

**Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr**

**Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.**

**Date of interview: 20 June 2012**

**Location: Vessey residence enclosed porch, Garrison, MN**

**Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, July 2012**

**Edited for clarity by: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D., December 2012 and January 2014**

TS: Today is Thursday, 20 June 2012. This is another interview of our ongoing cycle with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor.

To begin with today, General Vessey, you had some comments you wished to add about a previous conversation.

JV: Yes. I'd like to go back to my first tour in Korea, because there's an important event in my own life that I didn't add.

TS: This would be 1958, is that correct?

JV: Right. That is my meeting then-Chaplain Bill Reis, a Lutheran chaplain, one of the stalwarts of the chaplain corps, who was the 8<sup>th</sup> Army chaplain at that time. Bill Reis is an institution among Lutheran chaplains. His first combat duty was in World War II, during the Aleutian Campaign. It's a wonderful story, and I have frankly forgotten the exact details, but a group of soldiers that went somewhere on one of the Aleutian Islands to rescue an air crew, I believe it was, that had been downed either by Japanese fire or had crashed. And Bill Reis went with this group. The mission was somewhat successful, but they were unable to get back to the base camp by sea. They had made the trip by boat originally and were unable to go back by boat. So [they] started cross-country over very difficult terrain and difficult weather, and it took them many days to get back to their base camp just in time to learn that the memorial service for them was being conducted, because they were assumed dead from either weather or Japanese fire.

Anyway, that was sort of the beginning of the Bill Reis story, and his service through the years sort of mirror imaged that, that is he was a hero in many respects, both on the battlefield and in peacetime, bringing soldiers to the Lord. But at any rate, when I went to Korea I went to the general Protestant service at the 8<sup>th</sup> Army chapel on Sunday, and Bill Reis was the officiate preacher. It was clearly a Lutheran sermon, although he did not identify himself as such. But anyway, I met him at the door and said, "You have to be a Lutheran," and he said, "Indeed." So that hooked me up with Bill Reis at that time.

His tour in Korea in 1958 was significant because he befriended Ji Won Sang, who became the first president of the Korean Lutheran Church. In fact Bill Reis married Ji Won Sang and his new bride at that time. I don't remember whether the first Missouri Synod missionaries came to Korea in '58 or whether it was shortly thereafter, but at any rate, Bill Reis sort of planted the mustard seed for the Lutheran Church in Korea and we kept contact through the years. After he retired from the chaplaincy he and his wife, Florence, were parishioners with us at St. Paul's Lutheran Church, in Falls Church [Virginia]. So we kept contact through the years in fact until they both died. It was a wonderful experience

for me, and Bill Reis's contribution to the U.S. Army and to the Lutheran Church, and particularly to the Lutheran Church in Korea, are worth certainly more than just mention. (5:40)

TS: Did you encounter him in any other further duty stations after Korea?

JV: We never served together after that, but we always stayed in contact.

TS: When you talk about chaplains, are there other chaplains that you encountered that you got to know that were meaningful for you?

JV: Sure. Many. Many. In fact, Wil Hyatt,<sup>1</sup> who was an earlier president of Concordia [University, St Paul], was a long time Army chaplain. In fact, he wound up being Chief of Chaplains for the United States Army. Wil Hyatt was very close to General Creighton Abrams when Abrams was Chief of Staff and Wil was the Chief of Chaplains. The chaplaincy had sort of deteriorated, at least lost a lot of its strength earlier on.

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: I'm not the right one to analyze that question, but during the Viet Nam War came the inclusion of many new denominations that hadn't been included in the chaplaincy before, and I don't want to suggest that that's right or wrong. It's probably right. But many people were in the chaplaincy that didn't have the fervor for being chaplains to troops – and that's why we have the chaplaincy. My analogy perhaps is open to attack, but it seemed to me that we had many who wanted to stand on the steps of the chapel and ring the bell and hope the troops would come, rather than go to the soldiers that needed the word of the Lord where they were, whether it was in battle or in the motor pool or wherever it happened to be. The other thing that had deteriorated, I think that there was a more prevalent tension between chaplains and commanders.

TS: What kind of tension?

JV: The commanders seeing the need to accomplish the mission, whatever mission they had, and the chaplains being promoters of peace. You couldn't reconcile the mission that they had with that that the commander had. One of the things that came about while Wil Hyatt was Chief of Chaplains and Abrams was the Chief of Staff of the Army was the push to make sure that the chaplains were chaplains to the commanders as well. They were spiritual advisors to the commanders, who certainly needed spiritual advice if anybody did. So what I'm suggesting is that in Wil Hyatt's time the importance of the chaplaincy was raised in the Army among commanders and leaders, and Wil Hyatt set about to make sure that the chaplains accomplished their mission for the troops. He was a great chaplain. As you know he was later president of Concordia and then was the Vice President of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhardt W. Hyatt (1916-85); U.S. Army major general. Hyatt served as the 13<sup>th</sup> Chief of Chaplains of the United States Army, 1971-75. President of Concordia College, St Paul, Minnesota, 1976-83.

[Lutheran Church Missouri] Synod. He and I stayed in close contact. He was chaplain of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division when I was Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division.

Wil died while I was Chairman. I was attending a NATO nuclear conference in Montreal [in 1985] and I got a message saying that Wil had had a heart attack and that he was in the hospital in Washington. I left Montreal as quickly as I could to get to Washington to see Wil, and had a morning meeting in the Pentagon and told my driver that he should scout out the Arlington Hospital where Wil was a patient. My driver went to see him and talked to Wil, and Will told him that he was going to be discharged that day. In fact he was getting his clothing at the time. My driver told Chaplain Hyatt that I would come and see him at noon. When we went over there at noon we started down the hall to the room that Wil was in, and the nurse said you can't go down there. Then the doctor came out and told us that Wil had passed away from a recurrence of the heart attack.

TS: So you never did get to see him.

JV: No. I never did get to see him.

TS: But a meaningful relationship for you.

**(12:35)**

JV: Yes. An important relationship for me, and a wonderful chaplain for the U.S. Army. And there are others. Connie Walker, a long time chaplain at the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division, Connie Walker was the pulling guard that made Hugh McElhenny an All American, and a Minnesota product incidentally. Minnesota farm product. One of his brothers is still a judge here in Minnesota. He was one of these guys, the troops loved him and a hero on the battlefield. Awarded the Silver Star for heroism.

He was the chaplain in Bangkok when my family was living in Bangkok. I was supposed to be able to get home once a month, but usually once every two months or something like that. At any rate, we ran a duty roster on who would lead the table prayer at meals. It was David's turn. Avis said, "David, it's your day for table grace." David said, "Let's bow our heads. Rub a dub dub, thanks for the grub, yea God." (*chuckles*) I said, "Where in the world did you get that?" He said, "Chaplain Walker taught me that one."

TS: Learning how to relate to our audience. That's what that is.

JV: Right.

TS: A few minutes ago you mentioned this tension between chaplains and commanders. Was this tension something that you would identify in Viet Nam, or in World War II as well, a generation earlier?

JV: No.

TS: What happened in the intervening twenty years?

JV: I'm not sure that I know the answer to that. I think you look at American Christianity, and look at what happened to the churches right after World War II. There was a huge growth in new churches, new congregations, a general growth in membership in all of the main line congregations, main line religious bodies. Then in the '60s and '70s it began to peter out, and it has continued.

TS: The main line church bodies for sure. The numbers are down across the board.

JV: Yes. But I think that was part of it; that was part of that tension. It occurred more during the Viet Nam War and immediately after that, after the Viet Nam War, when the Army was in a state of flux.

TS: Speaking of tension, by the time you're in Viet Nam in 1967 you're forty-five years old. You've been in the United States Army for twenty-plus years, and the enlisted men that you're dealing with are a generation younger than yourself. What kind of tension, or to use a sixties phrase "generation gap," did you sense or experience in your own command?

JV: I didn't sense it. Maybe it's me not sensing what existed, or maybe it was the people with whom I served which I would take the latter answer. I went to Viet Nam and went into the 25<sup>th</sup> Division, which as I said was an old line Regular Army division with a lot of senior NCOs and enlisted men that had come from Hawaii, and had a higher percentage of regulars than many of the other outfits that came along later, but yet the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade of the 4<sup>th</sup> was a newly organized outfit with cadres from other parts of the Army and most of the lower ranking enlisted soldiers were draftees. I must say that my observations of them were at that time – of course this is '66-67 – that they served as well as the regulars, by and large. Many didn't have the experience that the regulars had, but you'd see bands around the helmets with peace signs or something like that on them.

TS: What did you think of that?

JV: I didn't particularly like it. On the other hand, I didn't see any great harm in it.

TS: Would it have been within your powers with your rank and position to instruct soldiers to remove things like that?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: Did you?

JV: No.

TS: How come?

JV: It was a nonissue in the performance of the soldiers' duty on the battlefield. If it had become an issue, then I would have done something.

TS: Without losing sight of Soui Tre, I want to make sure we talk about this, in this context. From 1967-69 you were in Germany. The anti-war protests about the Viet Nam War, protests both in the United States and in Germany, are increasing. Some would say perhaps reached their high point. What kind of tension did you feel with your enlisted soldiers – and I want to include all these so we make sure to talk about all of them – was there tension about this?

JV: I must say that in the Army in Germany in '67-'68-'69 and up into '70 there was much greater tension than in Viet Nam.

TS: How would you describe that tension?

**(20:00)**

JV: Much of it was manifested in racial tension. It was a time of a number of racial riots in the United States. It occurred more after duty hours on the German streets or even in the kasernes. Sometimes you'd find fights between whites and blacks. That was a time when we needed to draw the line and take vigorous action.

TS: Can you provide an example that sort of illustrates what you just said?

JV: When I was Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored, I had been commander of the division artillery. We didn't have much of that in the combat units, but we got to the division headquarters and suddenly there are fights on the streets of the kaserne at night among black soldiers and white soldiers. My theory was that leadership at the lower level is the place where that stops or starts, and in the Army in those days we had what we called courtesy patrols. They were not military police, but they were regular officers and NCOs who walked the streets at night or went into the clubs or recreational areas to make sure that law and order prevailed, along with having a beer or two or shooting some baskets or whatever it happened to be.

We had the first set of fights at the Drake Edwards Kaserne when I had just become Chief of Staff. I called in the commanders of these particular units and said, "What's going on?" They said, "We don't know." I said, "It seems to me you better find out. Somebody knows who these bad apples are." The second time we had it I again assembled the commanders and told them that we're not going to have this. I said, "If it takes you and I and the other commanders to walk the courtesy patrols, we'll do it. So get with your NCOs and find out, who are these people. Who triggers these incidents?" It didn't take long before we found a few of the bad apples and put them into the military justice system and it got straightened out. We didn't have much of it.

TS: From what I'm hearing it's not a widespread problem that you experienced, but a few bad apples situation.

JV: No. No. Right. Right.

TS: Is this one of the things that comes with a draft based military, where essentially we're pulling people in who may not want to be there? Or is it more than that?

JV: America, since both during the Civil War and World War I and World War II, and much of the time during the Cold War, we had a compulsory military service. I think it speaks well for America that the vast majority of those people have served willingly, and I think if you go to any audience of civilians, in fact if you look back a few years more when there were more of the people who had served under the Selective Service Act, and ask how many of you have served in the armed services, most of the males would raise their hands. Then you ask a second question: How many of you liked it? Some of the hands would go down. Then you ask a third question: Was it a good thing for you that you served? All the hands would go up, or practically all of the hands would go up.

I remember asking those questions in an audience, and a young black man stood up and said, "I was a dud as a soldier. I was opposed to it. I was opposed to serving. I got a bad conduct discharge, but I want to say that it's the best thing that ever happened to me." He said, "I learned a little self-discipline, and got my life in order afterward." So certainly there are plenty who didn't, who served and didn't get their life in order afterwards, but I think as a father, grandfather, a citizen, I'm for compulsory military service. As a general responsible for providing the nation the best defense at the least possible cost to the taxpayer, I'm a hundred percent opposed to it because it's far more costly than having an all-volunteer force.

TS: That's almost counterintuitive. We think that we could conscript young men and pay them less. How does the equation work out?

JV: That's not where the cost is. The cost is in, first, a much larger training base. You enlist people for three years or five years or six years. You call them to active duty under the compulsory military service laws for two years. The turnover in the armed forces is much greater, and that means a much more costly training base to account for that turnover. But more importantly, it means units with less experienced soldiers. It means the maintenance is not as good; the cost of maintaining equipment goes up. The readiness is not as good. It's just more costly to do it that way. But there are certain civic benefits to compulsory service for the nation. I think that it's an issue that needs to be rethought, but I'm not sure we ever will.

TS: That was going to be my follow up question, whether you see that issue being rethought or reconsidered any time soon.

JV: I don't think so. I think that you ride down the road today and you see every third car with a decal on the bumper on the back of the car that says "Support our Troops" and so forth, but I get the general feeling that everybody wants to support the troops but they don't necessarily want to serve. It's easier for the general public to treat the armed forces that way.

TS: To offer verbal support, you mean.

JV: Yes. Yes.

TS: As a former soldier, does that make you upset at all that it's like that?

JV: That's the way it is. It's an issue for the nation to decide, how we're going to build our armed forces. The Congress raises and supports armies, navies, air forces and the Marine Corps, and they have to decide how we're going to do it. I think if you look at the news hours on public television, every so often they'll have the names and pictures of casualties from the war in Afghanistan.

TS: Yes. They run them at the end of the program.

JV: Look at the names of the towns – seldom will you see casualties that come from big cities.

TS: What do you make of that?

JV: That it's easier to recruit in small towns.

TS: Why is that, do you think?

JV: I'm not sure that I know the answer, but you sort of guess at the answer and that is that there is more cohesion in the small towns. The idea of patriotism has a stronger root there. Yet you'd think there would be a lot of attraction for young people in big cities. There are a lot of immigrants there. It's a clear route to citizenship, a pretty good route to higher education. But nevertheless, just look at it the next time and look at the towns.

TS: Does that contrast or compare to, for example the 1960s to right now, was that different in those days? Did we see more urban recruits, from your perception?

JV: I don't know they saw more urban recruits, but if you had a Selective Service, it goes across based on population. So certainly there were more people from the big cities than from the less populated rural America.

TS: Maybe it is an economic opportunity thing today. Who joins and why do they join continues to be a question that will have to be addressed.

JV: Yes. Right. And of course part of it is the armed forces themselves. They send people to recruiting duty. The recruiter has a quota to make. Where does he go to make his quota? He goes where he's most likely to be successful.

TS: It sort of becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy in a way, right?

**(33:20)**

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: Have you ever worked as a recruiter?

JV: No.

TS: Something you think you might have been good at?

JV: I don't think so. My early efforts in civilian life as a salesman (*laughing*) were a total flop.

TS: Lesson learned. Talk about lessons learned, there's one.

If I may, let me suggest we transition back to Soui Tre. Again, we're talking about March of 1967. We began this conversation last time, and for our purposes today can you sort of close your eyes and place yourself in this time and place and sort of describe the 360 degree image that you have around you?

JV: As we finished last time, I think that we had Master Sergeant Ray Childress and I at the number six cannon in B Battery, and discovering that we were probably in a bigger fight than we had anticipated. I think the last time we talked I had been called to the radio by Colonel Garth, who was in helicopter approaching the area asking for a situation report. I was called twice to the radio to talk with Marshall Garth and the second time, the time I made this second radio conversation with Garth, by that time the perimeters of all three of the firing batteries were under attack.

The B Battery attack, or the attack on the B Battery area was, as I said earlier, the place that Bender and I had originally concluded would be the major avenue of attack, and indeed it was. His company in that area had fallen back into our perimeter and taken up firing positions along with the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 77<sup>th</sup> soldiers. By the time I got back to the number six Howitzer at that time, which seemed to be the key point in the enemy attack, the Vietnamese attacking us had hit number six with an RPG, Soviet made rocket propelled grenade, and knocked out the cannon. But worse yet, a second grenade had hit a beehive round that was on the ground there and it had exploded, and Childress was a casualty from that. I don't know how many flechettes he got into his body, but many.

TS: What's the size of these flechettes?

JV: About a ten penny nail, which was very disturbing to me because Childress was certainly key in holding that position and then to see him a casualty was distressing, to say the least. But our casualties were mounting. By that time I had learned that at least five of the soldiers in our counterattack attempt were dead and a number of the others were wounded. The casualties were beginning to mount around the area and we continued to be hit by mortars and a number of RPG rounds that came into the area. We had North Vietnamese or Viet Cong soldiers that got into the area. In fact one was shot off the tailgate

of the AN/GRC-46,<sup>2</sup> which was our long range radio truck, which had been dug in. This attacking soldier was shot on the tailgate of your main radio in your command post and you know that things have really gone to pot. (*chuckles*) Of course the smell of gun smoke from the firing of the Howitzers.

By this time C Battery of the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 8<sup>th</sup> Artillery was firing at targets inside our original perimeter, at my request. Marshall Garth had a mechanized infantry battalion supported by one or two companies of tanks trying to reach us, and they were having to fight their way to get to us, but I think the terrain itself was a bigger obstacle than the enemy proposed. So Garth was telling me that this reinforcement force would come soon. The battle was a heated battle, and of course I spent much time going from one position to another to confirm with my own eyes how things were going, and to encourage our own commanders and their troops. And I wound up doing such things as helping soldiers whose machine gun had gotten jammed and helping get it cleared. I would say that in those days I was a runner, but I ran more the first four hours of that battle than I had run in many weeks combined. (*chuckles*)

TS: You're talking about your military responsibilities here for your soldiers and for this mission. As a human being, which we also are, what kind of emotions are you feeling at that time? Is there fear?

JV: For me the fear was that we might lose the battle. Of course that was an absolutely unacceptable result.

TS: When you thought of losing, what would that mean?

JV: It would mean being captured or killed, losing that position. It was the sort of thing that as a commander just can't happen, so it meant spurring everyone to do what could be done to save the situation.

TS: How do you do that? How do we get that message across to people? Because people have very different emotional responses in situations like this.

JV: In the first place when you go and you find soldiers that are in despair, you try to buck them up and say, "Come on. We're not going to lose, and the reason we're not going to lose is because you're going to shoot at these people and not cower in your foxhole."

TS: Did you have people who were emotionally not up to the situation?

JV: I would say that everybody inside the perimeter could certainly sense that we were in serious trouble, that we were outnumbered vastly.

**(44:00)**

TS: Is a situation like that a time to reason with a soldier who is not up to where he needs to be?

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<sup>2</sup> AN/GRC-46: a radio teletype unit, used until the late 1960s.

JV: You don't have much time to reason. You've got more that you need to attend to, so it's a pat on the back and assure them that we are going to win, and the reason we're going to win is because you're going to do your part.

TS: Did you find yourself having to threaten people?

JV: I didn't threaten anybody.

TS: That's not your style?

JV: What are you going to threaten them with? *(laughing)*

TS: I don't know. I've never been in a situation like this.

JV: The biggest threat they'll ever face is right in front of them, right now.

TS: And they can see that, right?

JV: Right.

TS: For many of these soldiers, would you say the first time they've been in a situation like that?

JV: I'd say it was the first time they'd been in a situation as serious as that. Anywhere near as serious as that. And I have gone back to reunions and realized that for many of the people who were in that battle, it was sort of the defining moment of their life. It's the one thing they remember.

I had a recent newsletter from one of the infantry companies that has kept up with reunions every year ... It illustrates this point, that that battle was the defining moment of their military career and for many the defining moment of their life, because they lost dear friends and close comrades. And it was an intense battle.

TS: By this time, 1967, you mentioned losing could entail possibly being captured by the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong. What did you know, or what kind of rumors were there, about what happened to people who were captured?

JV: I frankly don't remember what we knew at that time. We knew it was unhealthy and you could see it in the cruelty that the Viet Cong inflicted on the villagers and so forth. But I don't think that figured in my equation of the day. We had been sent out there on a mission, and certainly losing the fire base to an enemy attack would have been an abject failure.

TS: Even though the mission you were dispatched for wasn't expecting this kind of force in return.

JV: At least we didn't expect it. Now later on, the next day, Bender and I were asked to come to Saigon for the press conference, and we did. General John Heintges,<sup>3</sup> who was Westmoreland's Army deputy, visited our position and my exec assembled the troops and General Heintges congratulated them on how well they'd fought. In fact by the time the battle was over we'd buried 630 of the enemy soldiers there on the battlefield, and there were reports of them dragging dead away. So I don't know how many were killed. In the historical reports I think downplayed in some instances, because they think we had inflated the numbers. But I know we didn't inflate the 630, because they were counted when they were put in the mass grave that we dug there. But John Heintges said, "Isn't it wonderful that we knew this was coming?" And he said this to the soldiers in my battalion. Well, I didn't know it was coming, and certainly they didn't know it was coming. But by the time I got back from the press conference in Saigon, I wasn't very popular because I think my troops thought that I knew what was coming. But I didn't know.

TS: How do you understand that situation now?

JV: It was special intelligence from intercepts that were cleared only for very few people. So I suspect that Garth probably knew. I never asked him whether he did or not, because he left shortly after that battle. But I spent much of the rest of my military service trying to ensure that the so-called special intelligence that would have an effect on ordinary people who weren't cleared for special intelligence got translated into language that didn't violate the rules of special intelligence, but also gave the soldiers who were in the fight the information they needed. And I think we do that pretty well now.

TS: So your own soldiers suspected that you had information that you were holding back from them?

JV: Yes. But I think I was able to clear that up with them pretty quickly.

TS: That's the first time that you found out that perhaps people up the food chain from you had an inkling that something was coming.

JV: Yes. When Garth came in the night before and talked to Bender and me, he emphasized the importance of us being ready. And both Bender and I talked about it and said it's some indication that in intelligence that probably isn't available to us that we're in no man's land here and we need to be prepared. And we were prepared. As prepared as we could be. We were not surprised by the attack.

TS: From your perspective, did that make the difference in the end?

JV: That made the difference between winning and losing, in my view.

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<sup>3</sup> John A. Heintges (1912-94); U.S. Army lieutenant general. Deputy Commander of MACV, 1965-67.

TS: The Vietnamese made multiple assaults on this position.

JV: Yes.

TS: Bring us towards the conclusion of this. Is there a high water mark, so to speak, in this battle from your perspective, what you saw?

JV: I'd say about, close to noon we began to see that the ferocity of the attack was abating. That is, the number of RPG and mortar rounds landing in the area, the number of soldiers that we were seeing, enemy soldiers we were seeing close to the edge of the perimeter was down, and shortly after that the reinforcement battalions came in, the first M113 infantry fighting vehicle, armored personnel carrier [APC] came into the area shortly thereafter.

Now there are accounts of the battle that say we were rescued by them. My contention is that the enemy had begun to withdraw before they arrived, because I was able to run out to one of the first APCs that arrived and point them in a direction to go. I was able to run into an area where an hour or two earlier I surely would have been shot numerous times in that area. But nevertheless, and it may be that the commander of the enemy force, it was called the VC<sup>4</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> Division, but later we learned that it was a regular army division commanded by a Vietnamese regular army officer, whom I later [met] during my time as the president's POW-MIA emissary to Hanoi. He was then the Vice Minister of Defense.

TS: This fellow who had been across on the other side, so to speak.

JV: Yes.

TS: And did you know of each other? That you had been together?

JV: No, no. It came out at the meeting that day. He sat next to me at lunch after the plenary session. He hadn't said anything at the plenary session. I knew him as the Vice Minister of Defense. Then at lunch he said, "You don't know me, but I know you." By that time this was six years of negotiations with the Vietnamese and there was always some publicity in Viet Nam when I was there on television and in the newspapers and so forth. So I thought he was referring to having known of my presence in my duties as the president's negotiator. Then he said, "You were the American commander at the battle of Soui Tre, and I commanded the 9<sup>th</sup> Division attacking you that day. You killed a lot of my men." I said, "You killed a lot of mine too." Then he went on to say, "But the war is over and that battle is in the past. We have other things to deal with now. I know that you brought Operation Smile<sup>5</sup> to Viet Nam. I don't have any children, but my sister had a daughter who was seriously disfigured at birth. She was a nonperson in our country." He said that Operation Smile made her a whole person and he said, "Thank you." And a couple tears came down his cheek. I thought, wow!

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<sup>4</sup> VC: Viet Cong.

<sup>5</sup> Operation Smile: a nonprofit medical service organization based in Norfolk, Virginia; founded in 1982.

(57:40)

TS: A poignant moment when, from the way you described the start of that conversation, it could have been much different.

JV: Right. And then he suggested that perhaps he and I should someday go back and go over the battlefield.

TS: Did you ever?

JV: No. But I didn't get the opportunity to ask him, I thought later of a number of questions I should have asked him about Soui Tre.

TS: He kind of caught you blindsided, it sounds like.

JV: Yes, he did. But I suspect that he knew that the reinforcing force was coming, and that he'd already been fought to a standstill and decided to withdraw before they could catch up with him and make things a lot more difficult for him. In fact, the reinforcing force never did catch up with the main force of the retreating 9<sup>th</sup> Division. They got some of the rear guard.

TS: But not the main body.

JV: Didn't catch up with the main body.

TS: When you think back on this battle of Soui Tre, what do you think that maybe you could have or should have done differently?

*(brief pause in recording)*

TS: There was time for reflection after. How did you find yourself thinking oh, I could have or I should have...

JV: The first thing is look again at the distribution of special intelligence, and informing the people that really need it. It would have made some difference. But knowing that, I would have insisted on more artillery support. As I said earlier, we had one battery of the 8<sup>th</sup> that was within range and we had that 8 inch battalion which belonged to somebody else, but it could reach us. This was at the tail end of Junction City, when most of the units we were withdrawing from War Zone C, and we had been tracked with going back in there to this particular sort of vague mission. As it turns out we were supposed to be bait in the trap I guess, but the trap had less spring to it than I would have had. Certainly more artillery within range and with planned fires from that artillery would have made a big difference.

As I pointed out in our last session, we lost the forward air controller when his plane was shot down just as the battle started, so the air support that came was well away from our perimeter and did not affect the attacking units that were attacking us. Now more forces inside the perimeter would certainly have helped. If we had not sent the other

infantry battalion off to the west. But of course then you have to ask the question if we were much more powerful, would the 9<sup>th</sup> Division have attacked? Because in later years I've come to the realization that his intelligence was probably as good as ours, and maybe better. So I think the two things that would have made the difference is having us have a clear knowledge of what we were facing and secondly, having much more artillery support available to us.

And one other thing: the counterattack force would certainly not have been as puny as it was, had I had any idea the size of the attack coming. I would not have sent that platoon size force out. Little things. Certainly we would not have let the number six Howitzer in B Battery be unmanned to provide men for the counterattack force when it was sitting astride the main avenue of approach. But generally, I think we were well prepared. Everybody was up and had weapons in hand and protected with as much protection as we had at the time when the first mortars landed. So I think we can certainly be happy with that.

TS: Did you emerge from this conflict with any more or less respect for the enemy on the other side?

JV: It certainly wasn't any diminished respect for what we were facing. But we knew from earlier battles that the 25<sup>th</sup> Division had been in that we weren't facing amateurs or poor people who weren't dedicated to attempting to succeed in what they were trying to do.

TS: The battlefield itself, for those who haven't been in similar situations or who weren't there, what did it look and sort of feel like when this was over?

JV: It looked like the remnants of a battlefield. Going back to Gettysburg or World War I battles or Cassino or any of those places, it looked like a place where a big fight had taken place, because there were fires burning, still some ammunition exploding. The vegetation had been generally stripped by explosion and fragments. In fact, I think I mentioned before that son David, our youngest child, had written in a letter to me, send battlefield pictures. And I had a new camera, a new Japanese camera. It sits over there in that case. (*motions toward camera, on adjacent bookshelf*) It was sitting on the edge of my foxhole during that fight and I thought hey, I just remembered David's admonition and I've got this new camera with me. I'll take a few pictures. I picked up the camera, and as you can see, somebody put a bullet hole through the lens of my camera. (*chuckles*)

TS: Unbeknownst to you at the time.

JV: Unbeknownst to me at the time, which gives some indication of the ferocity of the battle.

TS: Right. So this chaotic situation you described with the fires and the stripped vegetation...

JV: Of course the medical evacuation helicopters are landing and taking our casualties away. We were picking up hundreds of enemy dead and inspecting them for intelligence, and trying to make a list of the names and then bury them. It's hot. It's the jungle.

TS: So there's a certain smell to a battlefield too, I take it.

JV: Right.

TS: Of dead and maimed bodies.

JV: Yes.

TS: You've been in battles before. Does one get accustomed to that or is it always, I don't know, an intense emotional thing?

JV: *(long pause before answering)* I guess it was Sheridan<sup>6</sup> who said war is hell, and I think that anyone who has experienced that would say ditto. But it is the way it is.

TS: Very well put. What I've learned about the United States Army is that there's a focus on understanding the lessons learned from events or conflicts. Soui Tre is part of Junction City, the first part of 1967. From your perspective, what were the lessons learned from Soui Tre or from this larger Junction City operation?

**(1:08:40)**

JV: Junction City I think demonstrated the need for even better intelligence than we had, and I'd say again what I said a few minutes ago, that the enemy's intelligence was at least as good as ours despite our great technological superiority in gathering intelligence over his. But Junction City was a huge operation into War Zone C. We didn't find any major units during the main part of Junction City. There were a few smaller battles and actually Soui Tre was a small battle – except for those of us involved in it, it was a big fight. *(chuckles)*

TS: Perspective is everything, right?

JV: Yes. I think that better intelligence and swift targeted strikes at particular objectives would have been better than the general sweep of War Zone C that we made with the larger force. We did disrupt a lot of the enemy infrastructure but we didn't defeat any major force. I think this particular battle at Soui Tre, and one other battle that the 1<sup>st</sup> Division was in, were the two major battles in Junction City and they both occurred after the end of Junction City itself, after the main forces had withdrawn.

TS: In Viet Nam it has been argued by some that the United States military was perhaps still fighting the last war, and trying early on to have or to fight a big battle where an enemy force could be defeated and therefore to bring this conflict to some kind of conclusion based on that model. What would you say to that?

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Sheridan (1831-88); U.S. Army general.

JV: You can go back to McNamara's original announced objective, that is to keep the South Vietnamese from losing, and I think both the political leaders in the United States and certainly the military leaders, particularly the Army, understood that we weren't going to win that war by ourselves. The North Vietnamese were trying to convert the people in South Viet Nam to their way of thinking as the principle objective, and trying to bludgeon that idea into them with military force where it was needed. In the long run it turned out to be just about all military force rather than the North Vietnamese winning the hearts and minds of the people in the south, although they were successful enough to make it difficult for South Viet Nam to defend itself and even during the time that we were there. So the main duty of the American forces there was to make sure that the South Vietnamese military were not defeated and that any main force, or North Vietnamese military units, were taken under attack by the United States forces.

Now later on, as the war progressed, the need to do the so-called 'hearts and minds' business, you saw the creation of CORDS [Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support]. It was the idea of strengthening the civilian government and helping the people, the rural development system to help get the people more firmly on the side of the Saigon government. I think that certainly we learned a lot about it. In fact, early lack of success in Iraq was criticized by many who had been involved in the CORDS operation in Viet Nam, that some similar sort of operation wasn't used in Iraq. So you talk about lessons learned: I've come to the conclusion that most of what we call lessons learned, the new ones, are lessons re-learned.

TS: In other words there are things, conclusions drawn from Viet Nam, that we forgot about or neglected to apply later?

JV: Yes.

TS: Does that go for Afghanistan as well, you would say, or is that a different situation?

JV: I don't think that I want to make this particular war in Afghanistan. (*chuckles*) That's the danger in all military operations that you overemphasize the lessons you see from the last war and design your force so that you will always be ready for that kind of a situation, and some of the lessons that we learned we fail to emphasize in the future and have to re-learn the same lessons.

TS: That was I think where my question was going to begin with, that we had fought a victorious conflict in the 1940s against a specific opponent using specific strategies and technical approaches, and were we adaptable enough in the 1960s in Southeast Asia to see that some of those strategies and tactics may be applicable, but that others were not anymore.

JV: It depends on how the nation wants to fight the war. You see in World War II, unconditional surrender was the goal against both Germany and Japan. So we fought it in a fashion to achieve unconditional surrender. On the other hand, in the subsequent wars in

East Asia, Korea and Viet Nam, and the minor operation in Laos, all of those were limited because of the larger context of the Cold War. Ruling in the minds of political leaders on both sides I'm sure was the disaster of a nuclear war. So at the same time, drawing from what happened in Korea, we had a limited war in Korea and China intervened, lengthened the war by two years after it was clearly won militarily, and the stalemate that exists today and the division of the Korean peninsula. In Viet Nam we didn't want a war with China or Russia to ensue from the operation in Viet Nam.

TS: Right.

**(1:18:40)**

JV: We could have attacked and invaded North Viet Nam and defeated the North Vietnamese clearly if we had decided to do that, but we didn't want to do that I'm sure – and I'm speaking in the voice of politicians in power at the time, just with my own conjecture about what was in their minds – that they didn't want another Chinese invasion of North Viet Nam to keep the North Vietnamese from losing, which was clearly why the Chinese invaded North Korea during the Korean War, to keep the North Koreans from losing and keep from having a democratic, free market economy on their border.

TS: Right. And like you say, creating the stalemate and the political situation that we have to this day.

JV: Yes.

TS: Based on what you said there, about essentially fighting to not lose in the larger sense, would we want to conclude that you as a soldier felt hamstrung by a policy that had not losing as its mission?

JV: If you look through all the textbooks for the armed forces military schooling, I think that's not something you will find in the sort of order that you would expect to be issued. I just finished reading an article in the latest *Air Force* journal about the two major bombing campaigns against North Viet Nam. One was early on in the war, during the Johnson administration, with clear limits about how close to the border we could bomb in North Viet Nam, and then with a list of targets that were chosen in Washington rather than by the military commanders. And then the second bombing campaign, that Nixon authorized late in the war, after the Americans had begun to withdraw when much of those restrictions were lifted. In fact, Giap's<sup>7</sup> military campaign in 1972, with major attacks into South Viet Nam and into Laos were stopped by the bombing. I remember being sent to see General Abrams during that time, and him telling me that he was killing ants by stomping them to death with elephants.

TS: That's an interesting visualization.

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<sup>7</sup> Vo Nguyen Giap (1911-2013); Vietnam People's Army general and politician. A principal military commander in the Vietnam War.

JV: Yes.

TS: In South Viet Nam we had political and military allies. We were there fighting with the South Vietnamese military and supporting the South Vietnamese political leaders. From your perspective as a soldier who was there at the time, what were your perceptions of South Vietnamese military leaders and political leaders that you came into contact with?

JV: The military leaders that I came into contact with were relatively low level military leaders, but they were competent and relations were good between us and the Vietnamese forces in our area. Our own commanders, particularly Fred Weyand, who was the early commander of the 25<sup>th</sup> Division when I was there, had a good understanding of that relationship. I think we talked earlier about his idea of what our objective should be, and that was to make life safer and better for the Vietnamese population. But I think the history books probably give a much better evaluation than I about the South Vietnamese forces. They eventually lost. They had already lost logistic support from the United States and much of the air support. Congress had clearly limited that support. But it was one of those tragedies that you could almost foresee coming with the way the political events, both in the United States and in the world at large, had unfolded.

TS: When you left Viet Nam in 1967, how optimistic would you say you were about that conflict finding a positive outcome?

JV: *(sighs)* When I left it was up in the air. When I left, the full colonel's promotion list had come out and I was named on the full colonel's promotion list, again below the zone, and I was asked to stay with the 25<sup>th</sup> Division and command the 25<sup>th</sup> Division Artillery. It was very tempting for me, because I knew that outfit. I'd spent a lot of time trying to help improve it. I knew where its weak points were and the strong points, and thought I had a pretty good grasp of what was going on in the war, that part of the war that we were involved in with the division at that time and wanted to stay.

But as we discussed earlier, I had volunteered to go and had gotten the blessing of my wife to go, but with the assurance to her that it would be for the one year period, that I would not extend. She had her hands full. We had a boy that was about to be senior in high school, or was a senior in high school actually, and a teenage daughter going into high school and a younger child that had been moved four or five times in his schooling already. So I talked with Avis over the MARS<sup>8</sup> network. We got a phone call through. I told her I'd been asked to extend and take command of the division artillery, which was sort of a plum for a newly appointed colonel, to get that job right away.

TS: So you were below the zone on the promotion list, but you had been promoted or this would be the promotion?

JV: I would eventually be promoted when the promotions came out, so I wouldn't have been promoted yet even though it was a full colonel's job I wouldn't yet be a full colonel,

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<sup>8</sup> MARS: Military Auxiliary Radio System.

but I'm sure that they would have so-called frocked me, that is pinned the eagles on even though I had not actually been promoted yet. I told Avis that I had been asked to do this, and I didn't tell her that I wanted to do it. I was waiting for a reaction from her, and it was, "That's certainly a compliment for you, but remember you had promised me."

TS: She remembered the deal.

JV: (*chuckles*) Right. She remembered the deal. So I told the division commander that I was sorry, but I couldn't do it.

TS: I've asked you before about when jobs come up and whether it's something you can accept or decline, and what I understood in the past was that when you're asked to do something that essentially this is an assignment, and this sounds like it was a real request where you could really say yes or no.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: How come it was different?

JV: The tours were a year at that time, and my year was coming to an end.

TS: Okay. So you would have rotated out or back, and so to stay it really would have been a request.

JV: Yes.

TS: You had to volunteer to stay longer.

JV: Right.

TS: And so by declining this request, you were then bound for something else.

JV: Yes. At the time when I turned it down I thought commanding at the next higher level is a plum, because in the military promotion scheme at least in those days if you commanded at the level commensurate with your rank, it was considered a mark that you should have if you ever expected to be promoted to the next higher grade. Being promoted to the next higher grade was beyond anything in my imagination anyway, but for me it meant that I would probably get a job that I wouldn't enjoy nearly as much as commanding a division artillery. But as fortune turned out, the next job I was assigned to was commanding the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery in Germany.

TS: So it wasn't so unpalatable, so to speak.

JV: No. So it turned out just fine.

TS: On a slightly different note about Viet Nam before we leave Viet Nam, you were there for a year. Off duty, what did you like most about Viet Nam?

JV: There really wasn't any off duty, if you were in a combat division. Now we got a week's R and R someplace, and I went to Panang.<sup>9</sup> It had a reputation for being quiet, a little fishing and swimming and the beach and having good food. Simple. So I went to Panang for my week's R and R, and it was a fun time. You were able to shut out the war and imagine that you weren't involved in it and eat some good food.

TS: Reminds me of the time you had that opportunity in Italy as well. You spoke very favorably of that.

JV: Yes.

TS: Did you find yourself able to turn off the war when you were in Panang?

JV: Pretty well. Pretty well. I had a couple good books to read, and I read them.

TS: How often were you in Saigon during this year?

JV: I was there only once, and that was for the press conference after Soui Tre.

TS: You just mentioned that. So we talk about seeing Viet Nam, but from your description you didn't see much of Viet Nam.

JV: No. The rural countryside from Cu Chi on to Tai Ninh and then War Zone C, and that was it.

TS: Okay. Let me ask you if you have any final words about this year in Viet Nam. We tried to cover specific events and kind of your overall impressions, but I'm sure there are things that I neglected to ask or talk about.

JV: For me it was the joy of serving in a really good outfit. The 25<sup>th</sup> Division, particularly under Fred Weyand, was a top notch outfit. Made a lot of good friends that I've been associated with ever since. I wasn't sure that I understood the effectiveness of the strategy that we were pursuing overall, but I understood what we in the 25<sup>th</sup> Division were trying to do and it seemed to make sense. I think that even if it sounds like bragging a little bit, that I made a pretty good contribution to the 25<sup>th</sup> Division's efforts and particularly improving the capability of the artillery.

TS: What characteristics do you have or did you have as a teacher or as a commander there that enabled you to help the unit in that way?

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<sup>9</sup> Panang Island, Malaysia.

JV: I was a good artilleryman. I didn't mention it, and it's probably not worth mentioning, but one of the division commanders we had when I commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 73<sup>rd</sup> in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored the first time was Dutch Kerwin, who was later Vice Chief of Staff of the Army. Dutch has been quoted several times in several places naming me as the best artillery battalion commander that the Army had. Now I would say that I know a lot of guys who are better artillery battalion commanders than I was, but it was a nice from Dutch Kerwin who was an artilleryman himself and really a fellow that I counted as one of my real mentors in the Army.

TS: There's technical skill and knowledge, and there's the ability to impart that to people, the teaching part, and also the team building part and not everybody gets that right.

JV: Yes. That's right. I've been fortunate enough to work with people who were able to agree with me on (*chuckles*) how to do it.

TS: That's well put. You've known a lot of people in the Army. Would you say that you are an easy person to get along with for people who worked for you?

JV: I think that would depend on whom you talked to. (*chuckles*) I know that there are some who would give me probably pretty good marks, and there were a few guys that I canned in various places and would probably give a different view.

TS: When you did have to can someone, or remove them, what kind of things were you looking for? What were the red flags that went off for you?

JV: Thinking of the few that I had fired, the inability on their part to recognize their roles as part of the team that they were in, and doing dumb things that just indicated that their views of what was important and mine didn't correspond. For example, years later I fired an infantry battalion commander. His battalion was taking the expert infantry test, and he was in his office doing administrative work that he thought took priority over observing the testing of his soldiers, and whether or not they were expert infantrymen or not. It just seemed to me to be certainly a view contrary to my own on what was important in an infantry battalion.

I fired another brigade commander when I was a division commander. The day before, I had just taken command of this division and I had read through this very thick loose-leaf book of commanders' policies. These were the product of the previous commander, maybe more than one previous commander. They were all good policies, but they basically said, do the right thing. (*chuckles*) You've got a couple hundred pages of saying, do the right thing. You've got more reading than the subordinate commanders ought to be subjected to. So I had assembled the commanders to sort of lay out my policy of how we would operate the division. The first thing I said was, "I have read through these commanders' policies, and they're all pretty good policies. But I'll tell you what I'm going to do." I took the book and I threw it in the wastepaper basket. I said, "Those have been cancelled. Now I want you to command your organizations with obedience to Army regulations, the Uniform Code of Military Justice, and the safety regulations that pertain to

live fire on this reservation. One of the policies that I particularly want to call your attention to is this particular policy affecting where soldiers will carry their weapons.”

There was great concern in those days about loss of weapons. Understandably. So this policy was very specific about, if you have training in such and such an area, the soldier will not carry his weapon. If you have training beyond this, you will carry the weapon, but certain things will be done to account for the weapons. So I said, “From now on when we train, we’re going to train as though we’re going to war, and that means a soldier carries his weapon with him. Everyone. And it doesn’t make any difference what the training is that’s involved, unless it’s a classroom lecture. If we’re simulating wartime situations, we’ll have our weapons with us. It’s important that we understand what our goal is, and that’s to be ready to go to war.”

Two days later I went out to visit the training exercise for this particular brigade with David Grange, who was one of my assistant division commanders. I might say the best infantryman I have ever met in the United States Army. Dave got out to the command post for the brigade for this maneuver exercise that they were underway, and Dave said, “Look at the commander’s holster.” And it was empty.

TS: And you’d already given instructions about weapons.

**(1:44:30)**

JV: So I addressed him by his first name and said, “Where’s your pistol?” He said, “It’s in the arms room, Sir.” I said, “Why is it in the arms room?” He said, “Division commander’s policy under so and so says that if we’re here we should....” I said, “Do you recall our conversation in my office two days ago about what the status of that division commander’s policy was?” He said, “Oh, I hadn’t received written confirmation of what you said.” I said, again addressing him by his first name, “You’re in a mechanized division. The rule for mechanized and armored divisions is that oral orders will be the most usual thing that you’ll get on the battlefield. You had an oral order (*chuckles*) and you have disobeyed it, and you set a bad example for your outfit.” I looked around, and half the soldiers had their weapons and half didn’t.

TS: The soldiers too?

JV: Yes. So I relieved him. I regretted it in some ways many years later, because he was one of these very bright young guys. I think he’d been high in his class at West Point and sort of had potential future Chief of Staff of the Army on his t-shirt. But of course relieving him of his command sort of put an end to that.

TS: Does that put an end to his Army career?

JV: No, he went on. He was a good teacher. I got the Army to send him to Command and General Staff College, on the faculty of the Command and General Staff College, where he apparently was successful. But I don’t think he ever got promoted after that.

TS: What was he at this point?

JV: Full colonel.

TS: A full colonel. Okay.

JV: But anyway, I'm sure those and a few more like that would tell you, I'm not easy to get along with.

TS: Are you a second guesser by nature? You mentioned that you may have regretted that later. Are you that kind of person by nature?

JV: You always think about those things, but I'm not sure I regretted it. It was a good lesson for the people. Of course it went like wildfire through the division. Needless to say, there was a lot of attention paid to going into the field with all of your equipment as though you were going to war.

TS: Which was the point.

JV: Right. That was the point of the exercise.

TS: At this point we have a good natural kind of break point, unless there's more you want to add about Viet Nam '66 and '67.

JV: No. I don't think so. I'm sure I'll think of something later.

TS: We can add it later.

JV: Why don't we have lunch.

TS: Yes, Sir.

*(pause in recording)*

TS: Okay. We've returned from a brief break for lunch. Before we started recording just now, I asked if you wanted to add anything additional regarding this morning's conversation.

JV: At the moment I can't think of anything.

TS: Very good.

The next topic then that I'd like to talk about is, again from your JCS biography, "1967-69, Commander, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery, U.S. Army, Europe." That was a duty station in Hanau?

JV: Yes.

TS: And following that then, “1969, Chief of Staff, 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division, U.S. Army, Europe.” And that was a duty station in Frankfurt am Main, I think you said?

JV: Yes.

TS: Before lunch just a few minutes ago, you mentioned that you had been invited or asked to remain in Viet Nam while within the one year that you were scheduled for, and you declined. When you declined that opportunity to extend, did you know what your next position was going to be?

JV: I did not.

TS: At that point in your career were there assignments or duties that you were looking for or anxious to be part of?

JV: I had spent the better part of my career in combat divisions and in assignments directly related to my basic branch being a field artilleryman, and I enjoyed that. As we had discussed when [we discussed] my earlier tour at the Pentagon, I did not particularly enjoy it. I was hoping to get out of there and would have done almost anything to get out at the time. So I really didn't want to go back to the Pentagon.

But I had now already been selected for full colonel, so I was on the promotion list and knew that I would eventually be promoted to full colonel if I stayed around. By that time I thought that that was probably as far as I would go. I was a little old for my grade and had had good jobs in the artillery. Would like to have had another one or would like to have gone to the artillery school, but knew that the probability would be some staff assignment someplace. But that was the way it was. Fortunately about the time, around the actual date that I was to leave Viet Nam, I was told I would go to Germany to command the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery.

TS: How did you feel about that news when you heard it?

JV: I thought it was great.

TS: How come?

JV: First, I would be with my family again. Take some of the burden off Avis, my wife. Second, I knew where the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery was – it was in Hanau, and Hanau we knew well having already served six or more years in Hanau. Thirdly, once I had declined the opportunity to take the 25<sup>th</sup> Division Artillery I was surprised to be offered another one, or to be told that I would go to another one, to command it. So all in all it was a great day to get that news, and I knew my family would enjoy going back to Hanau.

TS: Right. In a sense this was a known quantity for the whole family.

JV: Yes.

TS: You mentioned not being interested in going back to a staff assignment at the Pentagon, this being something you hadn't enjoyed as much as some other assignments in the past. Did you think of yourself at all at this point as getting out of the Army?

JV: No. No. I had a fair amount invested in it and certainly I wanted to finish at least twenty-eight years on the promotion list, which would have taken me to about thirty-five years of actual service, which would have been the maximum retirement that I would get. I wasn't too far away from it. But I wanted to do something useful and preferably something that I enjoyed for the remainder of my career.

TS: This isn't the first time you've also mentioned that you figured colonel would be about as far as you could go or that you would go, likely go, promotion-wise. Did that sort of help to frame your kind of seeing your term in the Army as coming to a conclusion by a certain time?

JV: Yes.

TS: When you thought about time after the Army, given that the Army was at that point finite in your mind, what did you see John Vessey doing?

JV: I didn't have any idea. Didn't give it much thought, to tell you the truth. I knew it was a world in which I could probably succeed as well as I did in the Army, and I didn't worry about it.

TS: Did Mrs. Vessey talk to you at all about that?

JV: No. I think she approached it about the same way I did. She was a good Army wife. In the days in which she was an Army wife, the Army wife had a little more duty, a few more duties than they have nowadays when second career families are common in today's Army as they are in most of American life. But in the earlier days, the Army wife, particularly the commander's wife, looked out for the wives of the junior officers in the organization. Helped the new ones accommodate to Army life, instructed them a bit in Army protocol, and when the unit was deployed looked after the wives of the other officers and NCOs or helped look after them. Today the Army does more of that administratively than it did in the past. But I'm sure that the wives of the commanders still have to take on some of those duties. At least they were expected duties of commander's wives in those days.

TS: Really? That's a pretty interesting phrase, "expected". That was the way things...there was a system and that's how it operated?

JV: Right.

TS: By this time, speaking of gender, by the time you get to Germany in the late 1960s, has the Army changed with what it allows women to do and how often you encounter women in uniform?

JV: Yes, a bit, but it was just beginning to change a little. The big changes came later in the '70s actually.

TS: So this is just the beginning of this?

JV: Right. In the combat divisions it was unnoticeable.

TS: Right. But when we got into administrative offices or positions we might see more?

JV: In higher headquarters of divisions, but not in divisions.

TS: You said the noticeable difference and substantive differences will come in the 1970s.

JV: Yes.

TS: As a result of our Viet Nam experience, or unrelated to that?

JV: Related more to the all-volunteer Army I think, and to the general push for the recognition of women's talents in the society as a whole, the push for equal pay for equal work and all those sorts of things that have now seen us move to where there are more women in the colleges and universities than there are men.

TS: Yes, by some difference. Yes.

JV: You pick up the paper today to look at the business section to see comments of the CEOs of major corporations, and many are women. That's been a fairly recent change.

TS: So the Army certainly, by the time you leave it in 1985, has begun to implement drastic changes.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: That we're not really seeing by the late 1960s, not yet anyway.

JV: No. Not nearly as much as one sees today.

TS: You were, by your description, pleased with this posting to Germany as commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery. Specifically then, for the layperson, describe the specific duties and responsibilities that you're undertaking.

JV: It would be to command the battalions of the division artillery of the Armored Division, which had its responsibilities in a major avenue of approach of the Soviet Union forces into Western Germany, which meant primarily supervising the training and the war readiness as well as planning for defending the NATO territories in that particular zone of responsibility of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division.

**(2:00:15)**

TS: As a colonel now, who is directly subordinate to you as we go down the chain of command? How does this go down from you, at your position?

JV: We have the four artillery battalions, or actually five, of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division in those days. You had three light battalions armed with self-propelled 105s, and the medium battalion armed with three batteries of self-propelled 155s, and one battery of eight inch Howitzer self-propelled, and then the Honest John battalion.

TS: So Honest John is part of this one too.

JV: Right.

TS: In what condition did you find the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery when you arrived?

JV: I think that can probably best be described by my telling you about the change of command ceremony.

TS: Okay.

JV: The change of command ceremony was held at the training area in Hanau, which was a small training area but was big enough for this ceremony. And it was a mounted review. It was attended by the division commander, who was then Major General Tom Dolvin,<sup>10</sup> a wonderful soldier, one of the few guys who had commanded a tank battalion both in World War II and in the Korean War. So he was a tanker through and through, and as I say a wonderful commander and one for whom I had a great deal of respect and was a friend and mentor of mine throughout the rest of my career. But anyway, Tom Dolvin attended the change of command ceremony and then was my first introduction to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery in the fall of 1967, that is at that time. Of course I had been in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery before.

It was one of those grand days, a sunny day like today and a little bit warm for Hanau in September, I believe it was. General Dolvin was there with his wife and the wife of the then commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery and many dignitaries from Hanau, including Lux Hobein and his wife. Lux was the chief of police when I was in Hanau the other two times.

TS: Right. I thought I recognized the names.

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<sup>10</sup> Welborn G. 'Tom' Dolvin (1916-1991): U.S. Army lieutenant general; numerous assignments during a career from 1939-75.

JV: He was still the Polizei-Direktor. And a number of dignitaries from Hanau, the Lord Mayor and so forth. The outgoing commander gave his little speech and I gave my little speech, and I gave part of it in German, speaking to my friends in the Hanau community.

Then [I] gave the order to pass in review. That command was relayed by the commander of troops, who was the Div Arty executive officer. This field of self-propelled cannons started their diesel engines with a great roar, and they started and marched past the reviewing stand. General Dolvin, who was the actual reviewing officer, leaned over to me and he said, "That's the way an armored division operates – every engine starts and they all move." I thought, well that's sort of an edict to me about what should happen in the future.

The review was over. We had a little Kool-Aid and tea reception, some cake. It had "welcome back to Hanau" on the top of it. All the dignitaries went their appointed ways, and I went to the headquarters and asked that the staff be assembled and asked, "What's on the schedule for today?" The operations officer said, "Well, for the next two or three days we will be returning the power packs that we borrowed from other outfits in Europe to make sure that all of our vehicles would start and run."

TS: I was waiting for the punch line to this story, because it was going along so smoothly. *(laughter both)*

JV: That sort of told the story of my introduction to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery in 1967, which leads me to the next part, which I learned very quickly. It hadn't occurred to me earlier. It should have – that the Army in Europe would be this way. But it was sort of the stopping ground for relief from officers and NCOs out of Viet Nam. Once they came out of Viet Nam many went to Europe, or for new lieutenants out of ROTC and the military academy, and for senior NCOs for the few senior NCOs who stayed in the Army and were able to go to Europe. But otherwise, the Army in Europe was hollow in 1967.

TS: When you say "hollow," what do you mean?

JV: The readiness was terrible, as you can see from what I said about the equipment. The equipment readiness, we had something like thirty-five power packs that we had borrowed from other units. When I say power packs, I'm talking about the engine and transmission package.

TS: We're not talking about just a battery or something.

JV: No, no. We're talking about a big truckload for each one of those.

TS: These vehicles, had you needed them, they were useless because they wouldn't run.

JV: They wouldn't run. The parts supply was poor, because the priority was the war in Viet Nam obviously.

TS: Is that what had happened, is that the U.S. Army in Europe had been prioritized lower and this was the result?

JV: Yes. The personnel situation, most of the battalions had a lieutenant colonel and one major, whereas usually you'd have at least three majors in a battalion. But they had one. Many of the batteries were commanded by first lieutenants, instead of captains. The other officers, many of the batteries had no first lieutenants but only a first lieutenant commander and the rest of the officers were second lieutenants.

The noncommissioned officer corps was seriously depleted. This last winter I got a Christmas letter from an officer who had been the S-3 of the Div Arty. I hadn't been in contact with him for many years, and I got this Christmas letter from him. He had gone on to talk about the condition of the division artillery when I took command. He said, "Frankly when you took command, we couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if we had been put inside the barn. And," he said, "you taught us to be artillerymen."

TS: This is a pretty shocking condition that you're describing here.

JV: Yes. But an understandable one. By that time we had what, 700,000 soldiers in Viet Nam?

TS: And the equipment that they needed.

JV: Yes. Right. And the priority to keep that equipment running went primarily to Southeast Asia.

TS: What impact did the conditions you just described have on the morale of the troops that you suddenly were working with?

JV: For many they didn't know anything different, because the soldiers were draftees and they came to this outfit. The NCOs by and large knew that we were in poor shape and the senior officers did, but the other officers, it was the way it was. So it required a new look at the training and how we did it.

TS: You talk about materiel shortages, engines and transmissions. You can't just conjure those up out of thin air. How do you deal with a situation like this?

JV: We had the engines and transmissions. They just weren't running.

TS: Okay. So it was a maintenance thing.

JV: That was a big maintenance problem.

TS: And that's one of the things you had mentioned earlier, maintenance is one of the first victims of shortages or manpower situations.

JV: Right.

TS: Talk about what you did. You're facing a challenge: you've got manpower depleted, you've got materiel problems and maintenance issues.

JV: They're all training issues really. So you've got a number of different training problems. One is the maintenance training, and clearly we needed some help with the maintenance training. Part of that was, of course the immediate excuse is all the parts aren't available. The first thing you do is find out whether people know how to use the parts system, how to use the actual bureaucratic system that produces the parts, and clearly we had a lot of people who didn't understand how to use it correctly. So instituted training for that.

The other part was gunnery training. That was clear from the very beginning in looking at the reports of the battery and battalion tests that our gunnery wasn't very good. So that meant some looks at the training for gunnery, and for me that started with the next level of command, with the commanders.

By that time the fire direction centers in the artillery had been issued computers. I think the acronym for the computer we got was FADAC.<sup>11</sup> So I inquired about the state of the FADACs. The one at division artillery was in storage. It had not been used, because the people around didn't know how to use it, and the report was the battalions don't use theirs because they don't know how. So I said, "Okay, we'll have FADAC classes. I will be the teacher and the students will be the battalion commanders." And we did that. Learned to use the computers, and that was the right way to do it because then the battalion commanders went to teach their people how to use them and it enhanced their authority and respect. At least the battalion commanders understood that their commander knew how to use it.

TS: Right. Which enhances their respect for you.

JV: Then there was the general discipline, law and order, and we started with the Headquarters and Headquarters Battery in Hanau, where I knew the police chief in Hanau very well. We re-instituted the ride with the German police force, of our officers riding with the patrol cars in the German police forces on Saturday night so they learned how the soldiers got in trouble and how to try to prevent some of that. And we got the battalion commanders in the other towns to hook up the same sort of liaison efforts with the local police. So the law and order and general disciplinary problems went on the downward curve rather quickly.

We bumped up the athletic program. It wasn't very good at that time, and so we bumped that up. I made one foolish mistake. There was an NCO that I knew that had been an Army champion boxer and was on the Olympic team, but did not compete in the Olympic boxing. Anyway, he was an alternate on the Olympic team. I knew him from past years and I was able to get him to come. And I remembered my early days with troop units where

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<sup>11</sup> FADAC = Field Artillery Digital Automatic Computer. An all-transistorized general purpose digital computer, first used 1960.

boxing was an important part of the athletic program, so I foolishly decided that we were going to re-institute boxing.

What I did is have this NCO conduct a school, boxing school, for boxing instructors for each of the battalions. And he did, and it was a good school. He was a good boxer and a good teacher, and he believed as I did that boxing was a good sport for soldiers. It teaches them that someday, if it's only you and the other fellow and you can't get help from anyplace, that you may in fact see a little bit of your blood when your nose gets whanged and you're not really going to die after all.

TS: I never thought of it that way. All right.

JV: *(chuckles)* And the only way you can get out of this is with extraordinary effort or quitting. So I always felt it was a good sport for soldiers. But anyway, he had his school and then I had foolishly ordered that boxing be put on the training schedule and that everybody be instructed in boxing.

TS: So if I'm a soldier in your unit, I have to do this now.

JV: Yes. So I told the S-3, "Okay I want to see once one of the battalions has boxing instruction on their training schedule and I want to go visit them." The battalions were all in different towns. Not too far from Hanau, but you had a little bit of a trip in any case. Except one, we had one battalion, the medium battalion was [a bit further away]. The medium battalion and the Honest John battalion.

Anyway, the battalion at Gelnhausen was the first to have boxing on their training schedule. I went there *(chuckles)* to see the boxing instruction. It was in the gymnasium at Gelnhausen, and they had all the soldiers sitting in the bleachers and someone was giving them a lecture on boxing. That was not exactly my idea of how one trains for boxing. My older days in the Army, the boxing instruction had been lining up the soldiers by size and counting off by twos and passing out the gloves and the ones began to pummel the twos. *(laughs)*

TS: This is the more intellectual approach.

JV: *(still chuckling)* I could see that my practical approach from the intellectual view that most of the people had about boxing in the Army in those days. So we kind of let the boxing program wither, and spent more time on basketball, softball and football.

TS: Sometimes it's knowing when to strike your sails, right?

JV: Right.

TS: That's an interesting thing about your leadership style, which is being able to admit like you just did that sometimes you don't get it right.

JV: That's right.

TS: And to let that one go.

JV: The other thing that I did in those days that caused some consternation was insist on the live fire training being under combat conditions. Particularly for artillery tests, you usually didn't have infantry or tanks around for the artillery test. It was just a matter of the artillery firing and hitting designated targets that had been pointed out to observers or whatever it was. So I insisted that in the battery tests the forward observer be in a tank. All the forward observers were either going to be with armored infantry battalions or with tank battalions. And then that the target be what we called a danger-close target, that is very close to the tank. I think that it was 150 meters, which is close enough so that you occasionally get a few fragments dinging the tank actually.

TS: But you're in a tank, so it should be okay.

JV: Right. (*chuckles*) At first I had some trouble getting through the safety people at the firing ranges, but finally did get it accomplished by appealing to friends of mine that were in the headquarters of the U.S. Army Europe and knew what my objective was. Of course the tank battalion commanders were a little reluctant to have somebody shooting artillery within 150 meters of their tanks as well. But we did it, and it worked out very successfully. We were making some pretty good progress in the artillery I think.

General Tom Dolvin came to visit us at the major training area at Grafenwoehr,<sup>12</sup> and one of the things we were going to do was have a time on target, usually called TOTs. We had three battalions there at the time and we were going to have all three battalions fire at this one particular target at the same time. It was planned fire. (*chuckles*) We got to the OP and somehow the target that I thought was being chosen, and I thought that the division artillery S-3 and I had agreed on, a certain target that was clearly visible from this observation post that we had with General Dolvin with us, was not the target that they shot at. So they actually fired at a different target, and there's a wonderful picture that exists and it has Tom Dolvin and I with the binoculars up to our eyes looking out in one direction and some junior staff officers standing behind us with their fingers pointing off in the other direction at the target that was actually being shot at. So there was kind of an embarrassing moment, but one that Tom Dolvin and I laughed about very many years afterward.

TS: The story must have had a decent ending here.

JV: It had a decent ending in that they did hit the target.

TS: Even though it wasn't the one that you thought they were aiming at.

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<sup>12</sup> Grafenwoehr: town in eastern Bavaria, home to a large military training area since the early 1900s. Used by the U.S. Army since 1945.

JV: Even though it wasn't the one I had Tom Dolvin looking at. (*chuckles*) So it sort of took a little bit of wind out of my sails about the progress I thought we were making.

TS: It sounds like you had a long road to go on progress with this particular unit.

JV: Yes. We did. We did.

TS: From your observations at the time, was this unit the outlier as far as the condition and readiness of the United States Army in Europe at the time, or was this something that had kind of begun to whittle away at our overall preparedness?

JV: No. We were symptomatic of the situation in the whole Army in Europe.

TS: How do you prioritize what to address first? Because you ticked off a number of things that by themselves are serious.

JV: You have to address all of those things at once. Can't do one thing and then the other, because if you take it that way you'll spend so much time on the first item. For example maintenance: I could have spent full time on maintenance and had everybody spending full time on maintenance without attention to gunnery and discipline, law and order, physical fitness. You have to do it all. Of course the Army is structured to do it that way. You've got so many men who are really in the maintenance business and so many who are in the operations business.

TS: Was this a personnel issue, where you had people who weren't being trained, who were getting to their positions without the right kind of training or had this been an erosion really of standards?

JV: It was an erosion of standards based on lack of resources. I think people had begun to accept the lack of resources as a reason for not being as ready as they should have been, rather than straining to overcome the lack of resources. That happens on the battlefield. We talked earlier about the last winter of the war in World War II, when Italy was low on the priority and we were limited to three rounds per gun per day. The question is, what do you do with those three rounds to make it the most effective? How do you get the best out of what you have?

We didn't talk about it, but at that time we made provisional 50 caliber machine gun battalions; they were primarily meant to be used as anti-aircraft machine guns for the artillery. But we made them into ground support outfits and we could knock down stone Italian farmhouses by firing a number of .50 caliber machine guns at the house. We did that because we had so little regular artillery ammunition. It wasn't a great success in turning the tide of battle, but it helped.

TS: And it's reacting flexibly to the situation you have in front of you and you have what you have at the moment.

JV: Yes. Right. That was the way with the outfit in Europe in those days.

TS: How long would you estimate before you began to see the kind of changes that you wanted or expected?

JV: You began to see it almost immediately. Part of it was the parts situation for the main guns. Once we got some experts in and some expert instruction for the parts people we began to see the flow of parts improve. We didn't have anywhere near the support that the people in East Asia had, but at least we were getting more of what was available to us.

An example is air cleaners on the M109 Howitzer, which is the self-propelled 155 Howitzer, which was the basic artillery piece at that time for the armored division. Checking the air cleaner on the M109 is not easy, but it's not hard either. It's kind of a knuckle buster to get at it, and you have to sort of get down on your hands and knees and get inside and get into an inconvenient place, but with diesel engines if you have three things, clean air, clean oil and clean fuel, by and large they'll run almost forever. And the easiest thing to do is make sure you have clean fuel, so you've got to change the fuel filters in the fuel trucks to make sure that the fuel that is going in there is clean. Clean oil means changing the oil at the right time, and clean air means checking the air filter every day and banging it on the side of the vehicle to bang out the dust and putting it back in in the right direction so that air flow is in the correct direction so it is in fact filtered. It's not that hard to do.

But when I as the commanding officer of the division artillery go to artillery batteries and say, "Sergeant, let's check your air filter," and he doesn't know where it is, then you know you have a problem. But it's a problem that's easily fixed. It's calling in the battalion commanders and saying, "Hey, guys, let's take this Howitzer here and check the air filter." If they don't know where it is, you know it's not being checked so you have them look at it and say, "We've got a certain number of Howitzers that are down because the air filters weren't cleaned and the engines are bad, so let's get the air filters cleaned." That's pretty easy to do.

TS: It sounds easy.

JV: Yes. Put the responsibility in the right place and pretty soon you go around and say, "Sergeant, let's check your air filter," and he immediately gets in there, or tells one of his soldiers to get in there, and get the air filter out. The colonel wants to see it. So it's fixed. But you just have to do it.

TS: So maintenance. So kind of upgrading the maintenance behavior.

JV: Yes.

TS: And you said you saw some elements of this fairly quickly. You get people actually doing what they're supposed to be doing.

JV: Right.

TS: Because you took a unit that was pretty low when you took it, what challenge remained a challenge?

**(2:34:00)**

JV: The gunnery and actual firing is a challenge when you have inexperienced gun crews, inexperienced fire direction centers, inexperienced observers, and you're short of training ammunition. So it means looking at what are you doing at home station training. For example, the only place you can shoot the cannons in Germany is at one of the major training areas. So you have to wait until you can go there before you can shoot the cannons. But everybody had little 14.5 guns that were toy cannons actually, that you could shoot at a miniature training area and you could train your fire direction centers, you could train your observers on procedures and so forth. So the question is, are you using those? Well, we weren't using them. But we got to using them. So you can buck up the fire direction centers and the forward observers as well by doing that.

TS: The nature of artillery. You mentioned you have three medium battalions, one 8 inch, and one Honest John battalion. So five total.

JV: Yes.

TS: How has artillery continued to evolve?

JV: By this time the light battalions were all 155. That is the direct support battalions. They were no longer called light battalions; they were called direct support battalions, the 155s. Then we had one eight inch battalion and the Honest John battalion.

TS: So no more 105s?

JV: No more 105s.

TS: How does that indicate kind of an evolution of artillery in the years since the 1940s?

JV: Longer range and more horsepower at the business end. Instead of a thirty-three pound projectile you had a hundred pound projectile or ninety-six pound projectile.

TS: Is this with corresponding longer range as well?

JV: Longer range as well.

TS: Is the nature of the type of shells, the munitions itself, changing? Or is it something that you would have recognized in the 1940s?

JV: By this time we had the so-called Improved Conventional Munitions, which were cluster bomb sort of munitions, anti-personnel munitions, which were added to the basic high explosives.

TS: Did high explosives continue to be...is it correct to say the standard munitions?

JV: Yes. It was the standard munitions, because it's a dual purpose thing. You could shoot at buildings or entrenchments or fortifications with a high explosive, but troops in the open you'd use the ICMs, the Improved Conventional Munitions.

TS: How about the evolution of interactions with the Bundeswehr? Germany's Bundeswehr continues to develop since 1955, when it was established.

JV: Yes. Of course we had competitions with the Bundeswehr, as a matter of fact.

TS: What kind?

JV: I've forgotten what the name of the competition is, or what it was called by the trophy, but it was a tank competition. The tankers, for their tests they have a gunnery range which requires the tank follow a particular path, which means the tank has to run and then undertake certain targets that will pop up during the run. The competition was a NATO competition actually, but in those days the Bundeswehr was usually winning it with their new tank, which was the first Leopards. Leopards, as the Germans called them, had just come out<sup>13</sup> and were a little faster than our M60 tanks, which we had at that time in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored. So the division worked hard to compete in that competition, to try and win it, and particularly with Tom Dolvin as the division commander. They were especially keen on it. And in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division there had been a long tradition of the commanders, all the commanders of the combat arms, qualifying with the tank, with the main tank that the division was armed with. That preceded the '67-'68 years. That was back when I was there the last time, with the Honest John battalion. We were all expected to qualify on the tank range with the main gun tank. So it was part of being in an armored division.

TS: Sure. How often did you and in what ways did you liaise with German Bundeswehr officials on a general basis?

JV: I'm trying to remember the town where the division on our left was, which was a Bundeswehr division. We had a liaison party there full time and they had a liaison party with us full time. We'd annually have a joint dinner party or something like where the officers got together. Then we would train together at the training areas. We'd have sister battalions that would train, and it wasn't necessarily with German battalions. For example, when I commanded the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 73<sup>rd</sup>, we had a British battalion that we trained with and exchanged with. But those relations were generally good.

TS: With regards to tanks, does the tank by the mid to late 1960s continue to enjoy the kind of significance and importance it did, for example in the 1940s, or is that evolving?

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<sup>13</sup> Leopard tank: German battle tank, introduced 1965.

JV: Even more by the '60s.

TS: In what ways?

JV: First, the Soviets had a lot of tanks and pretty good tanks that they had designed and built. They had far more tanks than we did and if we were to defend a Soviet tank attack, we just did the numbers. Our tanks had to knock out four Soviet tanks before it got knocked out for us to have a fighting chance. So we had to be good.

TS: A real numerical disadvantage.

JV: Right. There was a significant numerical disadvantage all the way around. The Soviets had a much larger force in East Germany than we had in West Germany.

TS: One thing we haven't talked about for a while is significant people, that is for learning and impact on your development. One of the relationships you've wanted to talk about is Major General Don Cowles.<sup>14</sup>

JV: Yes. Don Cowles succeeded Tom Dolvin as the commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division, and then after I commanded the division artillery for two years I think, he moved me to be the Chief of Staff of the Division. We had a good relationship. He left the division before I left and went on to other duties. Later he was General Abrams' Chief of Staff in Viet Nam. He had been in the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored with General Abrams when Abrams was a battalion commander in the 4<sup>th</sup> Armored during World War II. So he had a long relationship with Abrams. He later became the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Army for Plans and Operations, and I succeeded him as the DCS Ops. I first worked for him – I was Director of Operations on the Army staff and working for Cowles after the Viet Nam War and went out to command the 4<sup>th</sup> Mechanized Division myself and came back and was chosen to succeed Cowles as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. So we had a long relationship.

TS: What made him a good officer and someone that you looked up to?

JV: Technically he knew his business. Tactically and strategically he knew his business. And working with people, he knew his business. He was a team builder and paid attention to that and was a great counsel to the people who worked for him. I don't know anyone who ever worked for Don Cowles that wasn't helped a lot by working for him. Unfortunately he came down with Alzheimer's shortly after he retired and died not too long after that.

TS: Who was another person as an example from this period, either a new acquaintance or someone that you are reacquainted with that is significant for your development or someone that you'd want to point out as a role model?

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<sup>14</sup> Donald H. Cowles (1917-89); U.S. Army lieutenant general; served 1942-75.

JV: Wil Hyatt I think we mentioned. We talked about chaplains before. Wil Hyatt was a chaplain in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division at that time. Wil and I had a good relationship at that time and had a good one until Wil died. A wonderful man of God and a great soldier. One who contributed much to the Army and to the church.

TS: On the other side, because you're now a colonel yourself and you have people under you, what's an example of a person that you can say you're now mentoring, who you see developing into the kind of person, into a good officer and a good human being, based possibly on the input that you're providing?

JV: I'd say there's probably a fairly long list. Unfortunately none of the battalion commanders that I had in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery made general, and I regret that. They were all good people, but in contrast to a few years later, when I commanded the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division, I had at least three who became four star generals and one who became Chief of Staff of the Army. ... Two others commanded the forces in Korea after I did, and a handful of people who made lieutenant general. Now how much of it was due to my influence or how much was due to their just plain good capabilities is something that we could argue. But most of them became known as sort of Vessey's guys.

One of the incidents in the 4<sup>th</sup> Division at that time that I want to talk about, going back to Viet Nam, was this sergeant in the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 77<sup>th</sup> in the battle of Soui Tre, Sgt. Ray Childress. He was in the fight with me at the number six position in B Battery and wounded grievously when this beehive round was hit by the RPG and decorated him with the flechettes from the beehive round. I didn't get to finish that story when we talked about it earlier. The day I went to the press conference in Saigon I went to visit Childress in the hospital that day and the doctor told me that it was unlikely that Childress would make it. He was grievously wounded. But they were getting ready to evacuate him to a hospital in Japan that had more capabilities for someone injured as seriously as he was. I didn't see him again, but got a chance to inquire about him and knew that he was recovering. He did live in fact, and was recovering.

But when I was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Chief of Staff, I got a message from Childress saying he wanted to come and see me. He was in the States at that time. He didn't say why he wanted to come and see me, but he said that he thought he could get a space A, available space, ride in the military airlift command to Germany. Sure enough, Childress showed up in Germany and came to my office. He said, "Colonel, they're trying to throw me out of the Army. They're telling me I'm not fit to serve anymore. They won't let me take the physical fitness test to prove that I'm okay." He actually paid his way to Germany to get over there. He couldn't get a ride on space A at the time and didn't have as much leave time so that he could afford to wait around, so he paid his way to Germany to come and see me. He said, "You need to help me stay in the Army." I went to see Don Cowles and said, "I've got a sergeant that we need to keep in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored." I told Cowles the story and he agreed, and Cowles pulled some strings in Washington and we just kept Childress in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored at the time. He finished out a thirty year career and retired. Went back home to Indiana where he worked helping veterans, and died only year before last.

TS: Also something you can feel good about. Helping the Army bureaucracy, the way things work. On paper he was going to leave.

JV: Childress' body may not have passed the test, but will alone would make his body do what needed to be done. But we had a number of people that were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored at that time that went on to succeed. This fellow I told you about, Red Brown, who was the operations officer at the time. He eventually left the Army and was seconded to the CIA and then left the Army and joined the CIA as a permanent member of the CIA and was very successful in the CIA. He's the guy that wrote the letter saying, we couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if we were in the barn. And I'm sure that in that list of three hundred or so people that exchange Christmas cards with me that there are a number of them from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division days.

TS: All in all a satisfying two years in Germany for you, or two-plus years?

**(2:54:50)**

JV: It was indeed. John, our oldest son, by that time wound up in Germany, going to the University of Maryland at the University of Maryland's Munich campus. He came home for Christmas, it must have been Christmas of '69. We were living in Frankfurt, at the Chief of Staff's house. He came in looking like a student of the late 1960s, with long hair and a long beard. I had just been returned from a six-week deployment up along the East-West zonal border, and it was a snowy day. I came in and I saw him and went upstairs and I took off my boots and Avis could hear me slamming my boots on the floor. She came up and said, "What's the matter? That's your son down there." I said, "Yes, I know. He looks like he's trying out for John the Baptist in the Passion Play." (*chuckles*) Avis in her wisdom said, "He does indeed, but he's also a straight A student. He's not shackled up with some girl. He's not a drunk. He's not on drugs and he hasn't wrecked your car. What do you want him to do?" And saying I wanted him to get a haircut seemed out of order, so I didn't say it.

TS: We talked at the outset today about how the protests of the 1960s were impacting service, and here it is now in your house. I was going to ask you about your family, because they're with you now and your kids are getting older now. Did you find differences of opinions with your kids too? Because you have one college aged now. When it comes to even your own profession ...

JV: Yes. Avis' comments brought me around to recognizing that it is what it is, and looking like you're trying out for John the Baptist in the Passion Play is indeed not a sin after all and that whether I like it or not, I certainly can't stop it. So the next day was a Saturday, but I wanted to look around at what was going on in the motorpool at the Drake Edwards Kaserne and had my Jeep come up and I told John to hop in the back seat and ride around with me. It was amazing the amount of recognition I got from other people for having my son who had a long beard – it wasn't particularly long, but he had a beard and long hair – that I could tolerate that. Of course today it wouldn't be uncommon at all.

TS: But it was those times. I think about the protests of the '60s, whether they were in Europe or in the United States, that the United States military was a target.

JV: Oh, yes. Certainly. The Red Army in Germany.<sup>15</sup> We were a target for the Red Army in Germany. We were a target for protestors of all sorts.

TS: Talk about that a little bit, because this is real now.

JV: I cite for example Hanau. In Hanau we had a chemical weapons depot in Hanau, and it was known to be a chemical weapons depot in Hanau. The German police would usually alert us, in fact almost always would alert us to the fact that there would be protests at a certain place. The German police obviously had agents inside the organizations. We'd have to put extra guards on the chemical weapons depot and make sure no one got inside to endanger themselves, particularly, or danger to the ammunition. There wasn't much danger, because it was all secured in very secure bunkers and so forth. But the curious thing is that you could see what was underneath the protests at that time.

For the Germans, there were probably a handful of people who were ideologically disposed to protest. Then there were busloads of people who had been paid a few marks and a few beers to come and protest. And there was always a television crew that got to the site of the protest before the protestors arrived, so they knew that the protest was coming and they were set up. Then you would observe the photography of the protest on television and it would look like it was a much greater protest than it actually was, that this busload or two of people would turn out to look like hundreds when they were on the television, because you'd get all the protestors close together and get them in the picture waving their banners and so forth. Most of the protests were not nearly as big as they were portrayed to be, was my observation. The general run of German citizens was even more disgusted with the protestors than were we, who had to provide extra guards and so forth to guard our installations. So you could see where the money and politics of the situation were used to create a vision that was different than the reality. But there were incidents where there were shootings.

TS: Did you ever feel yourself personally vulnerable or in danger?

JV: I never felt it. But we were warned about it, and we did in fact have American commanders, some a little later, actually Fritz Kroesen, when he was the Commander of the Army in Europe, was ambushed by Red Army people on the way from his house to his headquarters.<sup>16</sup>

TS: Just knowing about some of these attacks, I was wondering whether you [were a target]; you're now a colonel.

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<sup>15</sup> Red Army Faction: postwar West Germany's most prominent left-wing militant group. Also known as the Baader-Meinhof Group. Founded in 1970 and responsible for several terrorist attacks during the 1970s.

<sup>16</sup> General Kroesen was injured on 15 September 1981 in Heidelberg, when his car was targeted with an anti-tank rocket.



TS: By themselves they were feared then for their military capabilities?

JV: They weren't feared by themselves. They were feared as part of the Soviet polygram. If the Soviets disappeared. I think the view of the West Germans was – which was demonstrated by what was going on in Berlin – is that whenever somebody had an opportunity to come across the border they did.

TS: Yes. And ultimately in the 1980s, when Soviet policies changed, East Germany's demise was not far behind either. As you transitioned to Chief of Staff from your job as commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division Artillery, what were some of the lessons you would say you learned from your two-plus years in Germany this time?

JV: I'd say that one of the major lessons was understanding what happened to the low priority parts of the Army, even though the mission was a high priority mission. Defending against the Soviet Union was certainly a high priority national mission, but when the resources are limited and something gets a higher priority – this was the same lesson as the lesson from the last year of the war in Italy – that you were still at war but there was more in the minds of the national strategists. There was a more important battle going on elsewhere. But that required special attention to taking care of the readiness of that part of the armed forces that didn't have the highest priority.

But it was not only a readiness issue, it was a morale issue for the members of the armed forces. But that wasn't a new lesson for me. But it was more vivid being in the command position that I was in than I think my observations in World War II situation were perhaps a little naïve, but it was the same observation, the same lesson. I think the time as division Chief of Staff was really a new learning experience for me, because it was actually a major staff position, a position of authority. The Chief of Staff of a division is a guy who has a fair amount of authority and usually speaks for the commander when he speaks. But again, it's a team building job. You've got the general staff of the division and the special staff in the division and having them work together toward building a good division and keeping readiness in the forefront, as well as morale and discipline, takes a little work. It was some fun.

TS: Was that a position you expected when it came or was this a bit of a surprise?

*(audible noise in background – grounds keeping equipment)*

JV: It was a little bit of a surprise. Most of the guys who held that position that I knew before were armor officers. It's an armored division. There were a number of division commanders that *(noise from mower makes speaker unclear)*. Usually the Chief of Staff was an armored guy. But we made a lot of good friends. Just the day before yesterday got a card from Sherri Brown. Sherri Brown was the widow of Charlie Brown. Not the Charlie Brown of Schultz fame, but the Charlie Brown of Signal Corps fame, who was then the signal officer in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division and later I think was the chief communicator for the Army. He wound up a lieutenant general. Charlie Brown and I stayed in close contact

ever since those days, and I continue to stay in contact with his widow even though Charlie died a few years ago.

TS: The Chief of Staff job, what new challenges did you see with that that you hadn't seen previously?

JV: You had a bigger look at the logistic and support end of the division, because the Division Support Command, which is nominally under the command of the commanding general and he also has an assistant division commander for support who looks at that, but the assistant division commander for support is not necessarily in the direct chain of command unless the division commander tells him to be. In those days, at least in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division, the voice they looked to was the Chief of Staff of the Division for direction and support and a voice to their commander. So you had more interaction with the maintenance battalion commander, the engineer battalion, supply and support battalion, and the signal battalion. So it's a microcosm of the Army as a whole. You're not in command, but people look to you for direction.

TS: It is a coordinating position, right?

JV: Right.

TS: Was this a job that suited your personality, do you feel, and your skill set?

JV: I don't know whether it suited my personality or not, but it was a job that I enjoyed doing and thought I had a great job. We're talking about connections: I was succeeded by Josiah Wallace. You will remember when we talked about the early days at Fort Sill, and Joe Wallace and his wife. Joe Wallace, from the class of '46.

TS: Right. Right after the war ended.

JV: His father had been the Regular Army instructor with the 59<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade before the Minnesota National Guard was activated. In fact, when I was Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored, Joe Wallace came to visit me and he brought his father's cap ornament for the regular garrison cap, the cap with the visor and the braid around it for generals. He said that his dad wanted me to have that. It was the cap ornament that he had had during World War I, that Joe's dad had during World War I. It was slightly different in shape. More of a triangular shape than the rounded sort of shape that we had in the days that I was in the Army, but I wore that until I retired.

Then I gave it to George Joulwan,<sup>17</sup> who had been my exec when I was Chairman; he went on later to be a four star general and was commander of the NATO forces. I remember George told me who he had given it to, but I have forgotten. But it was some guy that George was mentoring and expected to go great places. So that little connection from 1939 has carried on through, the passing of that cap ornament.

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<sup>17</sup> George Joulwan (b. 1939); U.S. Army general. Joulwan served two tours in Vietnam, 1966-67 and 1971-72, and as the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe (SACEUR), 1993-97.

TS: That's a cool story. From Chief of Staff of a division, as you were in this job, what could you see as the next logical step or move for yourself?

JV: It was difficult for me to see it. At that point I'd had the two really good jobs for a full colonel. That is, in my mind. My own view of what a really good job was. I had commanded the highest level of command in my own branch of service in a division, and I had had what's generally considered the next plum of a job in a division, and that's being Chief of Staff of a division. At this time the war in Viet Nam was still going on.

TS: Yes. 1969-1970.

JV: The Army was short. The Army had built up a huge aviation force, particularly to support the war in Viet Nam, but it also discovered its usefulness for the Army in Europe. As I had told you before I think, I always coveted being an aviator, having flown as an air observer during the waning days of World War II and having applied for pilot training after World War II. Turned out I was three months older than they were accepting at the time, so I wasn't accepted. So one day I read the *Army Times* and it said the Army needs more colonel aviators than it has and they're asking full colonels who want to apply for aviation training to apply. Said if you want to apply, send in a postcard.

**(3:21:00)**

TS: I remember you mentioning the postcard, which just seems like the back of a magazine kind of a thing.

JV: Right. (*chuckles*) So I sent in my postcard.

TS: So you send in your postcard while you were still Chief of Staff of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division?

JV: Yes. I think just before I was moved to Chief of Staff. But I hadn't heard anything about it.

TS: Could you have kept your position as Chief of Staff longer, do you think, had this other opportunity not arisen?

JV: I don't know. I don't know. But I was selected to take aviation training.

TS: Were you surprised when they actually picked up the phone and called you or sent you a letter or whatever?

JV: Right. I was called.

TS: How surprised were you?

JV: I though wow! Postcard worked! *(chuckles)* And I was told to go take a flight physical to see if I passed the flight physical.

TS: How did Mrs. Vessey feel about this?

JV: She was fine with it.

TS: Didn't care? This is slightly riskier than being a desk jockey now.

JV: Yes. But a happy husband makes for a great marriage. *(chuckles)*

TS: At this point it's 1970 and you've been in the service a long time. Your family has only ever known you really as a military dad, right? A guy in uniform who sometimes is gone for periods of time. As you knew your kids and know your kids, how do you think that impacted your kids growing up? Positively or negatively.

JV: I don't know. I think you'd really have to ask them. When I talk to them now they say they enjoyed that life far more than they expressed at the time, and I'm sure that's looking back at it and seeing the experiences. They got to live in a number of different places in the world. John spent his freshman and sophomore years essentially at the University of Munich, and certainly got to learn every corner of Oktoberfest when it came.

TS: You can do a lot worse than going to college for two years in Munich.

JV: Yes. He got to be friends with some of the professors that invited to him to his house. He played soccer on a German town club. It was a great experience for him.

TS: How about your other two? Slightly younger.

JV: I think it was a little harder for both Sarah and David. David was quite a bit younger at the time. As I said before, David moved I think ten times in ten different schools in his twelve years of primary and secondary schooling. Moved seven times in the middle of the school year. So getting a call telling me that David had been apprehended smoking in the school parking lot was not necessarily a surprise, even though I didn't enjoy it. *(chuckles)*

TS: How often did you find yourself considering your family when it came to accepting a position, or looking at opportunities for even temporary deployments?

JV: Most of the things I was either told to go...I think the one big difference was the volunteering to go to Viet Nam rather than the Pentagon in 1966. Avis was the real hero of the marriage, keeping the family together and the kids in reasonably decent order. None of them have stopped at jail. They all seem to be paying their taxes.

TS: There's something to be said for the positive outcome, because if we look at the data the statistics on military marriages, the divorce rates are higher in service than out. So there are certain stress factors.

JV: Yes. There is indeed.

TS: So I wanted to at least give you a chance to talk about those, because you seem to have surmounted those.

JV: And I would say...you say you. You're using 'you' in the plural.

TS: I am using 'you' in the plural.

JV: Because Avis was the real hero of all that. She moved the household thirty times without a lot of help from me on a number of occasions. She ate sea slugs with silver chopsticks when she had to and pretended to enjoy it. (*chuckles*)

TS: How often as a parent through the years did you find yourself regretting that you missed stuff with your kids? School plays or sporting events or family vacations.

JV: Fairly often. And particularly sporting events, graduations and stuff like that. John was a pretty good football player in high school, and I think I saw him play one game. But we worked hard to try and make the most of the time we had. I remember John inviting Avis and me to come to Munich to go to Oktoberfest with him. Foolishly I thought, I'll be able to call. I didn't know quite when the job would permit me to go. I thought, I'll wait and see when it permits me to go. Then I'll call Munich and get a hotel room. Well, the hotel rooms in Munich are booked a year ahead of time for Oktoberfest, so Avis and I wound up sleeping in the car outside John's dormitory at Maryland's Munich campus. On a cold autumn night I might add. (*chuckles*)

TS: Wow! The colonel might have been accustomed to different digs than that.

JV: Right.

TS: It's the positive things that we latch onto. It is I suppose, not having had this, the tension that comes with it? This is what you've chosen for your career. And there are, it sounds like, certain things that happen and certain things you can't control.

JV: Being stationed in Germany, despite the operational difficulties at that time, it still leaves you in a centralized location close to Frankfurt, close to transportation hubs. The Army had some wonderful recreation areas, particularly down around the Garmisch-Partenkirchen area – and we used them. In fact the Watzmann<sup>18</sup> is the second highest mountain in Germany, but in contrast to Zugspitze, which has a cog train going almost to

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<sup>18</sup> Watzmann: mountain in the Bavarian Alps south of the village of Berchtesgaden; elevation 2713 meters.

the top, if you want to get to the top of the Watzmann you walked. At least you did in those days. To get to the very top there's a little bit of actual mountain climbing, but otherwise it's basically a mountain walk. You start from the bottom. So I got the two boys to agree that at different times on the year they turned twelve that they and I would take the walk to the top of the Watzmann.

There's a mountain inn about halfway up that has a sleeping hall for climbers who want to spend the night. All sleep in the same sleeping loft. Just lay out your bedroll, and there's a dozen other climbers sleeping in the same place. There's a cable hoist to hoist logistic support, but not people to this mountain inn. So there's plenty of beer and the food is typically good German food. So the best way to make that walk is to start early in the morning, and you can make it to the top and then back down to the Watzmannhaus all in one day, but you're at nightfall when you get there if you start early in the morning and go to the top and come down. So in those days there was a dozen or so climbers who would come into the Watzmannhaus for dinner and typically hoist a few beers and sing a few German mountain songs. For each of the boys we did that the year they turned twelve, and it was a fun experience for them. We made an automobile trip to Vienna one year. Did the whole Vienna thing with the Lippezanners and the opera.

**(3:32:00)**

TS: Excellent. Is this also the time living in Germany that you made the trip to Italy where you had the video camera?

JV: No. That was with just John and Avis, in our first tour in Germany.

TS: At this point you're heading off to primary helicopter school next time we talk, it sounds like. This would be a good time to stop today, if that's okay with you.

JV: I'll just mention one thing about living in Germany. We had a doctor, Bernie Mittemeier was his name, in fact still is his name, who was the surgeon in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division at that time, who later became the commander at Walter Reed. He was my surgeon in Korea when I was commander of the forces in Korea and later became surgeon general of the Army. But Bernie was a urologist by specialty. He twice did a transurethral resection, which was kind of one of the things that he was involved in devising. But we'll leave that part of the story until later, during the Carter years, because it has some impact during those years.

But anyway, Bernie also knew the wine country around the Rhine River and the Neckar River valleys. His family was from that area and he knew a family, the widow of the original owner, the man himself was a World War II casualty and the widow kept running this vineyard and small winery. She had a couple of bachelor sons that helped her with it. So we went with Bernie several times to visit this winery and the woman was an old friend of his family, his forbearers. She was a wonderful woman. She always wanted to talk politics, and we had long political discussions with her. She'd bring out wine, something special that she really wanted to serve. I've forgotten whether I got the message from her or from Bernie, but she had a batch of Trockenbeerenauslese, which is the sweetest of the Riesling wines and picked late when the grapes are like raisins. And she had bottled these in half bottles, so they were half the size of a regular bottle of wine, and she had planned to

put the vineyard up for sale but she wanted to let Bernie and his friends have first cut of what she had left of this particular year of Trockenbeerenauslese, and it was superb. It was like velvet touching your tongue and had an absolutely wonderful taste. So I bought...I've forgotten...eight or ten cases of that wine, not knowing that I was going to leave. John still talks about me doling it out by the teaspoonful, and then of course the orders came to go to helicopter school and I thought, what do I do with the wine? I looked at every way I could possibly take it to the United States. I had to become an importer.

TS: Because there was so much of it?

JV: Yes. There was hardly anything I could do other than take the legal amount that you could carry on the airplane. Two bottles or something like that. I could and did carry four of those small bottles when I came back, but the rest of it I gave away. *(chuckles)* We never have a glass of Riesling without son John reminding us of the wonderful Trockenbeerenauslese that had become a charitable gift.

TS: You give it away, or I don't know what you do with it. That's all you can do.

JV: Good point to end on.

TS: It is actually, and so with your permission I will hit the stop button.

**END OF INTERVIEW**