons business was better organized, and we knew more about it. So there was more confidence in the Army in Europe in the '60s.

TS: Is this a matter of just more numbers or is there an increased level of professionalism and quality as well?

JV: All of the above. More numbers, but better equipment and I'd say increased professionalism in the Army itself.

TS: Did you notice this really at your level, this trickling down of resources?

JV: Yes.

TS: Did it make you feel more confident about being in the Army; about the way you could contribute and be depended upon?

JV: I don't know whether it made me more confident. I was always pretty confident.

TS: You'd been in the Army a long time now. You can compare different eras.

JV: Right. I probably wasn't as cocky by the time I got back there in 1962. I'd seen more of the world and had a better understanding of where I was on the ladder of human capabilities. *(chuckles)*

TS: What does that mean?

JV: I had indicated before that I was pretty confident of my own abilities as an artilleryman, but I'd learned first that the field artillery is only a small piece in the pie, and that there are a lot of other important things that have to be done on the battlefield. I knew that, but knowing more about it made it clearer to me.

² Berlin Wall: barrier constructed by East Germany that completely cut off West Berlin from surrounding East Germany and from East Berlin. Construction began August 1961. As a barrier the Wall became irrelevant in November 1989, as the East German regime opened access to the West.

TS: Did somebody help you realize this, or is this just part of the getting older process?

JV: I think it's getting older, going to advanced schools. By this time I'd been to the Command and General Staff College and then the Armed Forces Staff College. I'd served at the 8th Army Headquarters in Korea and the CINCPAC Coordination Center. I'd had a tour in the Pentagon. So growing up.

TS: How about Hanau? Thinking of growing and changing, you've been in Hanau several times. Now nearly twenty years since the end of the war. How is this community and its relationship with the United States Army changing over time?

JV: Of course the one nice thing about Hanau is that the leadership was fairly consistent in Hanau. People that we knew in the '50s were still there in the '60s, still in leadership positions. I mentioned meeting and befriending the police chief when I was there the first time. Well he was still there and I think more widely accepted as a leader in the community by the community of Hanau by that time. Hanau was recovering from the war. The rubble was pretty well cleaned up. New buildings had been built. The cultural life of Hanau was far greater. There were concerts in Hanau to attend, and we did.

Generally the relationship with the Americans was pretty good, but on both sides of the house there were some bad apples. Hardly a Saturday night went by that there wasn't some sort of a fight between a few soldiers and a few of the local civilians in Hanau. It was something that one simply had to attend to. We were a foreign army in a foreign country, although Western Europe was culturally much akin to the United States there were still cultural differences. We were looked on as strangers.

TS: Looked on as strangers as friends, as occupiers, how would you flesh that out?

JV: I'd say, put yourself in the shoes of the Germans who a few years earlier had looked like the conquerors of Europe and then later become the country that was defeated and accepted unconditional surrender and had been split up into occupied zones with foreign armies abounding in the countryside. Then you've got the split between East and West Germany and the confrontation between the Soviets and NATO. Tanks destroying farmers' fields on maneuvers and so forth. It's not hard to imagine that some of these people did not like that (*chuckles*) and even though they may have felt some protection from the Soviet Union, who most of them considered a threat, the protection from the threat sometimes looked worse than the threat.

TS: There was a Status of Forces Agreement³ in place at that time?

JV: Yes.

³ A Status of Forces Agreement governs the relationship between a host country and a foreign country stationing military forces there.

TS: Today what we might term cultural sensitivity training...in those days, in the '60s, when new soldiers came into your unit or units you were associated with, what kind of education did they get about where they were and how to relate to people and how to carry themselves?

JV: I'd say it was fairly rudimentary, but nevertheless did exist. First they got oriented on where the trouble spots were in town and warned to stay away from those, but for recognizing the fact that you're dealing with vigorous eighteen, nineteen, twenty-year-old males, giving them the address of trouble spots to avoid (*chuckles*)...

TS: I can fill in the blank on that one. Right. That became the first place that they went?

JV: Right. So we continued to put new officers, the police chief gave us an opportunity when we got new officers that wondered where and what went on in Hanau, Chief Hobein gave us an opportunity to put the new officers in his patrol cars on Saturday night and let them see what happened. There was a German-American council that met regularly, probably weekly, in the community that addressed the problems in the community and passed those suggestions on to the commanders of the units. We worked pretty hard at it. By this time we had a number of NCOs who had married German women, and I must say that many of them were very helpful with getting along in the German community, with the German community. Most of the soldiers that married the German women, many of them wound up speaking fairly fluent German themselves. So it was an evolving situation as well as one that required that certainly new officers, newcomers to Germany, to do a little study and help understand, be introduced to the community.

TS: Yourself, how well did you speak German at this time?

JV: Pretty well.

TS: That suggests you made a point to learn the language somewhere along the line or learn it well enough?

JV: Yes.

TS: First time, or was that this time?

JV: Oh, no. The first time. In fact I think in the meantime I had taken a couple more German language courses in college.

TS: What difference did you feel that made, being able to speak to someone in their own language?

JV: In Germany it helps build a bond of friendship. That was my reaction in most places. Whether you were going into the store just to buy something or in a restaurant at night talking to the owners or the wait staff or whatever it happened to be or with German

friends, certainly being able to speak the language was... And I must say that most of them were very helpful. Needless to say, neither Avis nor I were fluent German speakers, but we were known to be people who attempted to learn the language and we'd get help from German friends certainly and people that we didn't know would help you with the language.

TS: How did your family enjoy or adjust to this extended period of time abroad?

JV: I think that all three of the children enjoyed the time in Germany. John, the oldest, perhaps more than others, but Sarah was born in Germany and David was born between the two trips to Germany. The family went back when he was five years old. Of course they went to American schools, but the schools also had some cross-cultural training in the schools. We had German help in the household, which also gave them a little cross-cultural experience.

TS: Were local nationals hired at the base by this time?

JV: Yes.

TS: What would you say was the most challenging thing about this particular time in Germany for you?

(telephone rings; voice in background)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TS: Can you test fire these things?

JV: Oh, yes. We fired them. I remember well the day we fired the first one. General Abrams,⁴ who was then the Corps Commander and later the Commander in Viet Nam and

⁴ Creighton W. Abrams (1914-74); U.S. Army general. Served in World War II in Europe, and during the Korean War. Commanded military operations in Vietnam, 1968-72; Chief of Staff of the Army, 1972-74.

later the Chief of Staff of the Army, came to visit us when we fired the first rocket. General Abrams, shortly before that, had commanded the 3rd Armored himself and there were a number of people on the staff of the 3rd Armored who were commanders of the units in the 3rd Armored who were really Abrams' people.

I remember that we were at a winter training session at Grafenwöhr, which is one of the major U.S. Army training centers in Europe and West Germany. One of the assistant division commanders was an old Abrams man, and had been in Abrams' division during World War II, but was a bit of a heavy drinker. That night at the Grafenwöhr, the night before we were to fire our first round, we were convoked to the Officers' Club for dinner with the Corps Commander, who was visiting there. This Art West, who was the Assistant Division Commander for Maneuver, was the real old Abrams man from World War II days. West and General Abrams got in some sort of argument at the dinner. The dinner went on until all hours. I remember my battalion was camped outside the main billet area. I got out to the battalion late, very late that night, and we were to shoot the next day. General Abrams was there not to see the 2nd of the 73rd shoot its first rocket, but there to see a maneuver of one of the brigades in the Armored Division out in area off the main reservation. It was to start over farmland off the main reservation.

Unfortunately the weather turned warm and the snow had melted and the potential impact of running tanks over farmers' fields would bring great expense to the Army, so that maneuver was called off. About six in the morning I got a call saying that instead of the Corps Commander visiting the maneuver of the 1st Brigade or whatever it was, he would attend the firing of the rocket. (*chuckles*) He was also going to attend some shooting by the eight inch battalion. The eight inch battalion was commanded by a fellow named Ralph Starner, who would become a friend of mine, and his wife and Avis were friends and we stayed friends for many years afterwards.

So in the morning the Corps Commander was to come and we were to brief him on what was going on and then he'd accompany us to the shoot. It was a miserable, lousy winter day with intermittent snow falling and temperature right around freezing. So first the Corps Commander came down to where we were. We gave a briefing on the Honest John rocket, what it could do and sort of a Chamber of Commerce type briefing telling him what it could do. He probably already knew it, but we did it anyway. But I could hear some of his staff officers in the background, some of the accompanying staff officers, differing with some of the things that we said and so forth in that briefing and I could see that this is not going to be a good day. (*chuckles*)

We then went out to where the firing was to take place. Art West, the Assistant Division Commander, rode with me in my Jeep. I sat in the back and Art West in the front. General West had had perhaps a little too much of the good wine that was served at dinner the night before and he got sick on the way out as we were following the Corps Commander, who is following my exec, who is leading us to an observation point where we can see the shooting. So Art vomits and it comes back – in the 3rd Armored Division there we traveled with windshields down, so I was somewhat bespoiled with Art's vomit. But we finally got to the observation post and I had brushed myself off with handkerchiefs and so forth and looked about as good as I could look, but I would have liked to have looked a lot better.

Then we got to the observation post and they came to fire the rocket. I was hoping for above all else was that (A) it went off on time and (B) that it hit the impact area. Suddenly the rocket did not go off on time. Finally I got out, got the Jeep and went back, went to the firing point to try to find out what was happening. We were in a position where we could see both the firing point and the impact area, but not real well. So I went down to the firing point and the crew was following a procedure, but there was an igniter that one used with this rocket. You had to insert it carefully and it had to be in the right place, and what they'd done is they inserted the igniter backwards. But they were following the safety procedures to make sure that they didn't have an accident. I went down there and got the crew out of the way and went up and took the igniter pad out myself and inserted it correctly and then told them to be ready to fire on command. Then I went back up to the OP, and we fired.

Later on in the day we went from there to one of Starner's eight inch batteries that was supposed to shoot. First I should say the rocket was reasonably close to the impact point. It was safe and did hit the impact area. Other than not firing on time and having to have the battalion commander go down and correct what was wrong, it was only a minor disaster. (*chuckles*) I've forgotten what happened to Starner's eight inch battery, but it was something about comparable to what happened to the Honest John battery.

We were sitting with General Abrams afterward sipping a cup of coffee out here with the snow falling and General Abrams, God bless him, said "Well, today sort of reminds me of an experience I had. I went to Fort Knox to take over a company" in such and such a tank battalion, he had the correct number of the tank battalion. And he said, "it wasn't exactly a day like today; it was a hot summer's day. It was sort of a pleasant day at Fort Knox. The soldiers were all adorned in their Class A uniforms and looked splendid. The ladies were wearing their white hats and gloves like an elegant parade." He said, "in addition to my taking command of the company I was supposed to accept the trophy for having the best tank in the regiment, and that tank was beside the reviewing stand all painted nicely and looking quite elegant. We had the formation. I took command of the company. We paraded in review. When it was over, the first sergeant and I exchanged salutes and I told him to dismiss the troops and I told him to move the tank back to the motorpool. The first sergeant asked for a moment to talk to me, and I gave him permission." He said, "Sir, we'll have to wait until everyone leaves in order to move the tank." I said, "Why?" He said, "We have to tow it. The damn thing won't run." (*chuckles*) Then General Abrams said, "Better days will come for both of you." He said to start early.

TS: He could have said something quite different than that, couldn't he?

JV: Exactly. But that was General Abrams. He had a great sense of perspective.

TS: Yes. Seeing that things happen like that sometimes.

JV: Yes. That was the first introduction to the pressure of having and commanding the Honest John battalion. The division artillery commander at the time was Edward Flannigan, commonly known as 'Fly' Flannigan, a great soldier and a great, fine artillery officer and an airborne soldier basically. I think that I tested Fly Flannigan's patience

because, as I said before, the general equipment given to the 2nd of the 73rd was not particularly good. The utility trucks were a mess, to tell you the truth. Most of them were towed into our place when they were given to us.

TS: Sounds like somebody offloaded some stuff on you.

JV: Right. Exactly. They offloaded their wrecks onto us. Shortly after organization day for the battalion we had an alert, and in those days, as in the days of the 4th Division, if you had this "alert" it meant moving out of your kasernes into an assembly area and then getting orders to do something: go to open the road to Berlin or go to the general defensive positions along the East-West local border or some such thing as that. But the standard procedure was to get out of the kasernes and go to this assembly area. The limit was two hours –you had to be out there with your basic load of ammunition, your combat rations and so forth, ready to go to war in two hours.

We hadn't begun to get all the trucks of the battalion into operational condition when we had the first alert, and I reported to Flannigan that our time in the alert area was something like three and a half hours instead of the two hours. Flannigan unloaded on me to say the least, telling me about the standards of the 3rd Armored Division and so forth. So I said, "What do you want me to do? Do you want me to lie about it? It took three and a half hours, and the reasons it took three and half hours was this, this and this." I said, "Certainly next time we'll do better." That started my relationship with Fly Flannigan, which turned out to be very good. He was very helpful to me and pushed me along and was very laudatory of what I had finally done at the 2nd of the 77th, because before we got done, after that first shot, we never fired another rocket that wasn't less than one probable error from the impact point.

Now in theory all of those rockets should fall within four probable errors of the impact point. We fired I think two of the best shots ever done by anybody with an Honest John and hitting the impact point. We turned out to be a pretty good battalion thanks to having some very competent young officers, who were eager to learn and eager to become good rocketeers. [REDACTED]

But they seemed to come in waves. I remember one week where early in the week we had a Division Command Maintenance inspection. We have discussed that inspection before. We passed that. [REDACTED]

So Saturday morning we were scheduled to have a regular battalion inspection of the battalion. So I decreed that we would not have the inspection on Saturday morning,

that Saturday the battalion would be free. There would be no training on Saturday, which was unusual for them. Well, Friday night about midnight I got the notice that we were to undergo a corps readiness inspection or test which meant that we were to load up, move to the Grafenwöhr training area and fire a rocket within a certain amount of time and hit a target. *(chuckles)* I thought that I had been singled out for some sort of Job-like punishment. But we did in fact load the battalion. I had to cancel of course the projected free day.

We did march a couple hundred miles to Grafenwöhr, fired our rocket successfully and got back. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I remember the commander of the [REDACTED] ...I had sent one of my officers to his maintenance place to get mowers to mow the grass. I had some idea of getting power mowers. They came back with a half a dozen push lawn mowers to mow ten or twelve acres worth of grass. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TS: Ironically, we had sheep at Tempelhof in Berlin into the 1980s for grass control out there between the runways, and I kind of laughed when I first saw it but by darn, they did a great job.

JV: Yes. Right. It worked. It was gangbusters. It was terrific. We had a wonderful relationship with this particular shepherd. He was always ready to come in because he could rest, his dogs could rest.

TS: Right. Because the sheep couldn't go anywhere.

JV: Right. The sheep couldn't go anywhere. But I must say that eventually we got some wonderful power mowers as a result of this.

TS: This also suggests the kind of relationship with the local community that you have, because you have some soldiers now who speak German, who are married to local nationals, and you can actually go out and ask and they'll provide. So on that level it's also very positive.

JV: Right. But at any rate, it was a wonderful time for me. [REDACTED]

(1:01:00)

TS: It's during this tour that the president changes rather suddenly. President Kennedy is assassinated on November 22, 1963. What impact did you notice from that event?

JV: It had a great impact on the 3rd Armored Division, because Kennedy had visited the 3rd Armored Division. In fact there was a great review of the 3rd Armored Division at the Fliegerhorst Kaserne, the place where the 2nd of the 73rd was billeted. I remember the division put out a policy cancelling all social events during the period of mourning for Kennedy. That took us right through the holiday period of that particular year.

TS: So the president, I think it was June 1963 he made a trip to West Germany?

JV: He made a trip to Germany. He made his speech in Berlin, but he also visited the U.S. Army troops in Europe and that visit was with the 3rd Armored Division at the Fliegerhorst Kaserne in Hanau.

TS: Do you remember his visit?

JV: I was not there at that time. I was still probably on leave from the Armed Forces Staff College before reporting to Germany to organize the 2nd to the 73rd.

TS: You're going to leave Germany and go to the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. When you left there what was the thing you felt best about?

JV: That we'd built a good battalion, that I turned over a good battalion to my successor [REDACTED] [REDACTED] And we had a good relationship with the rest of the division, that the last two commanders in the division had been Don Cowles, as I pointed out earlier. But preceding him was Dutch Kerwin,⁵ who was later Vice Chief of Staff of the Army when I was selected to be the DSC Ops of the Army, and a fellow who had a lot of influence on my career and several other assignments. That I had worked for good people and worked with good people in the battalion that I had and that we turned over a

⁵ Walter T. Kerwin, Jr. (1917-2008); U.S. Army general. Vice Chief of Staff, U.S. Army, 1974-78.

really top notch Honest John battalion. A lot of skepticism about the Honest John, whether it was worth the effort that was put into it, but I think we demonstrated that we had a battalion that could make it perform to its capabilities and perhaps even better than its advertised capabilities.

TS: How long did the Honest John remain part of the Army's arsenal?

JV: I don't know the answer to that question. Probably another ten years after that.

TS: Okay. Just curious. You talked about the good stuff. What was most disappointing or frustrating about this tour in Germany for you? Things don't always go according to plan.

JV: *(chuckles)* I would much rather have commanded a direct support self-propelled 105 battalion than the Honest John battalion, but I got the Honest John battalion. It was okay.

TS: Was it a good experience to add to your portfolio, in a sense?

JV: I don't know the answer to that question.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TS: Right. That's a more subjective thing. Okay.

JV: For me it was learning a lot about nuclear weapons. If you've got time we should go over a couple of other things that we did at that time.

TS: Please.

JV: The Honest John battalion was short people. It had very few people for the amount of work it had to do, for the amount of peacetime work it had to do. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] We had only one place where you could shoot the Honest John. There was no sort of substitute, lower caliber substitute as there was for cannon artillery. You could go out in the training area with a substitute for cannon artillery and have the communicators and the fire direction people and even the cannoneers train to do their regular job, but when the Honest John battalion went to the training area in those days, [REDACTED]

TS: How come?

JV: What if the war started?

TS: Right. Right.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TS: I was wondering what he was going to say. Either that or just the opposite.

JV: *(still chuckling)* And of course before it was over he decided that the whole division should operate that way, that no one should take an administrative area at the training area. That created chaos. So I was blamed by the other commanders of the division for creating this chaos. But it all worked out well for us.

⁶ Berton E. Spivy, Jr. (1911-1997); U.S. Army general.

TS: Are you a person by nature who likes to tinker with systems and prove what you find? You've mentioned that more than once here.

JV: I hope so. Certainly my experience has not been all that successful.

TS: You keep getting, as you said, pushed up the chain here so you must be doing something or some things, have some ideas that are pleasing some people.

JV: While we're on that I should talk about one incident years before when I was...we talked a bit about my being a gunnery instructor at the artillery school.

TS: That was at Fort Sill, right?

(1:14:00)

JV: Yes. A wonderful officer from Minnesota, Colonel Tony Perpich, originally actually invented [the GFT fan]. The field artillery was called the GFT. GFT stands for graphical firing table. The GFT fan, up until that time the fire direction centers in the field artillery had a soldier that operated the graphical firing table, which was sort of a slide rule gadget that produced the gun elevation at which the cannon was to be fired. And another soldier operated the range deflection fan on the map where the firing chart, which produced the deflection or the distance from the aiming post that the cannon was to be traversed to be on the right azimuth to hit the target. So you had two soldiers, two different directions, two soldiers in the fire direction center.

Tony Perpich was from Crosby, Minnesota. At any rate, he invented the GFT fan which (A) gets rid of one soldier and in theory saves a little time, because one soldier does it very quickly and you don't have to deal with two soldiers to get the answer that goes to the cannons. That was about the time that I was the gunnery instructor that this was first coming into the use. Something kept bothering me about that thing, that it was a little difficult. The soldier that had to use it had to put his pin in the firing chart and then he'd have to move his hand. If he was right handed, and most of the soldiers are right handed, he'd have to use his right hand to put the pin in the right location and then move his left hand to hold the pin while he moved this cursor on the range deflection fan and moved it into position to read both the range and the elevation for the cannon.

I fiddled with that thing and I thought, I bet Tony's left handed. It turned out he was left handed and this thing was made for left handed people. So I went to the hobby shop and worked with people at the hobby shop to make a fan for right handed people and I tested it with my students. We fired almost every day, so it was a good opportunity to use some smart young people to test it. I tested it with my students. It turned out you could save about ten seconds on average by using the right handed fan.

TS: Which did exactly the same thing.

JV: Yes. It did the same thing. But at any rate, I wrote all this up and I just jokingly said that I'd probably be awarded an Army commendation medal which was generally referred to as a Green Weenie. (*chuckles*) I thought I could probably get a Green Weenie for this. So I

wrote it up and submitted it through the proper channels to the chief of the gunnery department. I got called and was told that I was to go to his office. It was kind of pressing for me because I had a class to teach shortly after that, but I went home and got a clean uniform. I could just sort of imagine him pinning that Green Weenie on my chest.

I went in there and reported to him. He had the papers there and he said, "Vessey, are these your papers recommending this business that we turn that GFT fan around and make it for right handed people?" I said, "Yes, Sir." He said, "Do you realize we've just paid X millions" – I've forgotten what the number was – "X millions to buy these fans? You're going to make us look stupid as all get out." He took my recommendation and threw it in the waste paper basket. He said, "Don't ever raise this again." (*laughter*) So I thought, well, my first experiment at research and development was a complete failure.

TS: It seems like the boat that was missed on that one was the people who didn't think about it before they made a whole bunch of them for left handed people.

JV: Right. Right.

TS: So much for that commendation. Clean uniform went for nothing. Is that indicative of the type of bureaucratic hurdles that one can face with good ideas in the service? That it's constantly an uphill struggle, or just going through these channels?

JV: I think the services do pretty well by and large, but every once in a while we make some really bone-headed mistakes. It wasn't a huge mistake. The Army got along doing it with the left handed one as far as I know for the rest of the time we used that. Pretty soon a more advanced system came and overtook it. We had no wars in between, so...

TS: It just kind of faded away. That makes me think about learning and tinkering with stuff. I look at this time when you were a student at the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. Industrial College makes me think of shop class and technical things. Is that what that was?

JV: No. It was industrial mobilization of the United States for war.

TS: So very much a textbook kind of thing.

JV: Yes.

TS: How did you get selected? Why were you picked for this particular thing do you think?

JV: I've pondered that question many times. The solution I came up with was I was there on an athletic scholarship. (*chuckles*)

TS: Okay. Fill in the blanks here. I didn't have that written down anywhere.

JV: There's always an athletic contest between the various war colleges or senior service schools as they're called. You've got the National War College, the Army, Navy and Air

Force War Colleges, and then the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. ICAF is sort of the oddball out on this thing, because they don't study strategy, battlefield strategy or war strategy, but they do study industrial strategy. At any rate, they have a series of athletic contests among the students of the various classes. They have softball, tennis, handball – I'm not sure what they have today – squash we had, and they are scored some way or another. So there's a trophy that goes to the school, and ICAF has always done very well in that competition. So I've always said jokingly that obviously I was there on an athletic scholarship.

TS: I remember you mentioning you played handball and softball over the years. Is this something that they really wanted you for these things or are you just ...

JV: No. (*chuckles*)

TS: I just wanted to make sure. What lessons would you say you learned from your time at ICAF?

JV: It was a wonderful school. Of course you got an introduction to American industry and particularly the defense industrial complex of the United States. But understanding that it is not divorced from the rest of the industrial complex of the United States. So we studied everything from the electric power industry to the aerospace industry.

TS: One thinks of the examples of mobilization from the Second World War. Ford for example, with this retooling for aircraft. So is it those kinds of examples that were studied?

JV: Those examples were studied but by this time the world is different, so what do you do in the future was of course the question. At the time that I was a student there, or the war or the U.S. portion of the war in Southeast Asia was building at that time and supplying the forces there was a major problem. A lot had changed. Our position as a maritime nation had changed. We no longer had U.S. flagged ships that were the dominant force on the oceans by this time. Air played a much greater role in logistics than it had in the past. So much had changed. Of course aerospace technology: missiles had come into their own. The aircraft that were flying in those days were much more technically sophisticated. We were looking at supersonic aircraft in this time.

TS: Right.

JV: So an enormous amount had changed. In fact one of the industries we studied, or at least my section at ICAF, was the electrical power industry. That first big blackout happened on the East Coast occurred while we were studying the electrical power industry. During the course of the year I spent a couple of weeks at Northrop, North American actually at the time, who was then building the first supersonic bomber, which never did come to fruition. It was cancelled before it went into production. General Eisenhower himself had been a graduate of the Industrial College.

TS: How many people went through this every year? How many are we talking?

JV: I'd have to check that, but probably somewhere close to two hundred.

TS: And from all service branches?

JV: All services and civilians.

TS: Civilians too?

JV: We had State Department and Commerce Department.

TS: Now just to characterize this, you've mentioned in the past examples of a school or courses that are for people who are moving ahead and others where it might be to sort of park people who aren't needed for the service. How would you characterize this on a continuum?

JV: Any of the senior service colleges are for people moving ahead. If you don't get selected to a senior service college you'll never be considered, or it's unlikely that you'll be considered for a brigadier or...

TS: And you knew this too.

JV: Yes. Right. It doesn't mean you will be considered either.

TS: No, but it means that...you draw the conclusion that if you think this might be something in the future for you, this needs to be a box you check off, or you have this on your resume.

JV: Yes.

(1:28:15)

TS: How did it help you when you were in a course like this to know, okay, this is one of those things that will help me possibly in the future? Does that help you rethink your own career in the Army or your own willingness to stay in the Army?

JV: I'm not sure that it had any great influence on my willingness to stay in. I'd already decided to stay in, and it was an interesting and challenging year of studying things that I knew little or nothing about. I wasn't at all sure why I was there, because my previous experience had only been on the tactical and a little bit on the strategic level.

TS: Right.

JV: But nothing to do with the deeper, logistic side of the Defense Department. So not only was it new for me, it turned out to be important, far more important than going to one of the other war colleges would have been in the jobs that I had later, many of the jobs that I

had later, particularly as Vice Chief of the Army. It probably had more influence on that than any other, but certainly when I first went to Thailand as Commander of the U.S. Army Support Command Thailand, it had a great impact on being able to take on that job and do what had to be done.

TS: What would you say are some of the lessons that you learned from this that you said okay, wow, this is going to be helpful for me?

JV: The first lesson is that there are a lot of really smart and capable people in the United States Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps, and that you want to again continue to write down their names. We had office mates, we were three to an office. One of my office mates was Bob White,⁷ who was one of the early astronauts, an Air Force officer who had taken the X-15 rocket plane up to record altitude.

TS: Did he fly any of the Mercury or Gemini capsules?

JV: No.

TS: Okay. Just the X-15.

JV: Yes. The other fellow was a naval officer who had just come from commanding the presidential yacht. So it was an eclectic group to say the least.

TS: How was that working together closely with members of other service groups?

JV: Of course I'd already done it at the Armed Forces Staff College and had a fair amount of experience at 8th Army in Korea where I was responsible for working with the Navy for the Navy gunfire plan and to support operations in Korea. So I had some experience with it. But as I say, the lesson is that there are a lot of very smart people that aren't necessarily wearing an Army green uniform. The second lesson is that it reinforced something I had known for a long time and that is that every day in my life I will find something that I don't know that I ought to know that somebody else knows. (*chuckles*)

TS: Did you feel that when you were part of this course?

JV: Yes. And they gave us really challenging assignments. Many of the assignments given us were working in groups to solve some of the logistic problems for Southeast Asia, and they were having huge problems supporting the armed forces in Viet Nam at that time. In fact, a big chunk of our class was immediately assigned to the Pentagon, and I was one of those. Part of it was to implement the solutions that we had evolved in class for supporting the war in Southeast Asia.

⁷ Robert M. White (1924-2010); U.S. Air Force major general and test pilot. During the 1960s, White broke several records with the X-15 experimental aircraft.

TS: This is not just theoretical stuff we're talking here.

JV: No, no.

TS: You can apply it right now.

JV: This is solving today's problems as well as looking at future industrial mobilization problems. So as I recall, when we gave our study group solutions, all the senior officers, both civilian and military in the Pentagon, came to listen to the solutions that we were proposing. So that's the sort of school year it was and it was a great introduction to something that I knew very little about before that year came along and was very important for what I had to do later in life.

TS: Now you mentioned about staying in the Army. I've talked to service people over the years in different projects and sometimes I hear that there's a goal: I'm going to do my twenty years. Some people say they want to achieve a certain rank or whatever. You've been in the service nearly twenty-five years now. When you looked in the future, how did you envision for yourself your goals? Was it to put in X number of years? Was it to achieve a certain rank? How did you see your goals for yourself?

JV: I wanted to put myself in a position where I had a good chance of being promoted and staying in. I liked what I was doing; the assignments were interesting and challenging. The more I stayed in the more I could see that there were opportunities for interesting and challenging assignments ahead. I'd say that my outlook for the future for me was far more constrained than what actually happened to me. I was surprised to be on the brigadier's list when I was eventually on it.

TS: Genuinely surprised?

JV: I wasn't surprised to be a full colonel. I felt I could do any of those jobs and certainly deserved a good shot being promoted to full colonel.

TS: Like you said before, it's a pyramid, right? And there's a lot of colonels out there, full colonels.

JV: Yes. It peaks pretty fast.

TS: As you looked at that, when you became a colonel, did you feel like okay, this is kind of...

JV: That this is probably it.

TS: And yet you'd said at the outset today, five years later you're going to volunteer to go to helicopter school because you weren't quite satisfied yet.

JV: Part of that was somewhat selfish – I didn't want to go back to the Pentagon. I'd had my experience which I think I told you before that I used to walk out to the North Parking Lot to my car and look up at the sky at the airplanes taking off from Washington National and thinking to myself, I wish I could be on one of those.

TS: So desk work might be for some people. It wasn't for you?

JV: I didn't interest me particularly.

TS: I'm not going to jump ahead in the story, but you will turn out to be fairly looked on as a pretty positive person in the corridors of power before too many years have gone by.

JV: The Lord moves in strange and wonderful ways. (*chuckles*)

(1:38:00)

TS: I don't have a comeback for that one, sorry. Anything you'd like to add? We covered your tour in Germany and we talked a little about the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. The next step for us is to going to be to go to Southeast Asia, which is a breaking point. Are there things we should add in here to our conversation today, for example?

JV: Of course family-wise it was also an important time for us. Our children are growing up.

TS: Yes. Talk about that a little bit.

JV: Avis has had the trying experience of, we're bouncing back from East Asia to the Pentagon to Europe and then back to Washington and then subsequently on to East Asia again. She's stuck with moving the household and keeping the children in school and growing up. Of course we were changing churches. We obviously stayed Missouri Synod Lutherans during this period, but going from the United States to Europe fortunately we had a congregation in Frankfurt that was supported by both the LCMS and the ELCA. In those days they cooperated. It was a little bit of a struggle for us to get there on Sundays, because we were some distance away from Frankfurt, but we got there most Sundays when I was at least not out in the field in the training area. John was introduced to confirmation classes there.

Then coming back to Washington the next time we were members of St. John's Lutheran out in the Fairfax County area, near Springfield, when we were in Washington the first time. The second time we came back we had the problem of going to the Industrial College, so we wanted a place closer and lived in North Arlington. So we transferred our membership to St. Paul's in Falls Church, which was a close LCMS congregation and had come recommended to me because an ex-Navy chaplain, he actually served with the Marine Corps most of the time during the Korean War, was the pastor there. We stayed members at St. Paul's from then on whenever we were back in the United States. So it was a great association for us.

TS: With all this moving and the demands on your time, the stress you mentioned in Germany, how challenging was it to stay an engaged father who was in touch with his kids on a daily basis?

JV: It was a challenge. I'm sure it was more of a challenge for them than for me and certainly a challenge for Avis, because she got stuck with the major responsibilities when I wasn't around. But it was also good. We were back in Washington when I went to the Industrial College. We had rented a house in North Arlington that had a swimming pool. It also had a vacant lot next to it. The fellow that we rented from wanted to sell the lot and sell the swimming pool, but he didn't do it while we were there. He tried to do it, but he was unsuccessful in doing it while we were there so we had use of the swimming pool and we had a vacant lot. I remember during the football season the three kids and I would have a touch football game almost every night out there with Sarah and I playing against the two boys. (*chuckles*) We had the swimming pool that we used when the weather permitted it. I think we had a good time. But there was still a lot of pressure – you had to write a thesis while you were in the Industrial College. So that took extra time.

TS: When you're at the Industrial College, that is your job for that year. You're not doing other duties.

JV: No. And what I took on at the time was, I took on the additional duties of trying to get a Master's Degree.

TS: That was also 1965.

JV: Right. At George Washington. So I was taking night school classes. It was a good year.

TS: Pushed yourself, didn't you?

JV: Yes.

TS: How come?

JV: I needed it.

TS: Let's face it, you could have rested on your laurels a bit. You were a lieutenant colonel by this time. No one pushed you to do all this. You did it anyway.

JV: Yes. Well, so did a lot of other people.

TS: A lot of them didn't too.

JV: Yes.

TS: What drove you?

JV: I don't know. Same thing that drove me to want to ride a motorcycle when I first enlisted. (*chuckles*) It was opportunity. Looked like you shouldn't pass it up, I guess.

TS: You feel when you're going to be asked to Southeast Asia after the Industrial College of the Armed Forces, or pretty soon thereafter. Did you feel confident when you got word of that move that you were ready for whatever the Army had for you?

JV: Oh, yes. Yes. I'd had jobs that should have prepared me for what... I had no idea what I was going to do when I got to Southeast Asia. As I say, I was assigned to MACV.⁸ I was originally assigned to the Pentagon, then volunteered to go to Southeast Asia, which was readily accepted.

TS: How come? They needed people over there?

JV: I'm sure. But I was assigned to MACV, and as I think I told you when I got off the airplane I was accosted by a major from the 25th Division who told me that General Weyand⁹ had other plans for me and that he would straighten all that out.

TS: That's a chapter of our story I'm anxious to get to. Anything else we should add for today before we end?

JV: I think not, Tom. I think we've beat it into the ground.

TS: We've got some good stuff. I've enjoyed this conversation. So with that I'll turn the machine off.

END OF INTERVIEW

⁸ MACV: U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV). A joint-service Command of the United States Department of Defense. Operated 1962-73.

⁹ Frederick C. Weyand (1916-2010); U.S. Army general. Commanded US military operations in Vietnam, 1972-73; also Army Chief of Staff, 1974-76.