

Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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Location: Vessey residence, enclosed porch, Garrison, MN

Transcribed by: Linda Gerber, October 2012

Edited for clarity by: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D., January 2013 and January 2014

(00:00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

Avis Vessey comments at times during recording. Identified: AVIS

(noise throughout: birds and cicadas, later lawn service – interview takes place on porch)

TS: Today is Thursday, 23 August 2012, and this is another interview of our series with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. Today once again we're at the Vessey home on the outskirts of Garrison, Minnesota.

General Vessey, may I ask you if there's anything you want to add before we start today?

JV: I have some things to add, but they've frankly slipped my mind today, Tom.

TS: Very good. Let me pose a question then and as a way to segue from Southeast Asia to this period between 1973 and '76 let me ask you to summarize how you felt about the situation in Southeast Asia when you departed, after the Laotian cease fire of February 1973. I guess to develop this, let me ask you to pick an adjective or two that describes how you felt.

JV: About Laos itself I felt as though we had accomplished the goals we had set out. Yet the nature of the cease fire was, I don't want to use the word scary; it's not the word. But it looked to be one where we had given up more than we should have, I think, in the cease fire. And of course knowing that Laos itself was only a minor sort of pawn in the whole Southeast Asian equation, the big question was what would happen in Vietnam. Clearly in '73 when we left the situation in South Vietnam was chary to say the least.

My very good friend, John Murray, had been sent over there to head the delegation to provide support to the Vietnamese forces, and I had been in some communication with John and he was concerned about the set up that we had. Of course support for Southeast Asia, for the nations that had been fighting on our side, was diminished considerably in this country. The anti-war movement was still at full strength and even a bit more vociferous, at least it seemed to me.

TS: This anti-war movement, how would you describe how you felt about that, since you brought it up?

JV: It was a legitimate political activity for the United States. Back to what had happened since World War II. World War II, we went to war in what I would call the traditional fashion, although one could make an argument that that's not the case. But at any rate, the

President had asked the congress for a declaration of war and the congress declared war. The nation mobilized with a reasonably clear objective, although the debate was clearly there about the objectives and it wasn't unanimous in this country. But once we had gone to war it was certainly a bipartisan effort to support the war.

After World War II, with the so-called Korean police action, with no declaration of war, and then the Tonkin Gulf incident¹ and again no declaration of war, and again the administration moving and then asking for congressional support, created a different atmosphere in the country for supporting the military operation that the country was involved in. What's right or wrong, I don't know, but it's what happened.

TS: As a member of the United States military though, to what extent did you feel bitter perhaps that this protest was becoming an active part of our debate of participation in Southeast Asia?

JV: I didn't feel bitter but annoyed and disgusted at times with the way things went on both sides. Jane Fonda² going to North Vietnam and sitting on the seat of an anti-aircraft gun disgusted me. But the incident at Kent State [University, Ohio], where we shot [and killed four] students, disgusted me just as much.

(07:15)

TS: May 4, 1970.

JV: I remember in these years that we're about to talk about being at Fort Carson. We were trying to get community agreement to expand the reservation at Fort Carson. This expansion we wanted to undertake affected the community of Pueblo, Colorado primarily. I went to Pueblo many times to meet with the citizens. I remember a woman standing up and accusing me, she said I think something like, "You sent all those boys to Vietnam to be killed." And I explained to her, "Madam, I wasn't a sender, I was a sendee. (*chuckles*) And in my view we the people, including you and the other citizens of the country, sent us and we went to do what we believed was your bidding." Needless to say we didn't come to any agreement.

TS: It sounds like it. But you were the commanding general so therefore you were the point person for this.

JV: Yes. Right. She wasn't going to support the expansion of Fort Carson under any circumstances because of what had happened in Vietnam. But those are debates that the country will always have of how we provide for the common defense.

¹ Gulf of Tonkin incident: two separate confrontations involving U.S. and North Vietnamese military forces, in August 1964 in the Gulf of Tonkin. The outcome led to the passage of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which served as President Johnson's legal justification for deploying U.S. forces against North Vietnam.

² Jane Fonda (b. 1937); U.S. actress and political activist. Fonda participated in anti-war protests, and in 1972 made a public visit to North Vietnam.

TS: When you depart Southeast Asia of course the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam will last until 1975, so you will observe this from outside the region. Indeed you'll do this beginning in Washington. Your Joint Chiefs biography has the line, this entry in 1973-74, you were "Director of Operations, Office Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, in Washington, D.C." It's a Pentagon position again.

JV: Yes.

TS: So you know your way around the Pentagon, as it were. This isn't the first time you've been there.

JV: No, not the first time, but the first time in a position of some authority or much greater responsibility than I had the previous time.

TS: You're a brigadier general at this time?

JV: Yes.

TS: For the lay person, if you could explain the duties of the Office, Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans.

JV: (*chuckles*) I'm tempted to give you a funny answer. There's no point in my telling you, because you won't understand it.

TS: It's an awful long title and I figured there must be something behind it.

JV: It's splitting up the duties of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. You just listen to the titles, Operations and Plans. So that particular office devises the Army's chunk of the strategic plans for the United States. And then it also is the day to day – I want to say supervisor, operator, but it doesn't do that – that's done through the commanders. But it's the Chief of Staff's eyes on operations of the Army, and support to civil authorities, for example, falls into that particular office.

I had a group of people who operated the Army Operation Center twenty-four hours a day. Part of it was to keep track of what's going on in the Army throughout the world, the deployed Army. But the other part of it is to respond to civil authorities that need military assistance, and in those days all military assistance came through the Army. So military assistance to civil authorities fell into my responsibilities at that time. The other part of the job was to make the force structure of the Army and the budget of the Army coincide.

TS: So there's a financial piece to this job.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: More than a personnel piece?

JV: All of the above. Thirty percent of the budget is manpower, so it's fitting the size of the Army, what we'll do with the... Congress will authorize so much manpower, and how we produce the most combat power out of that is the work of the Army staff. And the Director of Operations, his job in those days was making sure that the two fit and that meant working with the people in the Army who devise the force structure, and the budgeteers.

TS: So the Director of Operations would listen to people describing their programs or their systems or their personnel and have to make decisions about whether to fund or fully fund or partially fund?

JV: Or make recommendations. Eventually the Chief of Staff of the Army would decide what to do. So it was a new job with a new range of responsibilities which I was only modestly prepared to take on, I must say.

TS: Let me pick up on that. First I guess, so we have a clear understanding of your specific duties, what did an average work week look like? I mean in the past you've had jobs where you were out of the office more than you were in. You had field positions. What do you do in an average week here?

JV: You arrive early and stay late. As I have tried to imply, it covered a broad range of things that one had to look at, so that meant one is learning more than I already knew about how the Army's budget was put together and presented to the civil authorities and to the congress. Then the job itself – so I spent a lot of time in the office.

TS: How much of this was meeting with civil authorities, as an example?

JV: Not much. You met with congressional staffers quite frequently. The Director of Operations was not one of the principal witnesses to the congress. That usually fell to the Chief of Staff of the Army or the Vice Chief.

TS: So congressional hearings et cetera. Things like this.

JV: Yes. Right. So it was more meeting with congressional staffers and meeting with the civilian secretary to the Army and the Secretary of Defense's office.

TS: Now that's something I haven't heard you talk about much before, meeting with political figures, whether it's congressional staffers or people in the Secretary of Defense's office. How's that going for you?

JV: First, it was a new experience for me. It was interesting, because many of these people were younger than the Army staff people that were meeting with them, that is particularly on the congressional staffs. They're bright young people with Master's degrees from Harvard, Tufts, Yale, and what have you. It's dangerous to generalize, because many of these people stayed on and worked for congressional staffs for years and that was their

professional life and they did it very well. Many of them I dealt with from the days as Director of Operations through my time as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and years after that.

TS: This is their profession, like you said.

JV: Many others looked at their time on the congressional staffs as stepping stones to higher spots either in the bureaucracy or political office or something like that. For the most part loyal Americans, but they came with their own point of view.

TS: Sure. You had both university training, U.S. Army schools, you've been to countless U.S. Army schools. How did your previous training help you do you think prepare to succeed in this position?

JV: I think the Industrial College of the Armed Forces was a great experience and was more help to me than any of the others. And certainly getting a Master's Degree in business from George Washington also was a help. All of the military schools helped. But I would say the Industrial College was probably the most help. Incidentally, I've just been invited to the name changing ceremony.

TS: At the Industrial College?

JV: Right.

TS: What's it going to be changed to?

JV: It is now going to be called the Dwight D. Eisenhower School for National Security and Resource Strategy; it has a new fancy title. (*chuckles*) Anyway, Eisenhower was perhaps the most famous graduate of ICAF, so ...

TS: He was President of the United States too. You've also had a number of very diverse U.S. Army experiences that we've talked about. Which of those previous U.S. Army experiences do you think proved most helpful in adapting to this new environment and new responsibilities?

JV: I think all of the experiences helped, because you come with a picture of what the real Army is about, that is, what the business end of the Army is trying to do, and if you don't keep that in mind it's pretty easy to get overcome by the bureaucratic paper and red tape and meetings and so forth. Fortunately most of the leadership that I've been associated with has been able to remember what they're about when they're dealing with the budgets. **(21:10)**

TS: So it's a balance between field experience and also this mix of bureaucratic experience, knowing how to work your way around the Pentagon?

JV: And you have to remember that somewhere out there, as a result of what you're doing, some private in the U.S. Army is going to be affected by this. Not only that, but the defense

of the United States is going to be affected by what you're doing. So if you don't keep those things in mind it goes askew.

TS: Should one conclude from that that one could stay in these bureaucratic positions too long and lose sight of that, of what the Army really does on the ground?

JV: Yes, that's possible but I think that for the Army staff you need a balance of people who really know how to make the staff work in the Washington arena and also people who always remember what the end result is, what you're trying to achieve, that is the defense of the United States and the wellbeing of the men and women who have joined the armed forces of the United States to provide for the common defense.

TS: You mentioned about the Pentagon, or Washington in the beltway, however we want to refer to that, what are those qualities that allows one to be successful in that environment? Because it is a unique special environment.

JV: I don't know that I know the answer to that. *(chuckles)*

TS: What do you feel made *you* successful?

JV: *(chuckles)* I continued to ask the question, was I?

TS: And then the pushback might be, you were given jobs with increasing responsibilities up to and including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the United States, so somebody thinks that Vessey is doing good work.

JV: Yes. Or you come up and you say, was I just standing in the right place at the right time?

TS: What do you think?

JV: I don't know the answer.

TS: Let me focus on the office of Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. From your perspective, how did that office fit into the organization and mission or reorganization and mission of the United States Army by the mid-1970s?

JV: It had big responsibilities. This is the days when General Abrams took over as Chief of Staff of the Army and was trying to build the Army from what was left over from the Vietnam War. As we discussed before we'd had essentially ten years of war, close to it, and with an Army that had devoured its junior leadership. So we were short captains. We discussed it before. The Army in Europe being in a miserable condition. Abrams, as did most of the staff and the leadership of the Army, viewed our major problem as the Soviets in central Europe.

So the question came up of re-equipping the Army, that we were moving to the so-called all-volunteer force. The budgets were being drastically reduced from the war in

Vietnam. There were always superimposed other problems of the time. The Yom Kippur War³ came along and we were required to support the Israelis with equipment that was sorely needed by the United States Army at that time.

TS: Let me ask about that. The Yom Kippur War of October 1973, involving primarily Egypt and Israel. Because here's a foreign policy question of international significance and importance, and it's impacting this office and what this office does, it sounds like.

JV: Yes. But there were two points to it. One is we were learning a lot about armored warfare, because it was a battle of armored warfare and it was considerably different from the fight we had been involved in in Southeast Asia. But we believed that it was close to the type of war we might be involved with, with the Soviet Union, if we were involved a war the Soviet Union. So learning the lessons, both the ground force lessons and air-ground cooperation lessons, was very important to us. But we were trying to improve the readiness of our own forces, and the weaknesses in our own forces were brought to light even more by having to provide tank power packs to Israel, tanks to Israel, from the few that we had. And the low production rates that we had for those sorts of things.

TS: The war of October 1973, what kind of discussions do you recall among people that you worked with about what this war meant for the United States Army and if the decisions, the way they were impacting the U.S. Army, were appropriate ones?

JV: I remember going to see General Abrams at his quarters there [at Ft Myers] about the requirement to send tank power packs, engines and transmission power packs, and us being particularly short. Of course the strategic and political decisions had already been made that we were going to do it.

TS: So the Chairman had that decision and essentially you knew it then too.

JV: And the Chief of Staff of the Army said, "You have to do it. There's no question. So we will go ahead and reduce our own readiness to supply Israel with that equipment." And we did. We also sent observers to the fight, to learn as much as we could about the fight.

TS: The Egyptians were equipped with a lot of Soviet hardware, right?

JV: Yes.

TS: So there was the ability to compare, observe and see them.

JV: Yes. Right.

³ Yom Kippur War: also known as Fourth Arab-Israeli War; fought by a coalition of Arab states led by Egypt and Syria against Israel, from 6 - 25 October 1973.

TS: When you went to see General Abrams, was that to lobby for a particular position? Or what did you want to ask him about with regards to this?

JV: I wanted to explain the cost of our complying with the order that we had received to provide X number of tank power packs to Israel, and what the impact would be on the readiness of the U.S. Army by doing that.

TS: Were you lobbying openly or another way for an alternative solution or delay on this?

JV: The only alternative solution was not sending as many as we were ordered to send.

TS: Did you make that argument?

JV: I made the argument, pointing out what it would do to our own readiness, which is the impact and the only argument for not doing it that we had.

TS: How did General Abrams respond as you remember it?

JV: He said, "We have no choice."

TS: Pretty short conversation it sounds like.

JV: Right. It was a short conversation.

TS: The United States Army is changing and responding at this time to a number of events, crises. The changing political and economic climate of post-1973, just some background so we have this. The oil crisis, Watergate, again the war in the Middle East that we just described, the Southeast Asia situation is not getting any better from our perspective, and the U.S. ties to a number of military dictatorships in Latin America, whether it's Chile, Brazil, Argentina or Uruguay.

JV: Paraguay also.

TS: [Alfredo] Stroessner.⁴ He'd been around forever, right.

JV: Right.

TS: So how is the U.S. Army responding to, or as an actor in the time of change and multiple crises, how do you see that?

JV: It was the world we lived in. But fortunately at that time the primary goal in the Abrams period as Chief of Staff was rebuilding the Army and modernizing it to face the Soviet Union in central Europe. That meant a major restructuring of the Army. I've forgotten the

⁴ Alfredo Stroessner (1912-2006); Paraguayan military officer who served as President of Paraguay, 1954-89.

number of divisions that we had on active duty at that time, but it was a sizeable number. But we were being reduced to an army of 750,000 or 770,000 I think it was. In the past the models that the Army had said that was an Army that would support ten active Army divisions. Abrams wanted fifteen active Army divisions. So we worked with a plan to integrate the active Army and the reserve components more closely than they'd ever been before, and we had a plan that we called Round Out.

We had active Army divisions with two active brigades and then it was to be filled out, rounded out, with a National Guard brigade. Part of my duties as the Director of Operations, I was the Army staff guy on the Army Reserve Forces Policy Board. I remember that one of my duties was to explain the Round Out concept to the Reserve Forces Policy Board.

That was an interesting experience. I remember the meeting very well. I had to brief the Round Out concept to this group, primarily adjutant generals of states and senior Army reserve officers from various districts. A fellow named John Baker, who was no longer the adjutant general of New York, but he was Governor [Nelson] Rockefeller's⁵ military advisor. He had been the adjutant general for many years. I had some charts and explained how we would round out these active divisions with the National Guard brigades and have a close tie between the active divisions and the National Guard brigades and assistance from the active Army to the National Guard brigades. I thought it was a pretty good brief. *(chuckles)* At the end of my briefing John Baker was the first questioner. At the briefing I wore a summer shirt at the time. I was a brigadier at the time. John Baker I guess was the senior National Guard officer in the United States, a major general forever.

Baker got up and said, "General, I don't know who you are or what your background is or where you came from, but you don't know a damn thing about the National Guard." *(chuckles)* Fortunately it was about lunch time and we had lunch, and then I went to my office and I got my blouse and my jacket, which had my World War II combat division insignia on the right shoulder which was the 34th Minnesota National Guard Division. And I came back and explained to General Baker that in fact I knew a little bit about the National Guard, that I had spent three years fighting with a National Guard division in World War II and been commissioned from a National Guard Division. So he and I later on became reasonably decent friends, and he respected the opinion and eventually became a great supporter of the Round Out concept.

(38:20)

TS: That speaks to your personnel skills of finding a way to communicate to this person, not in a confrontational way but in building some kind of relationship. Because you could have called him out, right?

JV: *(chuckles)* And I really wanted to. *(laughter both)*

TS: That's consistently what I've heard is your way of building, as opposed to confronting or conflicting. You brought this person on as an ally and as someone you could work with as opposed to simply making him sit down in a chair.

⁵ Nelson Rockefeller (1908-79); U.S. businessman and politician. Governor of New York, 1959-73; Vice President of the United States, 1974-77.

JV: Yes. I needed to. If I didn't have John Baker on the side of this thing we weren't going to get support from the National Guard Bureau or from the Army Reserve Forces Policy Council. So my job was to get these guys on our side, because General Abrams had already approved the concept and believed that it was what we needed to do.

TS: So it was going to happen.

JV: Well, it wasn't going to happen if we didn't get them.

TS: Is it buy-in? Is that the word?

JV: Yes. We had to have the support of the people that were going to do it or it wasn't going to work.

TS: And how did that program play out? You've described it.

JV: It worked very well. It didn't get implemented exactly the way we had hoped it would, but by and large it played out very well. It helped the National Guard get modern equipment, for example, for these brigades. They got equipment that was consistent with the equipment of the Regular Army divisions that they were a part of. They got support from the Regular Army divisions, varying depending on division commanders and how they did it, but most of them got good support and it was very popular with the National Guard. There were questions at the beginning.

TS: It's new and different, right?

JV: Yes. It was new and different, and the question, is the active Army trying to take over the National Guard? We want our own distinctive status as well as being a part of the Army.

TS: So there was an identity component to how they felt really, of sensing was the U.S. Army trying to reach in and....

JV: Yes.

TS: Okay. I hadn't thought about that.

JV: Our original idea was to station a good number of Regular Army officers and enlisted people with those National Guard brigades, to help them train, and put them in positions in the National Guard divisions or brigades. Unfortunately it turned out to be unpopular with both the Guard and the Regular Army.

The Regular Army guys that got sent out to do it thought they were being pushed off into nowhere. Particularly for NCOs. If they had stayed with the Regular Army part of the division they probably would have had quarters on the post – and the commissary was

close by and the Post Exchange was close by and the military hospital was close by for families and so forth. But if they're in Brainerd, Minnesota, with the 194th Tank Battalion ...

TS: Good example. Then you're in Brainerd.

JV: Right. You're in Brainerd, and the closest commissary is Grand Forks [North Dakota,] and the closest military hospital is I think Grand Forks. And the Guard people looked on them as interlopers; that is, they're here to do something that we know how to do ourselves. Rightfully. So eventually it evolved into what has become known as the Active Guard Reserve Force. These are full time positions taken actually by guardsmen who stay on full time to increase the readiness of the guard unit. But it turned out it's probably a better solution than the one we had proposed in the first place. But anyway, it worked out well in most cases and I must say it had opposition in the Guard and in the active Army all along. Later on I commanded a division at Fort Carson and I had a Round Out brigade, and we had just a bang up relationship with them.

TS: So by that time it had proven itself to the point where you saw it as favorable.

JV: I'd had the opportunity to help make it work.

TS: When you took this job, was this a one year position or was this something that you didn't know how long you were going to be in this position?

JV: No, no. I didn't have any idea. I expected it to be probably three years or so.

TS: In the past in the Pentagon you had stayed longer than this at several tours.

JV: Yes.

TS: What would you say is your proudest accomplishment or proudest accomplishments during this year you spent here?

JV: I don't know if I had anything to be proud of, but it was an exciting time to be there because of what was going on with the leadership of General Abrams and Fred Weyand, who came in as the Vice Chief.

TS: What made General Abrams a particularly effective leader?

JV: He was one of those soldiers who, when he was at the top, never lost the perspective of the soldier at the bottom. He had a good strategic sense. He'd been around long enough; he didn't have a pompous bone in his body. Whatever he did he was interested in improving the Army.

TS: It sounds like you respected the uniform as well as the man.

JV: Yes. Great talent. He was able to convince Jim Schlesinger,⁶ who was then the Secretary of Defense, to go along with this idea of having the fifteen division active Army with the manpower that all the experts, both in congress and in the office of the Secretary of Defense and in the Army, said would only support a ten division active Army. Find ways to integrate the active force and the reserve component force to make the fifteen division active force work.

TS: What would you identify as a challenge during this time that you felt, when you left this job, was still a challenge that became the responsibility of your successor?

JV: The whole business of the all-volunteer force or the recruited force at the end of compulsory military service. That was clearly the biggest challenge. The second was the challenge of building an Army that really looked like it could face up to the Soviet Union. You have to look at the whole picture of the world at that time. At that time the Soviets had continued to build up both their nuclear force and their conventional force in Europe. They were dabbling in the European politics. You saw more and more socialist governments with sort of wavering support for NATO at that time. So the United States had a great responsibility to show more strength than we had shown certainly in NATO. Or face up to the fact that the Soviet Union was going to have far more influence in Europe than we would like to have it have.

TS: Was morale a challenge? I ask that with respect to reduced funding, reduced size, the deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia.

JV: Morale in the Army itself was a problem, because of reduced funding. We had reduced the number of people in the Army drastically and we got rid of a lot of good people. Then for the junior leadership, moving to this so-called all-volunteer force was a real challenge. We didn't know how to recruit good soldiers at that time.

TS: I was going to ask you about that later, but let me bring that up about this all-volunteer Army now. The impact of, as you said it, having to recruit people. How much of an earthquake is that for the United States Army?

JV: First it means developing a recruiting force – we hadn't had to do that before. We did have recruiting offices around the country, but paying attention to who was doing the recruiting. Basically during the draft years the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps all had recruiting offices. We didn't have to work very hard, because we knew we'd fill it up with the draftees. We'd fill the Army with draftees anyway. The Air Force and the Navy had it a little easier, because they could tell these potential recruits, "Hey, if you're smart enough join the Air Force you won't have to be an infantryman in the Army and your chances of staying alive will be a lot better and you'll get to sleep in clean sheets at night," and so forth. So it made the services different in terms of how they approached it. The

⁶ James Schlesinger (b. 1929); U.S. public servant. Secretary of Defense, 1973-75.

smart high school graduates, most of them went to the Air Force or Navy recruiting offices and the others went to the Army and Marine Corps.

(52:30)

TS: Do you mean that? Yes?

JV: Yes.

TS: So that suggests that the Army, can we put it this way, wasn't getting the best and brightest young people?

JV: We weren't.

TS: So what does that mean for the Army?

JV: It means that your training problems are more difficult, your maintenance problems are more difficult and costly, your Army isn't as effective as you want it to be.

TS: To the change to an all recruited or all-volunteer force, does that work to the advantage of the United States Army in this respect?

JV: In the long run, yes, it did. But in the short run, because we didn't know how to recruit exactly, it didn't make much difference.

TS: How did the United States Army learn to recruit?

JV: Trial and error. And then putting some good people in charge of it.

TS: From your perspective, what was important about ensuring that the United States gets the number of people, but also good people?

JV: Explaining the attractiveness of service in the Army and having a good Army.

TS: By the mid-1970s did we have a good Army?

JV: It was okay, but it wasn't as good as it could have been.

TS: What did we need to get better at, to be able to say this is a good Army that I want you to join?

JV: Making it a good Army and then recruiting people who wanted to be soldiers. We had all sorts of advisors to tell us how to make the Army attractive. I remember putting curtains on the windows was one of the things. Well, I don't know how you were when you were a seventeen, eighteen, nineteen year old, whether you had curtains on the windows or not. (*chuckles*) It was not something that, I don't even remember whether I had curtains on the windows.

TS: So consultants came in with all kinds of suggestions.

JV: All sorts of them, right. I remember when I went out from the Director of Operations job to command the 4th Division, Pat Schroeder⁷ was a congresswoman from our district in Colorado. She badgered me incessantly to agree to have weekly rock concerts on the parade field at Fort Carson. *(chuckles)*

TS: With the rationale being....

JV: That's what the young people in the country want.

TS: How did you handle that one?

JV: We never agreed. *(laughter both)*

TS: What arguments did you provide the congresswoman?

JV: My arguments weren't necessarily very logical. It was just that, we're not going to do it.

TS: Cutting to the quick, as it were.

JV: Things like where to station the Army were questions. We looked at Alaska as a place to expand the Army, and the reason being that we want soldiers that want to hunt and fish and are interested in the out of doors. We're not looking for paper pushers to man the infantry squads or the artillery sections. So we did indeed add a couple of brigades to the force in Alaska, and it made a difference.

TS: This whole period, this one year period you're in Washington and the national backdrop is this whole ongoing Watergate investigation, which culminates on August 9, 1974 with the resignation of President Richard Nixon. How aware were you of that on a daily basis and how did it impact what you were doing?

JV: Of course it was in the headlines in Washington. I remember the day of the major disclosures and Nixon admitting that many of these things had taken place. We had a poker club that met once a month at the houses of the members of the poker club. They were principally brigadiers and major generals in the Army, including the then Judge Advocate General of the Army Larry Williams, and people I have mentioned before. Tom Dolvin, who had been my division commander in the 3rd Armored Division. I remember the utter disgust of that group in learning what had happened and how they felt they had been misled by the political leadership.

(59:20)

⁷ Patricia Schroeder (b. 1940); U.S. politician. Democratic member of House of Representatives from Colorado, 1973-97.

TS: That's a tenuous relationship because in a way...not in a way – as the United States Army you serve the Commander in Chief.

JV: Right. He's the Commander in Chief.

TS: And yet at the same time you're also a citizen of the United States with political opinions. So what's the tension there? You're sitting around talking about this. I mean, how do those discussions go?

JV: Fortunately in the United States, at least during most of my time, the Army was an apolitical organization. The Army leadership served whomever the people elected. Inherent in that is a certain trust and confidence in the wisdom of the American people that they will elect wise and ethical and loyal Americans to serve the country, and by and large that happens. In Nixon's case, Nixon was a smart guy who was in fact a pretty good president other than his almost dictatorial grasp of power and the maintenance of power and the way he used it. But having observed dictators in a number of countries, you can see a lot of parallels with exactly what Nixon did.

TS: Yes. Good analogy. This deterioration of the image of the President of the United States, what impact did that have on the United States Army did you feel?

JV: I think for the ordinary troop unit or the company commanders, battalion commanders and so forth there was little change: the Army leadership was solid. They weren't Nixon people any more than they became Ford people or Carter people. So I don't think it affected the Army. It certainly affected the leadership of the Army.

TS: Of which we could consider you at this time.

JV: Down a ways from the leadership, but shocked.

TS: When you got together with for example the group you mentioned playing cards. I mean, you're not on the job, so to speak. You're private guys playing cards. Do you talk politics? Do you express political opinions among yourselves?

JV: Not a great deal, but there was a lot of discussion about Nixon and Watergate. It was the predominant conversational subject I'd say in those days.

TS: How do you recall the tone and the content?

JV: Shock and disgust.

TS: The appearance of Gerald R. Ford as president, August 1974: do you feel that made a difference I mean from your perspective inside the United States Army?

JV: Yes. Gerald Ford had a good reputation in the Congress, and certainly his general background as a veteran,⁸ an athlete. It's the kind of guy that if you put up the pictures of the politicians at that time who wanted to be Commander in Chief, he'd probably have gotten a lot of checks.

TS: Okay. That's interesting. This position, think about career paths. Your career path has led through field units, artillery units, tours in Southeast Asia including the one in Laos where you did very different things. This position as Director of Operations, what does this mean for your career path in the United States Army?

JV: I think as we discussed before, General Abrams had told me, "You have to come to Washington, because nobody knows who you are."

TS: You've also described positions, desk jobs, as dead ends in the past too. When you saw this job you must have known the reputation that came with this particular position.

JV: Yes. Being in the office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, if you're picked for a job in that office, you're viewed as probably having potential for greater things.

TS: So you knew this wasn't a dead end job.

JV: Yes. No, no, no. It was a major general's job, and I was put in it as a brigadier. Then Don Cowles, who had earlier been my division commander in the 3rd Armored Division, was the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. He was an old Abrams team member and I think they expected that when the next promotion list came out I would be promoted. It came out and I wasn't chosen. In fact my deputy was chosen on the major general's list. I remember Don Cowles calling me in and sort of tearfully telling me that I wasn't on the promotion list. To me it wasn't that much of a concern. I thought that I had probably done pretty well by making a brigadier and if I didn't get promoted to major general it was not the end of the world for me. But both he and General Abrams assured me that they wanted me to stay on in that job, in the major general's job.

(1:07:30)

TS: I want to ask you about your family. Your family is back in Washington again.

JV: Family is back in Washington.

TS: You said you're arriving early and staying late, but you still have a private life. What's important for you this time around when you're in Washington, for you and your family?

JV: *(chuckles)* It was kind of a rough time for us because first our household goods from Southeast Asia... When I was reassigned, the orders said 'air shipment of household goods is authorized.'

⁸ President Ford served in the U.S. Navy, 1942-46, with World War II service in the Pacific on the aircraft carrier USS *Monterey* (CVL-26).

TS: Sounds pretty straightforward.

JV: The fellow who was then the head of logistics for the Army in the Pacific called me and said, "That costs an awful lot of money to do that and we're really tight on money. If you can get by without it, I'll promise you that we'll put it on the fastest possible surface shipment." So we agreed to that. So we were camped out in the place we had rented in Falls Church. Sort of a story of not checking the details. We rented this house because it was about two blocks away from the high school. Unfortunately the line between the school districts was on the end of our property line of the house that we lived in, so that the high school that our only child in school yet had to go to a high school a long ways away – even though there was a high school within easy walking distance of the house. Then the household goods got lost. I don't remember. It was a long time before they found them. I've forgotten what it was, but they finally found them sitting in a container on the dock at Da Nang [Vietnam], rain soaked. (*chuckles*)

TS: You're laughing now. I don't bet you weren't laughing then.

JV: I had spent a little money buying some gold jewelry for Avis in Laos, because gold was still \$32.00 an ounce, and there were some marvelous craftspeople in Laos that did wonderful things with jewelry. You could hardly come out of Laos without a gold bracelet. She had to pack up the stuff in Bangkok without help from me and I told her to inquire of the packer, the military people that were helping with that, where to pack the gold, what to do with that. They told her where to pack the gold and of course all the gold by the time we got the household goods, the gold jewelry was all gone. (*chuckles*) So it was one of our poorer moves.

Then it was the time of the oil crisis of course and we were urged to save energy and turn off our lights and so forth. This house we had was a fairly nice place, but it was built into a hill so that the bottom floor opened out onto the grounds below but was actually well below the grade level on the upper side. And our son David was in the bedroom on that lower floor. We had a bedroom on the upper floor, and there was a hallway from the kitchen and dining room area that led to where our bedroom was, but it also led to the stairway going downstairs.

David was out somewhere and came home fairly close to midnight and we were both in bed by the time he came home and he left a light on in the kitchen. Avis got up out of bed with me sleeping and got up to go turn off that light and then walked down that hall and the stairway is here, the hallway is here, and she hit the stairway instead of the hallway and went down the stairs and crushed her wrist and broke her pelvis. It was a bad evening.

David was in the room at the bottom of the stairway and he's in here playing his electric guitar with the volume turned up so he didn't even hear what happened and I was asleep. I finally woke up and realized that she wasn't there and went and looked and found her at the bottom of the stairs and called the ambulance. We had just barely moved into the place. The ambulance driver asked me where I wanted to take her. "Where's your hospital?" I said, "Really the Fort Myer dispensary." He said, "Buddy, your wife is hurt real bad. She needs to get someplace where there's a real doctor right now." (*chuckles*) So we

took her to the Arlington Hospital and before the night was over the question was whether or not I had pushed her.

TS: Really?

JV: Oh, yes. I spent a good part of the night with the police investigators trying to assure them that this had not been a domestic dispute.

TS: But that was one of their lines of questioning?

JV: Oh, yes. So we didn't get off to a real good start in that place.

TS: Is Washington still a city that you enjoy being in? Because it has been in the past. You've said good things about it.

JV: This was a little difficult for us because where we lived and getting back and forth, although I think in the long run we eventually enjoyed it. Sarah was in college in Minnesota and David was still in high school and John had just finished the University [of Maryland] in College Park. He eventually came and lived with us for a while. He had applied for the Foreign Service and had not yet been accepted. So we eventually got it worked out and I think we enjoyed it. We had a good church home there close by, at St. Paul's Lutheran in Falls Church.

TS: A church you knew from previous times in Washington, right?

JV: No. We knew of it, but we had never been there. Gerald Kuhn was the pastor, former Navy Marine chaplain. There were a number of other military people in the congregation. So eventually we enjoyed it, but it's a little costlier than living on the post so we were hoping to get quarters on the post. We eventually got quarters on the post, but by the time we moved into that house on the post and I brought Avis to Minnesota and by the time I got back I had orders to leave and go to Fort Carson. (*chuckles*)

TS: How unexpected were the orders to leave Washington and go to Fort Carson?

JV: As I said, I expected to stay in that other job probably three years. So it came up and of course I was delighted. And the new promotion board had done its job and I had been selected for major general anyway.

TS: The job of the 4th Infantry Division Mechanized at Fort Carson, was that a major general's position?

JV: Yes.

TS: Your response a moment ago was you were delighted about this position, so can I interpret that you saw this as a positive move in your career path?

JV: I don't know whether I saw it as a positive move in my career path, but I saw it as something I really wanted to do.

TS: It's a very different type of job. You're going from the bureaucratic environs of the Pentagon to a combat unit. You saw this as something you very much wanted to do.

JV: Sure. I'd spent most of my military career in combat divisions. When I wasn't there I wished I were there.

TS: I take it people knew this about you, right? If people knew you they knew that you felt that way?

JV: Oh, I'm sure. In fact there's a great story in one of Lew Sorley's books about Creighton Abrams, that he was dying of cancer at this particular time and spent a lot of time at his house rather than in the office and people would bring papers to him. Bill Livesy who was then Abrams' aide brought the potential division commanders list for him to approve. Abrams, according to both Sorley in his book and to Livesy later, said my name was not on that list and Abrams looked down and crossed off the name for the 4th Division and wrote Vessey in there and said, "He's a fighter." So that's how and that's why it happened.

TS: You respected General Abrams and so that's a compliment you could enjoy.

JV: Indeed.

TS: But nonetheless you were a bit surprised by the fact that, after just a year in Washington or about a year, you were heading back out again.

JV: And for us personally, having moved into a place that we hadn't really even lived in and she was up here in Minnesota with the kids in the old cabin on this property, and [me] telling her that hey, you've moved but you're going to have to move again. (*chuckles*)

TS: I mean you're fifty-one, fifty-two years old now. Do you get to a point where the moving gets to be just either easier because you've done it a lot or just, enough already?

JV: Both. (*chuckles*) She was certainly an expert by this time.

TS: By darn she better have been.

JV: Here's another high school that our son has to go into. Or stay with somebody in the Washington area and finish where he is. And I wasn't to report there until later in the fall. I had another month or so in Washington to complete. So it meant some way getting David into school in Colorado and getting a friend to house him until we got out there. So administratively it's sort of a pain in the neck, but it was job that I really wanted.

TS: How would you summarize what you found attractive when you heard this was the job you're going to get? What made you say oh, great?

JV: It was a mechanized division, both tanks and armored infantry. It was committed to NATO, so it was in line with the main thing that Abrams had laid out for the Army to do, and it was an attractive place. Colorado Springs is certainly considered by most people to be an attractive spot. A lot of military out there with NORAD,⁹ the Air Defense Command was there, the Air Force Academy and of course 20,000 U.S. Army soldiers.

TS: So in the fall of 1974 you're going off to Fort Carson, Colorado. Is this a convenient time to stop for lunch before we move on?

JV: It is a good time to stop for lunch.

TS: Okay. I'm going to take a pause here.

(break in recording for lunch)

interview continues, recording labelled 18-B and elapsed time set to 00:00

TS: This is Thursday, 23 August 2012. This is the afternoon session of our interview with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor.

General Vessey, this afternoon in a sense we want to travel to Fort Carson, Colorado. Again from your Joint Chiefs of Staff biography it says, "1974-75, Commanding General, 4th Infantry Division Mechanized, Fort Carson, Colorado." As I look at the history of the 4th Infantry Division, I notice that that division had played a significant role for an extended period during the Vietnam conflict. How would you describe the changed role or the changed responsibilities of that unit in the post-Vietnam environment?

JV: First it was converted to a mechanized division from a straight infantry division, and committed to NATO. So its principle battlefield objective was fighting Soviet armored forces in central Europe or wherever else the country decided to send it. But that was its basic commitment. That was what it was to be trained for.

TS: For the lay person, what is a mechanized infantry division?

JV: The U.S. Army had two types of heavy divisions: one was armored divisions, which had historically been named armored divisions, and their principle combat forces were tank battalions and armored infantry battalions. Mechanized divisions were the same thing. Their principle fighting outfits were tank battalions and armored infantry battalions. The

⁹ NORAD: North American Aerospace Defense Command. A combined U.S. – Canadian organization for aerospace warning and defense for North America.

armored divisions were a product of World War II and there were specifically numbered armored divisions. I've forgotten how many armored divisions we had.

TS: As an example, wasn't General Patton¹⁰ with the 3rd Armored Division?

JV: The 3rd, the 4th, the 1st, the 2nd. I'm sure we had up to eight at least, eight or nine armored divisions. The only difference between mechanized divisions and armored divisions were first their lineage. Those that weren't armored divisions had been infantry divisions beforehand and became heavier and heavier and thus hence called mechanized divisions. And to make sure that we had a difference between armored divisions and mechanized divisions, in the armored divisions it had more tank battalions that it had mechanized infantry battalions, and the mechanized divisions had more mechanized infantry battalions than it had tank battalions. So it varied from division to division, but basically was about three tank to two infantry for the armored divisions and three mechanized infantry to two tank for the mechanized division.

TS: At this time, in the mid-1970s, on paper what kind of manpower are we talking about? How many men are in this particular division?

JV: Full strength it would be about 15,000.

TS: Was it full strength at this time?

JV: The 4th Division was a Round Out division, that we talked about earlier. It had one brigade that was a National Guard brigade that was to be assigned in war time and mobilization time assigned to the 4th Division. But it was not under my command at that time because it was a National Guard brigade on inactive duty. But I had the duty of helping train it, and then it trained at Fort Carson when it had its annual training. We assisted it with its gunnery and maintenance and that sort of thing. In effect [it] would have been my 3rd brigade in time of war.

TS: So it sounds like the everyday manpower of this unit on post was the two brigades with the one being the Round Out.

(05:50)

JV: Right. And the division was augmented a little bit with extra aviation, because we were at Fort Carson which was the closest post to major mountains that the Army had in the continental [US], or in the lower forty-eight at least. So we had the mountain aviation training responsibility and a few extra things. Then we also had a few things that were the Army's attempt to take part in the Olympics with, for example we had the Army's biathlon team, which was basically the U.S. Olympic biathlon team, although civilians could apply and try to get on the team. But we had a team that trained all the time.

¹⁰ George S. Patton (1885-1945); U.S. Army general. Commanded several armies in Europe during World War II.

TS: Right. And they were headquartered at Fort Carson as well.

JV: They were part of the 4th Division.

TS: When we talk about the technology that a unit like this uses in the mid-1970s, how much of the technology, the tanks or the artillery or the other mechanized pieces, is World War II era stuff and how much of this stuff really has nothing to do, technologically, with those older generations?

JV: First the organization of the division was a triangular division, which was similar to the World War II division and of course had been modified through the years to keep up with technology. The tanks were the second generation after World War II, second generation medium tank or main battle tank really after World War II. The artillery was all post-World War II, but the cannons were similar to World War II. They were self-propelled, being a mechanized division.

TS: Are these 105 and 155 guns that you would recognize as an artilleryman?

JV: In the mechanized divisions committed to NATO¹¹ it was 155 for the direct support battalions and self-propelled eight inch howitzers for the general support.

TS: As an artillery man, how familiar were you with those guns? Are they something that you could, with your past in artillery, get a handle on and use very quickly, or was this something that was a new generation?

JV: No, it was not a new generation. We had essentially the same guns in Vietnam that we had in the 4th Mech. In Vietnam the 105 was the basic direct support battalion. For a while I commanded a battalion of the 4th Division in Vietnam. Same outfit, but it was a towed 105. By the time I got to the 4th Division that battalion had self-propelled 155s.

TS: As you looked at this equipment in the mid-1970s, and with the idea that the Soviet Union in Europe is essentially the opponent that we're planning for, is our equipment up to date or are we behind?

JV: We had good equipment. The M-60 tank was a good main battle tank, but the Soviets were producing better armored and better gunned tanks than we had. So we knew that if we were to fight the Soviets with the M-60 tank we had to be very good with that tank. But this is about the time that we had a new set of equipment on the drawing boards, that is, was in the research and development and testing stage. The Abrams, it was called the M-1 tank and eventually was called the Abrams tank, was on the boards and in the development stage at that time, as was the Bradley fighting vehicle to replace the model 113 infantry fighting vehicle. So we had new equipment that was on the drawing boards, but not in the hands of the troops.

¹¹ NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

TS: Were those vehicles, those pieces of equipment you mentioned, the Abrams tank, the Bradley fighting vehicle, would those have put us as you saw it level with the Soviet Union or would that have put us a step ahead?

JV: A step ahead.

TS: Did you see either of those weapons by the time you left the 4th Infantry Division?

JV: No. Years later when I was Vice Chief of the Army it became one of my major objectives to get those vehicles into production and get the cost growth down to budget size.

TS: I've heard you talk about budgets already. Being able to develop systems is one thing and paying for them is something completely different.

JV: Yes.

(13:00)

TS: When you received your orders for this command, how did you understand your orders? Was there a set of things you were tasked to do in this new position other than just run it?

JV: Produce a ready fighting division – that was the goal. To be able to be shipped to NATO on time. We would be in the schedule for NATO exercises. That is, we would deploy to Europe. That didn't happen during any of my time there.

TS: Did you find that type of unit when you arrived there or was this something that you needed to develop?

JV: The 4th Division was just being rebuilt from the Vietnam War. It had been reactivated. I think that it was on its second commander after the Vietnam when I got there. A fellow named Jim Hamlet,¹² a very capable officer who later became Inspector General of the Army was commanding, and I relieved him.

TS: Did you know General Hamlet ahead of time?

JV: I did not. I knew of him, but I didn't know him beforehand.

TS: During a change of command like this, which in the United States Army happens with some regularity just from your own examples, how common is it that the incoming commander, in this case you, meets or spends time with the outgoing commander in order to ascertain where the division is and what needs to take place?

¹² James F. Hamlet (b. 1921); U.S. Army major general. Commanding General of 4th Infantry Division, 1972-74.

JV: It all depends on what the old fellow is going to do for his next job, whether he's already gone or is still there, and it depends on what the new fellow is doing and whether he can get there in time to actually relieve the old commander physically. There's no set pattern. I've had it happen each way. In the case of Jim Hamlet, he had already left so he and I didn't get to talk about the division. I inherited his staff.

TS: Was it common at the time in the United States Army for an incoming commander to be briefed by his superiors or by someone else about the state of a unit?

JV: Yes.

TS: So what did you know about this unit before you arrived?

JV: That it was one of the divisions that was being rebuilt and that it had a reasonably good record, but had work to do to meet the readiness standards of the Army.

TS: So what I heard there is, it's in good shape but it could be better.

JV: It was not inhibited by lack of room for improvement, (*chuckles*) and that's probably the case with every outfit in the Army.

TS: Well, what were the areas as you kind of drew a picture for yourself of this unit? One of your emphases in the past has been training and team building and I've heard you talk about that a number of stops along the way. What did you come into this unit thinking that you wanted to get done?

JV: I wanted a division that was ready to be deployed to Europe, to fight, and a division that would attract soldierly volunteers too.

TS: That's the kind of way you guys talked around the office, wasn't it? What kind of volunteers do you need? I need some soldierly volunteers around here. (*laughter both*)

JV: The Army itself needed soldierly volunteers. We were just in the midst of battling this all-volunteer Army, and the influx of more women too was also imposed on us at the time.

TS: Let me pick on those one at a time then. Your choice of verbs there: battling the all-volunteer force suggests that this is posing a set of challenges.

JV: Indeed. We had to create an Army that attracted not only people to come in, but people to stay. We wanted noncommissioned officers with experience, so we wanted to reenlist a goodly portion of the people who enlisted once. Not everybody certainly, [and] there were two reasons. One is for readiness and the second is for cost. The drafted compulsory military service is an easy way to get the manpower.

TS: You can scoop them up and here, you've got them.

JV: But it is a costly way to maintain an Army.

(19:30)

TS: A skeptic might say hey, look, here you've got these people. You don't need to pay them very much because you've drafted them. Where's the cost?

JV: The cost is in the turnover. First you have to train them, so that means a large training base. It means you turn over forty percent of the Army every two years or something like that. Whatever the number happens to be; I'm not sure. So that means you need a number of training centers to take these people in, give them their basic training or advanced individual training, and then get them out to the unit and then build teams out of them. Well, by the time you have the team built, his two years of service is up and he's gone and you do it all over again. So it's the cost of training.

Then it's the experience level. He's around for two years. You've got him on this M-60 tank, with a huge diesel engine. You're operating under dusty conditions, straining that tank engine. You need it maintained properly. It takes some skill to do that. You say all it needs is clean oil, clean air and clean fuel and it's maintained. That's true – but doing that takes somebody who knows where the nuts and bolts are to get the air cleaner out every day and how to clean it and how to reinstall it correctly and so forth. So the cost in maintenance for the Army that's drafted for a two year service period goes up considerably over the volunteer force or the recruited force or whatever you want to call it, because you keep the people longer and they know the job better and do it better.

TS: How did you feel the impact of this? Now we're one, two years into this all recruited force by 1974-75 – how were you feeling or seeing this on the ground as a commander?

JV: First is the general sort of edicts that we had on what we were to provide for individual soldiers. It's one of the evils of big bureaucracies I guess that somebody in Washington decides what a soldier ought to have, what sort of living conditions he ought to have and so forth. These barracks, the barracks at Fort Carson, were of two styles. One was World War II barracks. We still had some World War II wooden barracks.

TS: That's the origin of this post, right?

JV: Right. And the second was some post World War II barracks, that were built in the '50s probably. It is an Army that, the squad lived in a squad room. Most of the soldiers were unmarried. So most of the soldiers lived in the barracks and they lived in a squad room, which meant eight or ten men living in the same room and shared latrines and shower rooms and so forth. Every company battery troop probably had one or two barracks, and that meant that one or two shower rooms with maybe forty, fifty showers in the shower room and latrines with maybe twelve toilet stools lined up in a row with no cubicles separating them. It was communal living, to say the least.

TS: From the definition it sounds like.

JV: Not much different from the Army that I joined, where we shaved in one big metal sink that ran down the length of the washroom and had a series of spigots there so that each man that was washing could have his own spigot, but all the water drained down the same drain. Now we're suddenly told by the experts in Washington that modern day soldiers don't want this. They want more privacy, so we should put up cubicles, stalls around the toilet seats for example, and it would be better to divide up the squad rooms into rooms. Maybe they want curtains on the windows, so we should get some curtains to put on the windows and we should make the mess hall look more like grandma's kitchen. *(chuckles)*

TS: You're laughing now. Were you rolling your eyes then?

JV: Indeed. *(chuckles)* And we recruited people, we enticed them into joining the Army for reasons that had little to do with soldiering.

TS: How was the Army pitched? Or how did the Army think it needed to pitch itself to people?

JV: I'm not sure that I'm a good one to answer that question, but it's obviously stressing the benefits, the help with education. "See the world"¹³ and what have you.

TS: I recall from the 1970s seeing adverts on television for the Navy stressing exactly that. 'Join the Navy, see the world' I think in fact was the pitch. I remember thinking even then, not everybody who joins the Navy is going to have this great time romping in ports around the world. And what that suggested and suggests now is a set of unrealistic expectations, and when you as the commanding general get troops at your post, they have expectations of what the Army is going to be for them.

JV: Right. And your job is to convince them that that needs to be slid into the background a little bit, and you need to understand that there's a thing called marksmanship and physical training and discipline, law and order. *(chuckles)*

(27:00)

TS: How much of a challenge was all that?

JV: It's a real challenge. I recall an incident that happened. It wasn't early and necessarily very early in my time at the 4th Division, but it was fairly early. The stress for the Army, and for me personally but also for the Army in general, was readiness, that is you didn't quit any day. If you had a piece of equipment that was supposed to be ready to go, you got it ready before you quit for that day unless there was some reason, you needed a part that was not available or something like that.

So when the tank battalions came in from training on the range, the idea was to get the tank ready to go. If we had to put it on a flatcar and take it Europe or if we had to go out and train the next day, the tank should be ready. I was cruising the tank parks late in the afternoon after some of the battalions had been out either firing or maneuvering or

¹³ Reference to "Join the Navy and See the World," a long-time recruiting slogan of the U.S. Navy.

something, and a tank crew was working on its tank and the first thing that impressed me was that there was a lack of leadership. I didn't find anybody above the rank of corporal out there in the tank park and that annoyed me a little bit. Then I stopped to talk to some of the tankers .

TS: They knew who you were, the commanding general.

JV: Oh, yes. And tried to impress on them my thanks for them getting their tank ready and so forth and how it was important to be ready to fight and a soldier said, "I didn't join the Army to fight. I'm not going to fight anybody."

TS: He said that to you?!

JV: Yes.

TS: Just to make sure I got it: you're in uniform and he knows who you are.

JV: Oh, yes. Well, (*chuckles*) I had the sergeant major with me and I turned to the sergeant major and I said, "I want him out of the Army and off the post by midnight." It wasn't quite administratively possible to do that, but we got him out the next day. It was probably a rash action on my part. On the other hand it got the point across to them, to the outfit in general that hey, this guy is serious about what we're about. And I explained it to him and to the other soldiers. "You did in fact join the Army to fight. That's the reason for the Army, is to fight the nation's battles if there are any. We pray that there won't be any but if there are, that's our job and that's the most important thing we can do is be ready to do that. Not only to protect the country but to protect each other, protect you and you and you if you help each other. Stay alive." And I announced that we didn't need him. I asked him if he was really serious because, I said, "If you're serious about this, we don't want you in the Army." He said he was serious, and so it took a little finagling with Washington but eventually the Army changed its general policy and gave commanders the authority to issue summary discharges to people who were recruited inappropriately or unwilling to serve. Anyway, it was sort of the first test case for the Army I think.

TS: You've been in the Army a long time. Had you ever heard something like that before?

JV: No. That was the first time I heard that.

TS: What is that? Should we read into that that this is some kind of byproduct of what's going on with the Army and its soldiers?

JV: I'm sure that that particular incident was an anomaly. On the other hand, when you hear that it's time to ask your question, how do we recruit, what do we recruit for, what do we tell our people that we're recruiting, who does the recruiting, and how do they do it and how much do we hold the recruiters responsible for the conduct of the people that they recruit?

TS: Was the United States Army having those conversations in a serious enough fashion in your opinion at that time?

JV: We were just beginning to understand what the issues were. Before, we scooped up the manpower. If it didn't pass the test, out.

TS: And you scooped some more up.

JV: Yes.

TS: So in a sense you were always assured of having enough soldiers. You just may have to scoop a number of times.

JV: Right. Take another scoop.

TS: It sounds like that's not a mistake that one can afford to make institutionally, because it costs money.

JV: Yes. Right. Money to recruit, money to train and so forth.

TS: In other words, the Army needed to get it right on the front end before they take these people in.

JV: Exactly.

TS: As I'm hearing you say, that had to be learned.

JV: Yes.

TS: The second thing I wanted to pick up on, you said a few moments ago when you talked about women in service, and your choice of verb was 'imposed'. This was imposed on the Army. I'll let you develop that thought a little more.

JV: I probably misused the term, because I'm sure the Army accepted the idea, but that was part of the manpower authorization or the human power authorization was a certain percentage of women. Up until that time all of the women were in the so-called Women's Army Corps and, for example, we had a WAC, Women's Army Corps, barracks at Fort Carson and all the women who were in the Army at Fort Carson lived in the Women's Army Corps barracks. Most of them were in administrative positions, clerks or secretaries or medical assistants or something like that and they went to their various duties.

TS: Almost stereotypical duties, gender-wise.

JV: Yes. Right. None of them were in the combat units. I'm not sure when I arrived if we had any women in the division, but soon after that we were to integrate women into the support organization in the division, into the support command.

TS: When you say support command, just for the lay person, what does that entail?

JV: The maintenance battalion, supply battalion, the signals and engineers.

Written comments added by Gen Vessey in summer 2014: Bob Shoemaker was commander of 1st Cav Div.

TS: What about the integration of women beyond these longstanding kind of stereotypical female roles?

JV: Of course that was the challenge in those days. The positions that they could occupy were then developed by the Army itself, whether it was done in the Pentagon or [not]. Training and Doctrine command I'm sure influenced it. The Pentagon approved it. But those came about and Bernie Rogers,¹⁴ who later became Chief of Staff of the Army, was the commander of the Forces Command when I took command of the 4th Division. We had a great meeting at Forces Command of the division commanders in the Army, and Bernie was telling us how important it was to do this correctly, to integrate the women and do it right, but to do it quickly. And he wanted, he was pushing for coed barracks, which we didn't have at Fort Carson.

TS: You've described the barracks already. They weren't coed, or even set up for that quite frankly.

JV: No, no. It was a little difficult to imagine exactly how one made them coed. I remember one of the staff officers at Forces Command brought up the point that you've got one set of latrines. This guy said, "What you do is put a sign on the door and put men on one side and women on the other side. And when the women go in they turn it around so it shows women so everybody knows there's a woman in there, and then when she's done you turn it around the other way." If you've got a battalion in the barracks and a couple of latrines and a handful of women and hundreds of men that doesn't work very well. It's not at all practical and simply won't work. I voiced some pretty severe objections to those ideas and suggested that some of them were either somewhere between unworkable and nutty.

TS: What idea did you have for how this is going to happen?

JV: You need to invest in the infrastructure to make it work before you decide to do that.

TS: But the Army sounds like it's not doing that.

¹⁴ Bernard W. Rogers (1921-2008); U.S. Army general. Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, 1976-79.

JV: It hadn't at that time. We were being pushed to integrate women into the Army. So Bernie said to me, "Go down to Fort Hood. The commander of the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, he's got it worked out. He has coed barracks." So I said, "I will surely do that." I had a battalion in an exercise of some kind at Fort Hood and I thought, I'll go down there and look at my battalion in the maneuver and also look at the coed barracks. Anyway, I went down there. This fellow and I were both aviators, so we went out in a helicopter to look at the battalion and I said, "Bernie told me to look at your coed barracks." I didn't tell him in advance that I wanted to do this. I wanted to do it unannounced. So he said, "That's in the support command. We can do that. I'll radio in and we can land close to the barracks and go over there." (*chuckles*)

We did exactly as he had promised and the support command commander or his deputy met us at the helicopter. We went over to the barracks. It was like getting into a sleazy nightclub or something, because the door was locked. We knocked at the door. Pretty soon an eye came at this peephole and looked out at us and could see four stars out there. Two different guys. This woman let us in. She looked like she was a member of the Chicago Bears defensive line, in drag. (*chuckles*) She had a regular field belt on and had a military police baton on the belt and had a big ring of keys. So we went in and asked her to explain how the coed barracks worked. What they had was, half the building was for women and half was for men.

TS: How was this divided up?

JV: The men lived in one half and the women lived in the other half.

TS: There was no wall or doors?

JV: There was a wall and the door between the two was like a theater exit door with the push bar on it. But it was roped tight shut. But there was an axe there or a hatchet to chop heavy rope that was holding it closed in case of fire or something, in case of emergency that the axe was to be used. And she was explaining how actually the women felt pretty secure and that all they needed to do was, they needed a little concertina barbed wire up in the attic where men could actually get from one section to the other. Men or women could go from one to the other.

TS: It seems like a work in progress, I think we'd say.

JV: (*laughing*) So the whole thing about coed barracks was totally laughable and you could laugh while the tears came to your eyes and you tried to figure out what you were supposed to do.

TS: Where is the push coming from? How high up the food chain, to get this happening in a hurry?

JV: The push was from outside the Army at that time. That is, there was a great societal push. I'm sure we could go back into newspapers of that time and find articles about the

armed forces taking more women and the Army reluctantly moving along with this. But we didn't know how to do it. And particularly we didn't have the physical infrastructure to take care of it.

TS: Right. The barracks example you just gave is illustrative of that.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: So how did you find yourself reacting at Fort Carson in order to accommodate this change?

JV: We went a little slower.

TS: What was your plan?

JV: That we'd decide which battalions were to have women in them and then we would get architects and the engineers and draw up a plan for modernizing those barracks or making them suitable for adding women and it would take us about a year to do it. In the meantime, the women lived in separate barracks and reported to their units for the training day and trained with them.

TS: What kind of reception did you get from the people you reported to when you said, this is how I'm planning to do it?

JV: Okay. I think Bernie Rogers thought we were dragging our feet a little bit, but he had commanded Fort Carson at one time himself and he knew what the barracks conditions were. He also knew that it was impractical to do otherwise. Unless you took care of it properly you weren't going to attract any women volunteers.

TS: Here comes this recruiting question again, of thinking about that.

JV: All you're going to have is bad stories about the poor conditions that you had subjected these girls to. And certainly when you're going to have a recruited force you want parents and high school counselors and pastors on your side and you don't want them saying, don't do that.

TS: This is a public relations question as much as anything, it sounds like.

JV: Indeed.

TS: As women began to appear on your post now doing things other than admin or nursing or assistant jobs, talk about how that goes when they first start to show up.

JV: (*chuckles*) It was sort of a mixed reaction. I remember going to a parts room in the maintenance battalion and this wonderful grizzled old African American sergeant was in

charge of it and he had three or four helpers in there, all of whom were male except one. So I said, "Tell me frankly, Sergeant, what's been the impact here?"

TS: Just you and he talking now.

JV: Yes. He said, "Well, Sir, I didn't like it at first. But one thing, it's cleaned up the language. There's not all that cussin' around here that we used to have, and that's better. And frankly, she's smarter than the rest of them." (*chuckles*) So I said okay.

(49:00)

TS: You're the commanding general. You walk in and talk to the Sergeant Major with a couple of stars on your lapel. In situations like that, how much do you figure that you're getting a straight response when you ask a troop a question? I mean after all, he's not talking to one of his cohorts.

JV: By that time I'd been around the Army long enough to know whether I was getting a straight remark, a straight answer, or having the wool pulled over my eyes. I think when you ask a student I think you can tell.

TS: Yes, you got me. That question is going nowhere. Let's try another one.

Here's a job. Now you've been in the Pentagon before this, staffing a desk. I heard some long hours and spending a lot of time in your office. You're in a very different situation now. What does a typical week look like? Are you in the office a lot or are you out in the field a lot, are you meeting with soldiers a lot? What do you do?

JV: In a job like that you're in the office only enough to take care of the administration that really requires you to be there. Otherwise you've got infantry battalions, tank battalions, field artillery battalions, an engineer battalion, supply and maintenance battalion, medical battalion, signal battalion with all sorts of different training go on, and then you want them to integrate that training so that they're a team. You build an annual training schedule that pays attention to the skills that the particular units have, but also the team playing to make the division a fighting battlefield team. Exciting training of some kind going on every single day.

TS: Did you like to be present at and be observing and be part of those trainings?

JV: Yes. As much as possible.

TS: So soldiers got used to seeing you around.

JV: Yes. You've got a big outfit. You're one guy. So the individual soldier doesn't see you real often.

TS: But the commanders of these battalions would see you on a somewhat regular basis.

JV: Right. And I had a top notch crew at the 4th Division. I had Bill Livesy, who had been General Abrams' aide, as one assistant division commander, and David Grange, who was probably the best infantryman the Army has known in modern times, as my other assistant division commander.

TS: Did you pick those people yourself?

JV: No. Those two were assigned to me beforehand. Dick Schultes was the Chief of Staff; he later became commander of the Special Operations Command and Denny Reimer was a field artillery battalion commander. He became Chief of Staff of the Army. Bob Sennewald was the Div Arty commander, who later became Commander of the Forces in Korea. We had a group of future four star and three star people who were the colonels and brigadiers. So it was a great team and fun to be around and I got to, at least for a short period of time, implement many of those things I thought I had learned in lower positions and different divisions. I had served in the 4th Division once in Europe and commanded a battalion in Vietnam as part of the 4th Division.

TS: So it wasn't completely unknown to you.

JV: Right. The 4th Division, having that on my shoulder patch was not new.

TS: How well was the 4th Division functioning as a team when you arrived?

JV: Pretty well. As I say, it was in the process of building. The previous commanders had built on what they had inherited and the changing conditions of the Army, and I got the benefit of their work and plus to lay a few on the bricks on the wall myself. We tried to change the outlook – in post-Vietnam and this going to the volunteer Army weapons security, relations with the local community, discipline, law and order, those were all big things. They almost superseded ready to fight.

TS: Really? No kidding.

JV: You worked on being ready to fight, but you didn't want to lose any weapons. So when I came there those were the things that Jim Hamlet had to worry about and they were big things to worry about. When I got there one of the first things I was given was a large book on division commanders policies. It was a three ring notebook about three inches thick, with policies. It had policies addressing many of these problems, weapons security and so forth. I read them and they were all good policies. And the Chief of Staff, Dick Schulte, said, "What do you want to do with this? Do you want to renew these or what do you want to do?" So I read them and I had my first meeting with all the subordinate commanders, with the brigade commanders and the separate battalion commanders, and I said, "I've read these policies, and they're all very good. But what I'm going to do is this." And I took the book and I shoved it in the wastepaper basket.

TS: All the division policies.

JV: I said, "What I want the division policy to be is for us to train to fight the Soviets in central Europe and do that in accordance with good order of military discipline and the Uniform Code of Military Justice and Army Regulations. You don't need any extra advice from me. You already have enough written things to govern your conduct. But the one policy is that we're going to train like we fight."

TS: What do you mean by that?

JV: That's what somebody asked. (*chuckles*) And I said, "For example when you go out to train, whatever you're training at, it's part of your ability to go to war so go with the equipment that you would need to go to war for that training. For example, in here" and I picked the thing out of the basket, "here's a policy that says about carrying weapons. It had detailed policies about if you go beyond a certain line you must carry your weapon, but if you don't go beyond that line you shouldn't carry your weapon. If you're going to train on a wartime training mission, go with the weapons that you're going to fight with. Is that understood." Everybody said, "Yes, Sir."

Two days later Dave Grange and I went out to inspect a brigade operation, and the brigade commander is there. Colonel. He's got his field belt on and his pistol holster, but there's not a pistol in his holder. I addressed him by his first name and said, "Where is your pistol?"

TS: Is this in front of his troops?

JV: No, no. He said, "It's in the arms room, Sir." And I said, "Why is it in the arms room? You're out here training to go to war are you not?" He said, "The division policy was that if we did so and so and so we shouldn't have a weapon." I looked around at the troops in his headquarters company, which was in the field, and they did not in fact have their weapons. I said, "Were you not at the meeting we held and discussed this?" He said, "Yes, Sir, but I hadn't received written confirmation of that order." Again addressing him by his first name, I said, "This is a mechanized division. We go to war, we're going to routinely operate on verbal orders, fragmentary orders and you had a particular order and you have disobeyed it. So," I said, "you are hereby relieved of command."

It was kind of a shocking thing, because this guy was one of these guys who had potential Chief of Staff of the Army sort of printed across his t-shirt. He was a favorite son and of course had been chosen by the board for brigade command. So it was kind of a shocking thing to relieve him and perhaps unkind and unfair of me, but it was an important point to get across and it didn't take long for that to get across. We began to look like we were preparing to go to war very quickly after that.

TS: As a commander, how hard was it for you to make tough decisions like that? You relieved the guy of command.

JV: It's very difficult, because you know he did not make brigadier.

TS: I was going to ask about his career.

JV: I got him a job at Command General Staff College on the faculty there and he finished out his career on the faculty of Fort Leavenworth.

TS: So even though you relieved him, you also got him another position.

JV: Yes. Yes, he was a good man. Very smart guy. But didn't grasp a fundamental principle and perhaps not his fault, but it is a point that one needs to get across: we're going to prepare to go to war. Sort of like the old Bobby Knight.¹⁵ Bobby Knight was once asked if the Olympic team he was coaching had the will to win. Bobby Knight said, "Will to win? Everybody's got the will to win. The real question is, do they have the will to prepare to win?" That's the same with training for combat operations. Do you have the will to prepare?

TS: Did you, in this decision or in other cases, ever second guess yourself about decisions you made or didn't make?

JV: Oh, yes. Right. Right. And that one in particular you second guessed yourself. But frankly it was applauded, Dave Grange said to me, "Wow! We really needed that."

TS: What did he mean by that?

JV: That the division needed that point to come across, that we are preparing to go to war. As I said before, Dave Grange was probably the best infantry trainer that the Army ever had. He obviously needed reinforcement of the things that he wanted to do. I was fortunate to have Dave Grange work for me several times later on. Commanded the 2nd Division in Korea when I was Commander of the Forces in Korea.

(1:04:10)

TS: That's just a few years hence here.

JV: Yes.

TS: You mentioned earlier about the integration of National Guard units to round things out. How's that working out?

JV: The Round Out concept is no longer used. When they built up the Army for Iraq and Afghanistan.

TS: How does it work when you are here at Fort Carson?

¹⁵ Bobby Knight (b. 1940); U.S. collegiate basketball coach.

JV: It worked well. We had a Kansas National Guard brigade that was a good brigade. It was a joy to get them at Fort Carson, and they enjoyed the time there and we enjoyed having them.

TS: What did you do to ensure that it was productive, for ensuring this unit was prepared to fight?

JV: Made sure that they got the help, the best help in fact. I just turned to David Grange and said, "Make sure we get the right trainers to help this outfit." And I really didn't have to say that to Dave Grange, because he would have done it without my saying it. You had to have believers in the concept and David was a believer in that idea.

TS: Were you a believer in that idea?

JV: Indeed. I was one of the devisors, one of the guys who came up with the idea.

TS: How long did the Army implement that strategy?

JV: I was long gone. I think probably after the first Iraq war.

TS: So 1991.

JV: Yes. I think by that time the strength of the Army had been raised enough so they didn't need the Round Out brigades.

TS: That would be the military buildup of the 1980s.

JV: Yes. And the Guard itself has been rotated now through combat experience.

TS: Yes. Right. I also wanted to ask you about Fort Carson, Colorado. I mean you've been in a number of posts. You talked about Fort Sill, where you spent a number of years. Fort Carson, Colorado as I researched it, is a World War II era post. In the mid-1970s in what ways was Fort Carson, or was it perhaps not, a typical U.S. Army post of that period?

JV: It was still a fairly new permanent post for the Army, that is considering the other ones. You talk about Fort Sill or Fort Sam Houston. Those were leftover from the frontier days.

TS: Yes.

JV: So the buildings at Fort Carson were either, as I say, World War II wooden buildings or barracks that had been built in the '50s. And we weren't adding much. We had plans to replace the World War II barracks when I was there and the work had begun. But I was out there a couple years ago and wouldn't recognize it now. We did start a new hospital while I was there. The commander's house was a couple of the old World War II general officers cottages pushed together. In fact we had three of them on the grounds and a little

compound there. One called the skunk house, because indeed it was infested with skunks. *(chuckles)*

TS: You meet everything in the Army over the years. As a lay person on a base like this, what made this a typical Army post? What did it look like when you were there?

JV: What made it a typical Army base was of course it was surrounded by a fence and guards at the gates. *(chuckles)*

TS: I think of these 19th century forts and how they often had a central parade ground with buildings on four sides.

JV: Fort Carson had the same thing. Had a central parade ground and a big one.

TS: Was any basic training done there?

JV: No.

TS: Okay. So all basic trained soldiers have arrived here.

JV: Right.

TS: And what kind of training? Have these troops already been trained in their specialty or are there schools here as well?

JV: No. They've already been trained in their specialties. We had just local schools to buck up the training.

TS: Was this post fairly self-contained as far as commissary, BX, hospital?

JV: Yes.

TS: So it's a self-contained community. This community interacts I take it with the local civilian communities.

JV: Yes.

TS: I'd like to have you say a little bit about that relationship.

JV: Again, we're in the immediate post-war, post-Vietnam era, so Colorado Springs was growing at that time although it was only a fraction of what it is today. NORAD and the North American Air Defense Command had been there, and of course the big bunker in Cheyenne Mountain¹⁶ had been built and was probably the safest place in the United States

¹⁶ Cheyenne Mountain nuclear bunker: Cold War era command and control center, in use 1966-2006.

as far as its physical security. And the Air Force Academy had then been built and was operating. So the community of Colorado Springs was a community that basically supported the military. Fort Carson and the Army was sort of on the low end of the totem pole, with the Air Force Academy being first or NORAD and the Air Force Academy being tied for first. Of course we had more low ranking enlisted people than anybody else and consequently we had more people that appeared on the blotter of the police department.

TS: Like you said earlier, those things happen.

(1:12:00)

JV: Yes. So we had some special work to do there, but there was a large group of supportive people that wanted the Army there and wanted Fort Carson to stay there. It provided a fair amount of money to the community in terms of what we bought and contracted for in the community, and what the soldiers and officers spent in the community.

TS: Were there organizations that helped to bring together service personnel and their families and local civilians in a way that I recall from Germany where we had organizations that brought people together?

JV: Yes. They did indeed. And Colorado Springs did that pretty well. Both the mayor and the Chamber of Commerce were supportive.

TS: You alluded a moment ago to the economic impact of having a post. The Chamber of Commerce I imagine would be one of your biggest fans.

JV: Right. And many of the ranchers nearby had been organized into support for Fort Carson, which was an interesting concept because you'd think they'd be opposed to it. There was an annual ride around Pikes Peak, horseback ride, that the commander of Fort Carson was expected to take part in. Fortunately I never had to do that.

TS: No horseback riding?

JV: The horseback riding in our family belonged to [Mrs Vessey]. *(chuckles)*

TS: You've been in command positions before. How would you compare or contrast your position as the commanding general of the 4th Infantry Division Mechanized with the command positions you've had in the past?

JV: When you command a battalion, at least an artillery battalion, you probably get to know every one of the somewhere between 250 and 500 soldiers that you have. You probably know their names and can address them by name. You know what their job is. So you're closer to the individuals. When you command a brigade or something like the division artillery you can't know every soldier, but you can know the company and battery commanders. You can know the battalions and their staffs and know the senior NCOs in most of the battalions. When you're a division commander the numbers go up from 500 to 1500 to 12,000. So the numbers that you can call by name, the percentage that you can call

by name, goes down considerably rather quickly. But it's still team building, and your team members then are your brigade commanders and knowing parts of their team, that is their battalion commanders and so forth.

The other part is the administrative part of the post, because you're also the post commander. So you've got the post hospital. [There is] the actual commander of the post, who takes care of the administrative business; you've got the local military police, the maintenance staff, the engineers, civilians mostly. But they're all part of your team. So integrating those people into a major team.

At that time we had a battalion of Chinook helicopters stationed at Fort Carson, and we were to haul the nuclear weapons out to the first anti-ballistic missile system that was to be deployed. I don't want to say fortunately, but about the time we began to haul the nuclear weapons out, the program was cancelled. So as I say, we had the mountain aviation training and a number of other things to do. So you had a full plate. But it was a really great job.

TS: Did you enjoy trying to encourage the team building?

JV: Oh, sure. Yes. Right. For me it was fun. It was probably one of the most enjoyable, certainly the most enjoyable general officer's job that I had.

TS: Okay. You talked in a positive way about that Pentagon assignment that you came from, but there's a sense of enthusiasm in your voice for this that I didn't detect to this degree when we talked about the Pentagon.

JV: Sort of the epitome of command jobs is commanding a division, because again it's one of these places where you know a whole lot of people in the division and it's one of these places where you still feel pretty intimately involved with it. My next command job was commanding the forces in Korea. I had operational command of 600,000 Koreans, plus the 45,000 Americans that are stationed in Korea. You're beyond intimate knowledge of more than a few of those people, and even getting from one end of the command to the other and taking a look at it takes an awful lot of time.

TS: Did you find you missed that level of intimate contact with people? Because you are a people person.

JV: You still have intimate contact with people, with the people that are part of your team.

TS: That's different though, right? You've just described big numbers.

JV: Yes.

TS: Where literally you can't even see all these people anymore, let alone get to know them at all.

JV: Yes.

TS: Living in Fort Carson. What did you like best about that personally, away from the service life?

JV: It's a pleasant atmosphere, pleasant climate. There are a lot of things to do. I had set out for myself the goal to climb the Fourteeners.¹⁷ I only made one. *(chuckles)*

TS: I remember you liked the outdoors at Fort Sill. You mentioned you enjoyed a lot of the outdoor opportunities there. So there are outdoor opportunities here too at Fort Carson?

JV: Yes, right. But you didn't have as much opportunity to take advantage of them – you're the division commander. Much more of your time is consumed. Just finding family time, going to church on Sunday. What we did is, once a month we'd go to the chapel on the post to make sure that military people understood that they did in fact have a Christian commander. But the rest of the time we went to a civilian church in town. Sat in the rear pews or in the middle where we could be ordinary sinners like the rest of the congregation.

TS: When you went to church in town, did wear a uniform or not?

JV: No, did not.

(Mrs Vessey asks questions, off topic)

TS: There's more of your time being consumed by your job than in the past.

JV: Yes.

TS: When you talk about that, put that in hours per week for a lay person. What are you spending on the job? This is not an eight to five punch the clock job, is it?

JV: No. No. No. Many evenings are taken up. But there's still enough time. One of the nice things about Fort Carson in those days is you got an honorary membership to the Broadmoor Golf Course, one of the great golf courses. Actually fifty-four holes there.

TS: You liked to golf, didn't you?

JV: Yes.

TS: What are some of the relationships that are important for you here? You mentioned a couple of your subordinates that were very important. Were there other people you want to mention here that we'd consider important relationships?

¹⁷ Fourteeners: mountain climber term for a mountain over 14,000 feet in elevation; there are 53 in Colorado.

JV: Basically the military team was great, but we had friends in the community, retired Army Colonel Ray Murphy was the former athletic director at West Point. He had married George Casey's widow. George Casey, you may remember, was the father of the recent George Casey who was Chief of Staff of the Army, but was commanding a division in Vietnam when I was on my way. And then we made other friends in the community. The director of the Colorado Springs Symphony, and the editor of one of the newspapers, the mayor of the town. People we have kept in contact with since then.

TS: Your contact with people like that, does that underscore the fact that your position as commanding general was also public relations?

JV: Yes, to a certain extent. On that business of engaging with the local society and so forth, we sort of had a rule between the two of us that if there's some special function, if our attendance at that function will improve the security of the United States, we'll take part. Otherwise, forget it. ...*(chuckles)*...and we've been strong on the 'forget it' side.

TS: I can imagine the opportunities must just be endless.

JV: You could do something every night socially.

TS: Right. So you set boundaries. You have to set boundaries in a sense.

JV: Yes.

TS: Because you are a visible figure here, right?

JV: Yes.

TS: If something happens in the community, positive or negative, about Fort Carson then the commanding general is going to be associated with that in some way.

JV: Yes.

TS: So if soldiers show up in trouble, eventually questions may be asked of you.

JV: Right. And as I said earlier, we were trying to push through an expansion of the size of the reservation in those days and that took a fair amount of time.

TS: I know that post was expanded eventually. While you were there or not?

JV: Not while we were there, but partly as a result of what happened during our time.

TS: Were there arguments in the community on both sides to expand it, but also push back?

JV: Oh, yes. A lot of push back. A lot of push back.

TS: Was it more political or was it more land use?

JV: All of the above. In fairness much of it was ecological push back. It's fairly delicate surface soil, the front range of the Rockies, and running tanks and self-propelled vehicles around it turns what might be green into dust pretty quickly.

TS: And you could understand that.

JV: Yes.

TS: You liked this job and alas, it doesn't last forever.

JV: No. It ends pretty quickly.

TS: While you were so pleased to get this position, how disappointed were you on the other end to be leaving it? I know it's the Army and you go where you're told, but still.

JV: I got a call one day saying that I was to be in Washington two days hence. I had a meeting with the Chief of Staff of the Army, a meeting with the Secretary of the Army, a meeting with the Secretary of Defense. On this particular schedule.

TS: Topic not mentioned?

JV: No. I thought first, what have I done that's gotten me into this trouble? (*chuckles*) Or B, what crazy job? I was thinking of the job in Laos. Do we have another one something like that that they're looking for? So when I left I had no idea what it was. We talked about what it might be, and didn't have a clue.

I left Colorado Springs on one of those wonderful days where you could stand outside our back door and see the Kansas border to the east and the Rocky Mountains to the west and flew into Washington and got in there fairly late in the evening. It was one of these ninety-five degree days with the humidity. Just stifling. I could hardly read the signs to find my row in the rental car place to get into town.

Went in the next morning and saw the Chief of Staff of the Army and he said, "Jack, Dutch and I have decided that the Army needs a new Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans, and we've decided that you're it." I looked at General Weyand and said, "Sir, I can think of about ten guys right off the top of my head that are better qualified than I for that job, and I'm doing what needs to be done out there with this division and we're making progress."

TS: That's your way of saying in an Army situation, "I really don't want this job?"

JV: You're right. (*chuckles*) And General Weyand looked at me and he said, "Jack, as I said before, Dutch and I have decided that the Army needs a new DCS Ops, and we've decided that you're it. I look on your options as two: one, you can either get down there to 2E

whatever or 3E whatever it is, whatever the office number was for the DCS Ops and get to work, or you can get out.”

TS: That’s it?

JV: I said, “Tell me again that room number, Sir?” *(chuckles)*

TS: So you voiced your concerns and they basically said, “You can either take the job or you can exit the Army.”

JV: Right.

TS: Wow! And you did the appropriate thing, which was to ask for the room number, right? How did you feel though? I mean clearly you didn’t want to leave this.

JV: No. I was having fun and I think Avis was having fun. David was in school. All looked pretty right with the world from where we were at Fort Carson. Having served under the DCS Ops, I knew what the job entailed. And it was a big job.

TS: That’s a lieutenant general’s job?

JV: Yes.

(1:33:00)

TS: As you’re now sadly exiting Fort Carson, what would you say is your proudest accomplishment of your time there?

JV: I think again team building, and having a team that was focused on creating a combat ready division and knowing how to do it. I think the fact that eventually we had two or three four star generals, a handful of lieutenant generals and a few more major generals come out of that crew. Obviously these were very talented people and might well have gotten where they got without this, but ...

TS: Still speaks pretty well for your leadership, I think. I remember in the Boy Scouts we used to say...help me out with this...’when you go to a campground, you should leave it in better condition than the way you found it’.

JV: Right.

TS: Did General John Vessey leave this unit in better condition than he found it?

JV: Indeed. It was in pretty good shape and moving in the right direction.

TS: Excellent.

JV: The rest of that day was an interesting day too. The other interviews.

TS: Because once you realize this was going to be your job you also met with the Secretary of Defense and...

JV: The Secretary of the Army then the Secretary of Defense. [James R.] Schlesinger was the Secretary of Defense. I met with the Secretary of the Army, and my meeting with Schlesinger was to be at one thirty. I was finished with my other meetings by around eleven o'clock. So I decided that, hey, time for a game of handball.

TS: A meeting with the Secretary of Defense in a few hours, I'll get a little handball in here?

JV: *(chuckles)* Right. So I went down to the handball court, and it was before the Pentagon Officer Athletic Club was air conditioned and it was a hot day as I said earlier and got in a pickup handball game. It's one of those where, it's a challenge court and if you win the next guy on the roster takes you on. So I had a pretty good day and the full colonel that had been assigned as my keeper had worked for me before when I was there as Director of Operations. He came down and knocked on the handball court door and said, "Sir, your time with the Secretary of Defense has been moved up an hour. You're supposed to meet him at twelve thirty."

So I got out of there and went into the shower, and I was sweating profusely. I turned on the cold shower and tried to cool off. Got into my uniform, and I'm still sweating. Went up to Schlesinger's office and fortunately he was away when I arrived. I've forgotten the name of his military assistant, but a good guy that could see my dilemma and he took my blouse and got a fan and turned the fan on and let me sit under this fan to try to cool off. *(chuckles)* I was finally halfway presentable by the time Schlesinger arrived, at about the time of my original appointment. Schlesinger was known as being hard on people.

TS: Did you know him at all?

JV: No. I had met him, but I didn't know him. I reported to him and he said, "You have been nominated to be the next Army Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. What makes you think you're qualified for that job?" And I said, "Sir, I don't know whether I'm qualified for that job. I've never had that job, and I know it's a big job. But the Chief of Staff of the Army thinks I'm qualified for that job and he is recommending that I take it." Schlesinger looked at me and he said, "That's the best answer you could possibly give." *(chuckles)* That was the end of my interview.

TS: That's a good story. So you have a new job now, and it's time for Mrs. Vessey to pack again. On that happy note I'm going to suggest it's a good break point for today.

JV: Okay.

AVIS: Tune in tomorrow to see if they get divorced. *(laughter)*

TS: I'll tune in tomorrow to see if you ever got the boxes unpacked moving to Fort Carson.

AVIS: I'm not sure. I ended up with the right number of kids, and that was enough.

END OF INTERVIEW