

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

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

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

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(00:00) = elapsed time on digital recording

Avis Vessey comments at times during recordings. Identified: AVIS

TS: Today is 29 August 2012. This is another of our interviews with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. And today once again we're at the Vessey residence on the outskirts of Garrison, Minnesota.

General Vessey, I know beginning today you wanted to go back a little bit to Fort Carson, Colorado.

JV: I do indeed. One of the people that we did not mention in our last session talking about the time at Fort Carson was my command sergeant major, Bill Tapp, William Tapp, a marvelous soldier and one who certainly helped me greatly and helped make my tour as a division commander successful. In fact, he and I had such a good relationship that when I later commander the forces of Korea I asked for Bill Tapp to be assigned to Korea as the command sergeant major there. He was, as I said, a remarkable soldier, Special Operations experience as well as infantry experience. Tall, handsome black man who had to deal with some real difficult family issues of his own, but was a soldier through and through and helped me greatly in commanding the division. Among the other things he did was introduce me to all-black churches. Practically insisted that I come with him to worship at an all-black church.

TS: Talk about that experience and how that was different from what you had grown accustomed to.

JV: What brought it to mind is, I have been reading this biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.<sup>1</sup> He writes considerably about his experience of going to an all-black church in Harlem, in fact in teaching Bible school there for a whole semester that he was in New York. In reading that I thought how similar his experience was to my own. The church assembled to praise God and they did indeed take that seriously. It sort of reminded me of the old joke about a Lutheran church where, during the pastor's sermon, when the pastor would make some key points a visitor would shout, "Praise the Lord!" It obviously was not the usual thing that happened in this congregation and pretty soon one of the ushers came down and whispered in his ear and said, "Sir, we don't praise the Lord here." (*chuckles*) Missing the whole point of the service. But the sheer joy and exuberance of the singing, the reaction to the sermon and so forth, was in sharp contrast to the sort of staid northern European

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-45); German theologian, executed by the Nazis.

outlook toward the worship service that we have in most Lutheran churches, including my own congregation.

TS: You talk about a good command sergeant major. In general, from your experience, what makes a good senior NCO?

JV: One who keeps the commander informed of the general outlook of the enlisted soldiers in his command. One who is observant enough to understand what it is, and who can sort out anomalies from trends. And particularly for commanders who have not themselves served as enlisted soldiers, giving them the view of the enlisted soldier and his or her outlook on policies and what is happening in the training world or in the combat situation. I think it's perhaps a little easier for me, having served five years as an enlisted man, than it is for some officers. But Bill Tapp and I hit it off well. We would go out early in the morning before the sun was up and stand in the chow lines in the various organizations, mess halls, to get a flavor of what was going on in that particular outfit.

TS: So while the soldiers were going through the mess line you'd go through with them?

JV: Right. While it was still dark enough that they couldn't see that it was a two star standing behind them. *(chuckles)*

TS: How possible was it when you mixed with enlisted soldiers to get a flavor of what's going on? Or did you get the sense that because you were a two star in their midst that immediately things were different?

**(07:15)**

JV: Things are going to be different when the two star comes around. You have to understand that. But a good sergeant major can help the commander understand that and understand what the difference is.

TS: The further you got from your enlisted days and the further up the officer chain you went, is there a sense of being detached from the enlisted soldier and understanding what she or he is going through?

JV: I hope I never felt detached. I'm sure my outlook changed through the years. I'm sure you have the same experience as a teacher in looking at the students that you have today. I'm sure you can relate to your own experience as a student concerning them.

TS: True. By the time you were in as Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans in Washington 1975, you are a three star. Is that correct?

JV: Yes.

TS: You've been in the Operations and Plans business, as it were, not all that long ago. But let me ask you just to describe in lay terms your specific duties as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. What is it you did?

JV: First, you're the principle advisor to the Chief of Staff of the Army for exactly what the title says, the Army's operations and plans. Now the Army itself doesn't really conduct operations – it provides forces to the unified or specified commands for their operations. For example, they send Army forces to Europe to serve under the NATO commander. They send Army forces to the Pacific to serve under the Pacific commander, the commander in Korea or wherever it happens to be. But the Army trains and equips those forces so that they're able to go to any one of the commands that asks for forces and may in fact train Army forces specifically to go to a particular area.

For example, we know that today the Army is rotating units in and out of Afghanistan, so the training is specifically geared toward Afghanistan. But the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans serves the Chief of Staff in his role as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in providing a strategic direction and strategic plans for the armed forces of the United States. So the Deputy Chief is very much involved in strategic planning for the army's part of the defense of the United States and its various allies and commitments and by treaty, whatever it happens to be.

So there are really three parts of it. One is looking forward, to what may happen in the near and more distant future in terms of providing an army to do that. The second part is making sure that the Army of today is ready to do what it has to do in terms of filling out the Army's operational plans for the various unified commands of the United States. The third is seeing that the Army conducts the operations that it is conducting in support of those plans and in support to civil authorities on a day by day basis.

Part of that office is devoted to support to civil authorities. You're dispatching a small team to a disaster of some kind in the United States or even today, with the hurricane coming into New Orleans, you're concerned how the Corps of the Engineers is responding to that situation and whether or not additional Army help might be needed to assist the civil authorities. Then you have a part of the office that's dealing with the immediate budgetary problems, which is next year's budget you're working with. Next year's budget and how to make sure that the Army's needs are met as that budget is prepared. Then you have another branch that's looking at strategy and what might happen in the world and what might be the Army requirements and whether it's equipment or people or whatever it happens to be, and making sure that the other staff sections in the Army understand what the Chief's views are in terms of where the Army ought to be going.

TS: This meant that you had to have a developed understanding of the different theaters in the world where the United States Army was involved.

JV: Yes, indeed.

TS: Some of these you had experience with, but not all I take it.

JV: Yes.

TS: How does one manage that, where the United States Army or the United States military had and has a global reach? How does one stay abreast of what we're doing all these places, all the time?

(14:20)

JV: There are two parts to that. One is making sure that your own staff, that the people you have assembled, have the experience and knowledge of those particular regions so you can call on the whole Army to do that. The other is to go there yourself and look at the situation. So it means traveling to Europe or traveling to the Far East or whatever comes.

TS: For you personally, was traveling on these, perhaps we can call the fact finding missions, was that something that you felt was important to do?

JV: Yes. Yes.

TS: How much of that did you do during the time you were Deputy Chief?

JV: I went to Korea. I went to Japan. I went to Europe. I went to South and Central America.

TS: As you made these trips to ascertain firsthand how things were going, what surprised you the most about what you found?

JV: I don't remember any real surprises. Particularly in Korea at the time – and I had no idea that I was going to wind up in my next assignment shortly in Korea – we had a great debate going on at that particular time on what the North Koreans were doing and how much went into their armed forces. We had a wonderful young analyst in the Army's intelligence section, who looked at both the CIA and the Defense Intelligence estimates of what the Koreans had been doing [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

JV: [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

Yet both the CIA and DIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, had sort of gotten into a rut of fixing the North Korean defense forces at number X. I've forgotten what the number is, but it was a certain size and it never seemed to change. This analyst that was in the Army's intelligence business began to question that seriously, because adding tanks and tank divisions and still maintaining the same number of infantry divisions, if you just put four men in each tank pretty soon you could take the number of tanks and multiply by four and know that you had to have at least that many more to crew the tanks, to say nothing of the additional number to provide the headquarters and support and so forth that had to be

provided for tank battalions and tank brigades and the tank division. So we had a big debate going on at that time, and the official national intelligence estimate seemed to have the North Korean forces numbered well below what we in the Army believed that the evidence showed at that particular time.

TS: This belief that North Korean forces were flat as far as size, do you believe that was behind the Nixon administration's desire to, then actually reducing the size of our forces in South Korea in the early 1970s?

JV: Yes. And then of course it came to a head in the Carter administration.<sup>2</sup>

TS: That we'll get to in more detail. Just for point of information, the tanks that North Korea would be acquiring, were these home built or Soviet or Chinese models?

JV: They were Soviet models, and the early ones were built in the Soviet Union. Eventually I believe that North Korea produced some of those tanks themselves. I'm not absolutely certain about that. I don't remember what the story was.

TS: So you were, during this year, acquiring some sense of the background about North Korean military capabilities, possible build ups and weapons systems?

JV: Yes. And similar situations were going on in Europe at that time. The Soviets were pushing the NATO governments a lot and there were number of Red incidents. In Germany, for example, our commander in Germany was himself shot at by a Red Army team. One could see tension both in East Asia and in Europe at that time.

**(22:20)**

TS: For the Chief of Staff in charge of Operations and Plans, a typical work week – and you've described pretty much desk jobs in the past in the Pentagon – how much is this a desk job and how much of this is out and about?

JV: I'd say about fifty-fifty. At least it was for me, because the job was new and I needed to get out and see things that I hadn't seen before, to understand the job. Then the other part of that job is that you attend meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the Chief of Staff.

TS: And you would do this regularly.

JV: Yes.

TS: Is this your first experience attending meetings of the JCS?

JV: Yes.

TS: Talk about that. That's a new circle that you're moving in.

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<sup>2</sup> Carter Administration: January 1977 to January 1981.

JV: Indeed. It was a new world for me and I had to learn some things that I didn't know before, that is, how the JCS operates, what the mechanics are of the JCS operation and how one supports the Chief of Staff of the Army in his role as a member of the JCS. That required, I must say, a fair amount of effort on my part. Fortunately I had some good people to help guide me.

TS: How did the JCS work? You talked about mechanics. As you observed and saw this group ...

JV: The duties of the JCS at that time, and they haven't changed materially since then, are to provide strategic plans and strategic direction to the armed forces of the United States, to provide logistic plans to support those strategic plans, to advise the President and the Secretary of Defense and the National Security Council, and to provide for joint training of the armed forces, that is, training among the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps, so that they work together on the battlefield, and to provide a joint education system for the armed forces. So the duties of the JCS are different from the normal day to day duties of the people who are members of the JCS, except for the Chairman. The rest of them, the heads of the Army, the Navy, the Air Force and Marine Corps, which are full time jobs in themselves, but somehow when they show up at the JCS meeting they have to take their Chief of the Army hat off and hang it on a peg and put on their JCS member, which means working together with these other four or five people to do those things that I just described.

TS: Who was the Chief of Staff of the Army that you were working for?

JV: Fred Weyand. He had commanded the 25<sup>th</sup> Division when I was in Vietnam, so he knew me and I knew him.

TS: Had Fred picked you for this job or identified that he would like to see you in this job?

JV: Indeed. I think we talked about that in the last session. Yes.

TS: I mean you talk about supporting the Chief of Staff, as a member of the JCS how did you personally support the JCS or the Chief of Staff in that arena?

JV: The details of it are, the Chairman of the JCS sets the agenda. That's the big power that the Chairman of the JCS had, at least in those days, that he set the agenda for JCS meetings. If it didn't get on the agenda, the JCS didn't address it. So what each of the services, in their roles of supporting their particular chiefs, had an opportunity to insert suggestions for the agenda. I don't want to go through the formal part of this thing because it would take too long, to be honest.

TS: But that is the challenge.

JV: And I'm not sure I remember it completely accurately.

TS: But it's lobbying for points to try to get them on the agenda.

JV: Exactly. And then when things get into the Joint Staff, that is suggestions from the services, the Joint Staff looks at those and perhaps brings them to the Chairman. Then they go through another stage where yes, it's agreed that these are things that the JCS ought to address. For example, if the Army has suggested something and the Joint Staff agrees and the Chairman agrees that that is something that ought to be addressed, then each of the other services gets a crack at what the Army has suggested before it actually comes to a meeting. There will be an exchange of papers and a meeting of action officers and then there would be a meeting of the deputies, the people corresponding to the Army's Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. We will meet and address the subject and try to come to agreement or at least clear up the disagreements. We know what they are before the chiefs themselves have to address that particular problem. Then eventually it will come to the chiefs for agreement and eventually for advice to the Secretary of Defense or the President.

TS: That seems like it requires cooperation, but also between the service branches isn't it safe to say there's also competition?

JV: Indeed. For example, if it's something the Army suggests, okay a billion dollars of the defense budget needs to be moved from somewhere else into the Army to deal with this. Indeed that sets up a competitive question at least.

TS: Can you provide an example perhaps of that during this year that you're here, of something that came up, where this was this sense of needing to discuss and maybe compete for funds? Because the Army budget is not expanding during this time.

JV: No. No budgets are expanding. I'm sure there were many, but right off the top of my head I come back to that Korean question of the size of the Korean armed forces and what the United States should do about that. As you point out, we were at a time when reductions in the U.S. forces in Korea were being considered and certainly the strength of the Army in Korea was an issue and a major budgetary issue. So that's one right off the top of my head.

**(31:30)**

TS: Given these estimates that suggest that North Korean military preparedness may be increasing, their size may be increasing, it's then the Army that argues in light of that, here is a suggestion that the U.S. should deal with that by perhaps the United States Army developing this particular program or unit that will take budgetary ...

JV: Or at least not reducing the size of the force in Korea.

TS: Right. But there may also be arguments from one or more of the other service branches to say either (A) we're not sure about those estimates or (B) yes, in light of those estimates

here's how we would argue to fix that, and that's where this cooperation is required out of competition.

JV: Right.

TS: How easily, given the service branches desire to protect their own budgets and positions, how easy was it to find compromise on issues that came up?

JV: There aren't any easy issues that come up. When you get to that level, there aren't any easy issues. They're all difficult. If they're easy, they should have been solved somewhere else.

TS: Down the line perhaps?

JV: Right. So understanding that they're all difficult, at the same time I must say that you're dealing with people the same general age and experience that you have in the wars that the nation has fought in the past. And the outlooks that they have, even though they may be colored by life on ships or flying airplanes or something like that. I must say that the people that I dealt with were wonderful, loyal Americans dealing with difficult problems that they recognized had to be solved, recognized that their position wasn't the only position, and that if we worked at it we could probably find a position that was reasonably good for the nation. Not perfect, but acceptable.

TS: As you look at the Joint Chiefs of Staff and seeing how it worked, what are some lessons that you picked up about how it works that served you in the future?

JV: The first lesson was, how good the people are from the other services, that is that the Army doesn't have all the smart guys. (*chuckles*) That's lesson number one. And open your ears and listen to what the other people have to say and understand that by working together you can indeed come up with a better solution for the nation.

TS: As you looked at people there, are there people that you made a note of, if in the future I have increased responsibilities, now there's a person I'd like to put in my file?

JV: Yes. From all the services. Some of course, the people that were my counterparts in the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, it was unlikely that I was going to be able to get them unless they later became Chiefs of Staff or something like that or Chief of Naval Operations. But there were subordinates of theirs that one could observe and say, there's somebody to keep track of. I must say that there were a number of those that I used in later years.

TS: Anybody you want to name, mention specifically?

JV: I think I've already mentioned Charlie Gabriel, who was an Air Force officer. ... Joe Moorner, who was the Navy's Operations Deputy at that time, was a brother of Tom Moorner,

who had been the JCS Chairman some years before.<sup>3</sup> Joe and I had occasion to cooperate on difficult problems.

TS: What would you say was one of the more challenging things in this new job for you?  
(37:20)

JV: Learning the job was the big challenge for me. (*chuckles*) I'd say that next to becoming Chairman, becoming the operations Deputy for the Army ... those were the two jobs where I felt I was almost over my head and had to really scramble to understand (A) the job to begin with, the breadth of it, and (B) to learn enough about it to do it reasonably effectively.

TS: How long do you feel it took you to get up to speed to the point where you felt comfortable and confident doing this job?

JV: I'm not sure that I ever did. (*chuckles*) I was only there a year, and I got moved out of it. I was never sure whether I got moved out of it to a higher job because I wasn't doing that job.

TS: Do you mean that?

JV: It crossed my mind.

TS: So this is a job where you're meeting with people in different circles from the past, you're traveling to places to see how things actually work on the ground. In the past you've been involved a lot with training, and it's been something that's been important to you. What kind of opportunities are you getting to be involved with training in this job?

JV: It indeed is an important part of that job, but the structure of the Army at that time for training meant that the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans had responsibility for setting training requirements, that is train to do a certain job. But the people who decided what the training would be were not part of my responsibilities at that time. That is, it was either they are or are not trained to do this job. We had established a so-called Training and Doctrine Command. It was part of the reorganization of the Army in the Abrams years, and we were just fleshing all that out when I was Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans. So the Army itself, we were still shaking down from the all-volunteer force.

TS: How long did that take? Because this is now, we're talking two, three years.

JV: Yes, but it took much longer than that. It was another half dozen years after that.

TS: You're talking into the Reagan administration.

JV: Right.

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas H. Moorer (1912-2004); U.S. Navy admiral. Chief of Naval Operations, 1967-70; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1970-74.

TS: Before the Army really, you would argue, felt comfortable in its new clothes as it were of being an all-volunteer force.

JV: Right.

TS: One might ask why did it take so long?

JV: Difficult. It was difficult. It required a whole new outlook on how we selected people to come into the Army, who we chose or who we accepted, how we trained them, and of course we had the question of where we trained them at that time. We were trying to reduce the amount of overhead in the Army, so it meant trying to close installations or combine functions. When the Army is structured one way, every officer and soldier eventually sees some way for him to be successful and not only contribute to the Army and the defense of the nation, but to contribute to his own wellbeing and personal future. So the enlisted soldier or the officer sort of figures out what is the game, what are the rules of the game for me, how do I, Joe Schmuck, get ahead in this Army, what do I need to do, what do I need to learn, how do I need to act to get ahead?

TS: Was that still in flux?

JV: It's always that way. I mean, is that not the condition at the university?

TS: Yes, it is. Was it more pronounced do you think?

*(brief pause in recording)*

**(43:20)**

At this time, 1975-76, it's still a time of flux as far as budgets, military budgets, but there are also other things in the world that are providing potential challenges for the United States Army. You mentioned Korea already and the enormous question mark that North Korea was and, one could argue, still is. There's also the aftermath of Vietnam. April 1975, the North Vietnamese take Saigon and that conflict there enters a whole new chapter, and there's also the bizarre tale of what happened to Cambodia or, as it was known, Democratic Kampuchea about this time, '75-'76. I'll let you talk about those situations, because you were involved. Suddenly this is a whole new game.

JV: Yes. At that time, from our point of view in Washington we looked at a world that was aboil really. As you say, Vietnam finally fell to the North, South Vietnam fell to the North. Cambodia is in chaos really. Terrible things happening. So the whole of Southeast Asia seems to be boiling, and what we've got to do is maintain what friends we still have out there and the same in Europe. Europe is a boil as well, with socialist governments that are becoming wishy-washy on NATO issues. The Soviets [are] deploying new nuclear weapons and modernizing their ground forces in Eastern Europe.

TS: Do we want to argue perhaps that the four power agreement on Berlin in the early 1970s in some ways stabilized the situation, at least in East and West Germany?

JV: It looks stable to the outside, but when you look at what the Soviets are doing inside their armed forces it looked like they were prepared to either blackmail, which would seem to be the most likely course of action for them rather than actually physically attacking. On the other hand if you blackmail and threaten and your bluff gets called, you could wind up actually fighting.

TS: I want you to explain a little more about what you're just saying there. Is this something that the United States military was, concerned isn't the right word, anxious about or, yes, concerned about?

JV: Concerned is the right word. Right. We wanted peace in Europe. Certainly. We'd had two huge destructive wars in Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and we certainly didn't need another one. And to us it seemed to be that strengthening NATO forces to make it clear that the Soviets couldn't attack successfully reduced the probability of their trying to blackmail the Western Europeans into a political position that was unacceptable to us.

TS: A skeptic might argue, that's just an arms buildup.

JV: Indeed. In fact, that's what it was. But there didn't seem to be any other reasonable solution. Certainly we had plenty of talks with the Soviets.

TS: And that's just one of the arenas. We mentioned Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, or Kampuchea as it then became known.

JV: We also had the Middle East.

TS: We have freedom movements in Angola and Mozambique, as the Portuguese finally are forced to leave Africa. How much, if we think about Southeast Asia, how much is that situation viewed as a major concern for the United States Army by the mid-1970s? Or is that something that is said, well, we have other things that demand more attention right now?

JV: There were two views in the country. One is, it is of concern. We were in there. We became part of the problem and certainly have some responsibility, at least for refugees that are being created in Southeast Asia. And certainly a responsibility for creating or securing some sort of stability in the region.

TS: That's one point of view. What's the other?

JV: The other point of view is that hey, we left there. It's their problem. We've got other fish to fry. Turn our backs on it.

TS: How is the United States military, if we can use that as a monolith, viewing those two points of view with regard to Southeast Asia?

JV: I would say those two points of view existed within the military services.

TS: How about you personally?

JV: I viewed that we had a clear responsibility, both from the strategic point of view as well as from the humanitarian point of view, for (A) humanitarian point of view, taking care of the refugees, making sure that we did all that we could do to assuage the hardships of those people, and (B) secondly from the strategic view, finding some way to create some stability in Southeast Asia so that the friends that we still had there remained our friends and felt somewhat secure.

TS: This would be the Thais, for example.

JV: Yes. The Thais particularly. The Thais, Filipinos, Singapore, Malaysia.

TS: We'll soon have Soviet naval forces at Cam Ranh Bay,<sup>4</sup> right?

JV: Exactly.

TS: Is the situation in Cambodia something we can simply shake our heads and be sad about or is it something that we as the United States military sought to affect change?

JV: I'd say we wanted to do something about it. We had invested a fair amount in Cambodia.

TS: Right. This Kampuchean Regime, in all the possibilities we might have expected, nobody saw the extent of what happened there.

JV: No. Just understanding what happened or believing what was going on was difficult.

TS: Good phrase, believing it.

JV: And then answering the question, what do we do about it?

TS: What do we do about it?

JV: It is another question and certainly in this country there wasn't much political clout to even do much more than wring our hands about it.

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<sup>4</sup> Cam Ranh Bay: deep water bay on the southeast coast of Vietnam. Site of large U.S. Navy and Air Force bases during the Vietnam War.

TS: Wringing our hands about things, in the aftermath of the Vietnam involvement commitment by the U.S. Army was it difficult to get civilian impetus for actions outside of our own country now?

JV: Yes. And difficult inside the military departments as well.

TS: Do you remember disagreements within the United States Army, for example, about setting priorities in that respect?

JV: Again, the question was, what do you do with the limited resources, very limited budgets? I've forgotten what our budget was that year, but it was an ever declining number. Compared to the budgets of today, the armed forces are looking at reduced budgets right now and our total budget was probably what would be considered loose change in the budget for today, at that time. So we were desperately trying to keep an Army.

**(54:30)**

TS: Given that, how would you assess morale among people, even at the levels that you're working at now?

JV: I guess just to say that the problems were difficult. They were difficult issues to address, but they had to be addressed. We had no choice.

TS: Reductions in force, budgetary restrictions and uncertainty with regard to mission, I mean that's something that we face at our level, at the university, and one can see the impact on morale sometimes, so I'm wondering. Are these same things that we've been talking about impacting how people feel about their own position or their future with the United States military, the United States Army?

JV: I'm sure that those concerns affected all of us at those times as they will in the years immediately ahead after we withdraw from Afghanistan and try to figure out where we go from here.

TS: In some respect then, do you want to draw a line in this as far as the reduction and the change that comes after a conflict to 1953 possibly and 1945, when we're also facing emerging from a conflict?

JV: Yes, it's similar. Right. Similar problems, and of course you see friends affected. Reductions in force come about and you see people that you know and were good comrades and friends and people that helped and supported you that have to leave the service. That's difficult. Understanding that proud Army units that existed, fought well in the wars that we fought, will have to furl their banners and put them away and no longer be on the rolls. Outfits that you yourself commanded and were near and dear to your heart, and realize that banner will not be marching in the Army's parades anymore. All those things are unpleasant.

TS: How much then did you fear for your own future in the United States Army?

JV: I don't ever remember giving it much of a thought. I had already exceeded rank beyond my wildest dreams. (*chuckles*)

TS: You've said that a couple of times now. Did you really find yourself pinching yourself and looking at your shoulder and seeing three stars and wondering how I got here? Did you do that?

JV: (*still laughing*) Indeed. We talked years ago about coming back from Europe, when I went to the helicopter school. I went through Fort Sill at the time on my way to Fort Walters to helicopter training, and Ed Wendell, who had been my boss in the Pentagon the first time I was there in the office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Personnel, and Ed Wendell was the G-1 in charge of personnel at Fort Sill at that time. I stopped to see him and I told him that I was on my way to helicopter school and after that I'd surely have another tour in Southeast Asia and when I came back from that I wanted to come to Fort Sill and I wanted to head the gunnery department at the artillery school. Ed Wendell, who is a dear friend, said, "You don't even have enough date of rank as a colonel to get quarters on the post here today, and you probably won't have by the time you get back from another tour in Southeast Asia. So you'd be a wonderful head for the gunnery department, but you don't have enough seniority. You won't make it." (*chuckles*)

TS: That's encouraging.

**(1:00:30)**

JV: And I thought, wow, that's disappointing. The next day the brigadier general's list came out, and I was on it. (*chuckles*)

TS: You've been steadily promoted now and what I've heard you say more than once is sometimes you feel surprised to have gotten another advancement in rank.

JV: Yes.

TS: What is that all about? I mean, in a sense you've had good job performances. You've worked with good people. They've recognized you.

JV: There's a plethora of really talented people in the Army from which to choose for any of those jobs and for me, when you get chosen, it's wow!

TS: You must have done something right again, because in 1976, barely on this job for a year, and you get a phone call – or was it a phone call? How did you find out that you were to be ...

JV: I got called into the Chief's office.

TS: Talk about that conversation, because you've only been here a year. Did you see this coming?

JV: I did not. I did not. I expected to spend probably another two years in that job and figured that well, it's certainly long since past the retirement age and that will probably be the end of my career. I had just recently visited Korea, and of course we had been discussing the issue of the Army's view of what the North Koreans were doing and how different from that of CIA and the Defense Intelligence Agency at the time. Dick Stillwell, who had been the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations of the Army a couple of times removed from when I had the job, was the commander in Korea at the time. As I say, I had just recently visited there and it was the summer in which we had the so-called axe murders of the Army officers in Korea.

TS: Were you there when it happened?

JV: No, I was not there when it happened, but I was there shortly after.

TS: I believe that was in August of 1976. You arrived right after that?

JV: Yes, right. Shortly after that.

TS: How did the conversation go where you found out that you were to have a job in Korea?

JV: The Chief called me in and said that Dick Stillwell is planning to retire and that he had decided that I was the guy to take his place.

TS: I've been disabused of the notion that one is offered jobs in the Army. This is another case where you weren't offered the job.

JV: No, no.

TS: This is your job. How did you feel about that when you heard the news?

JV: I was flattered to be offered that job, to think that Fred Weyand, who knew me well, had that much confidence in me to offer me the job, and I thought it was a job that I could certainly undertake.

TS: Was it a job when you heard about it that you thought you could undertake and okay I can do this or did it excite you?

**(1:04:30)**

JV: It didn't particularly excite me. I had full time work in the job I was doing and, as I say, I felt stretched and yet satisfied that this was an important job. The pay situation, I think you got ten bucks more the way that the pay situation was at that time. *(chuckles)* So other than having to buy some new epaulets and so forth for your blue uniform... And then of course

going back to Korea in a new responsibility meant taking on new tasks. Of course it also meant going home and explaining to my good wife that, hey, be prepared to pack up again.

TS: How did that conversation go? And you've had them before. In a sense it's almost like a script?

JV: *(laughing)* It was, here we go again.

TS: How do you recall Mrs. Vessey responding or reacting? You've moved lots of places, but Korea is not Fort Sill.

JV: I don't know. She took it in good stride. I don't remember any particular enthusiasm for the prospect, but certainly a willingness to do it.

TS: You say you knew you were stretched by this job you were in. Were you displeased to be moving on? Or were you ready to move on as you thought about the fact that you are going now?

JV: I'm not sure that you're ever ready for a jump in responsibilities. The job in Korea was a big job.

TS: It's a four star job, right?

JV: It's a four star job. You become the commander of the United Nations Command. You become the commander of the Army's 8<sup>th</sup> Army and you become the commander of the U.S. Unified Forces for Korea. And as the commander of the United Nations command, you become the operational commander of the deployed Korean armed forces.

TS: That was one of the initial questions I wanted to ask about, this rather confusing command situation where you have different hats and you're almost asked to wear them all at the same time.

JV: Right. You have more hats than you have heads.

TS: That's for sure. And I'm wondering if we want to get into the conversation about Korea, or as I look at my clock, if we want to break for lunch.

JV: Let's break for lunch.

**interview continues, recording labelled 19-B and elapsed time set to 00:00**

TS: This is still 29 August 2012, and this is the afternoon session with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor.

Before we started to talk, General Vessey, I said it's time to go to Korea. I want to start with the actual entry in your Joint Chiefs of Staff biography, because that's already complicating and I'll quote here. It says, "1976-79, Commanding General, 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. Army, and Commander in Chief, U.S. Forces Korea, and Commander in Chief, United Nations Command. And from 1978, Commander in Chief, Republic of Korea United States Combined Forces Command Korea." That's more than a mouthful. If you can, break down these positions and how these were all coordinated.

JV: You wind up with one person holding all those jobs as a result of the thing we discussed beforehand, that is reduced budgets, reduced manpower and so forth, and combining headquarters at a time when it appeared that that could be done safely.

TS: So it hadn't always been like this.

JV: No. No. In earlier times, going back to MacArthur's<sup>5</sup> days, he was the Commander of the United Nations Command. Then you had a subordinate 8<sup>th</sup> Army Commander commanding the U.S. Army forces in Korea. You had the Air Forces in Korea being commanded by a Commander of the Air Forces Korea, and so forth. So that change occurred over the years, from the end of the actual combat in Korea, the signing of the armistice, and I frankly can't tell you when the numerous changes took place.

TS: But when you were given this job it was made clear to you that this was the command structure, that you would have all of these various...

JV: Right. Yes. And I knew that from having visited Korea as the Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations and Plans.

TS: So your predecessor also operated under these same...

JV: Right. Except for the Combined Forces Command, which came later.

TS: Right. When you had this conversation that you were to receive this, you were to go to Korea, what were your orders for this command? In other words, what were you sent there specifically to do?

JV: Fred Weyand was then the Chief of Staff of the Army. He had served with distinction with the 25<sup>th</sup> Division when the 25<sup>th</sup> Division fought during the Korean Campaign. And then of course later he commanded the 25<sup>th</sup> Division in Vietnam. Fred Weyand knew Korea and knew of the difficulties in Korea, and also had the firm personal desire to keep the peace in Korea. I've forgotten his exact words, but he spent more than a little time explaining to me how important the job was and the way the Army was, the way the

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964); U.S. Army general. Commander of U.S. and U.N. forces in Korea, 1950-51. Previously Supreme Commander, Southwest Pacific Area, during World War II; Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP), overseeing the occupation of Japan, 1945-51.

defense budget was and so forth, and we couldn't afford another war in Korea but we couldn't afford to lose Korea. So my job was to make sure that the North Koreans could see that they had no chance of succeeding in any attack on South Korea, and other than that doing our best to keep the peace in Korea.

*(background noise – aircraft)*

TS: Okay. So it was made clear to you that there's a line to walk here between conflict and being a pushover I guess.

JV: Right.

TS: What kind of pre-departure briefings did you have about the situation on the Korean peninsula? I mean you'd been there previously, but how were you brought up to speed on the specific situation now that you were going there?

JV: I had briefings not only from the Army folks about the status of the Army in Korea, but also from the Air Force and the Navy about our plans for defense of Korea and our relationships with the Republic of Korea. And what was going on between our Navy and their Navy, and our Air Force and their Air Force, what we had on the ground, what our reinforcement capability was. Had a long briefing from the Marine Corps on their ability to reinforce from Okinawa. So I had a thorough set of briefings and long, fairly detailed intelligence briefings on the situation in Korea.

TS: Were the intelligence briefings from civilian or military authorities?

**(07:15)**

JV: Both.

TS: Is the State Department part of these discussions that you have before you go over there?

JV: Indeed.

TS: This is a new experience from what you've described in the past. You've taken on other situations and I haven't heard this level of advance preparation before you take a command.

JV: Right.

TS: With the State Department, what are they keen to impress upon you?

JV: The general state of relations with South Korea. At that time the Republic of Korea, the president was Park Chung-hee, who had conducted a coup in 1962 and had been in power since then. So that's fourteen years of Park Chung-hee and sort of tenuous relationships diplomatically with the United States, because of our idea that that's the wrong way to

come to power in the first place, and that we wanted to see Korea as a democracy, fully functioning democracy.

Of course the United States has always had plenty of expatriates from Korea in the United States. In fact I think at that time the largest single chapter of the University of Minnesota alumni was in Korea, in Seoul. Relationships with Korea since the Korean War had been generally good between the American people and the Korean people, but not as good between the Korean government and the government of the United States.

TS: I'm sure we'll explore that in more detail in a little bit, because this is a difficult situation. I mean on the one hand we may be dissatisfied with Park Chung-hee and how he came to power and how he maintained himself in power. At the same time there are still strategic considerations in Asia. That's an ally that we need to have.

JV: Right.

TS: And so there is this give and take, right? And something that I suspect the United States was aware of, just as Park Chung-hee was aware of.

JV: Right.

TS: I want to ask you about how command was structured, because there's the United Nations, there's the Republic of Korea – and it's their country – and there's the United States as major actors, if you will. How did all three of these interact with or possibly compete with each other?

JV: I wouldn't say they competed. I think if you're looking for frictions within any organization or between any organizations you look at the boundaries, and that's where the frictions take place because that's where responsibilities of one party and the other party bump up against each other. That's the duty of those in charge of wherever it is, whether it's in the university or on the battlefield or in peacetime overseas operations, is to sort those out and establish the relationships that mitigate the abrasions and look for a little lubricant to make things work together better.

TS: So we have three organizations here. What was the core mission of each? Why were they all there?

JV: Let's start with 8<sup>th</sup> Army. The Korean word is *pal gun*. 8<sup>th</sup> Army. (*chuckles*) In fact 8<sup>th</sup> Army was the major force during the Korean War, and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army symbol was widely seen in Korea. For many Koreans, *pal gun* was the United States.

TS: That was what they saw the most clearly.

JV: Right. If you want to talk about American forces, it was *pal gun*. Of course that was the Army component of the United States Forces Korea at that time. Its mission was to provide the United States Army's contribution to the defense of Korea, but the 8<sup>th</sup> Army was also a

tactical field operation. It was a field Army. So it was a part of the fighting force that would defend Korea. At that time it had a corps headquarters, an American corps headquarters, but it had only one American division, which was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, which was all that was left at that time of the fighting force that had fought the Korean War and defended it in the subsequent years.

U.S. Forces Korea was the Army, Navy and Air Force that was in Korea. The Navy had no permanent ships, but ships would come into the area and would be available to Naval Forces Korea if they were needed in time of war. The headquarters was actually there. U.S. Air Forces Korea had two bases, with a fighter wing at each base, and then could call on outside support if a war were to start and if needed, and had an actual Air Commander who was also the Deputy Commander of U.S. Forces Korea.

TS: So subordinate to you.

JV: Right.

TS: Did the Marine Corps keep a permanent presence in Korea?

JV: It didn't have any permanent troops based in Korea, but they rotated through for training and exercises and so forth regularly.

Then the United Nations Command was more in name than in physical reality, because the United Nations Command had been the outfit that signed the armistice for example and the United Nations Command dealt with the North Koreans in the Demilitarized Zone. The only representatives of the United Nations was an honor guard. I've forgotten the exact nations that were involved, but the British were involved, usually they had a platoon of Gurkas for example, that served in the United Nations honor guard. The Filipinos were involved. I think we had a few Turkish representatives. We had representatives from several of the old United Nations Command nations that had troops present during the war and continued to provide a small contingent for the United Nations honor guard. [It] was used for formal parades or ceremonies and when dignitaries came around or the Secretary General came for example, or any dignitaries from anyplace in the world, as a matter of fact. It was looked upon as sort of a plush assignment by the troops who participated in it.

TS: Numerically, how many people, how many men are we talking about in this honor guard?

JV: For the United Nations? For the honor guard? Seventy-five maybe. Maybe a hundred.

TS: So it sounds like, the way you're describing it, it's a structure that's still formally there that should hostilities come for whatever reason could then be built out into whatever would be required.

**(17:30)**

JV: Yes. Right. It's just a recognition that those countries are still committed to the defense of Korea in the old United Nations Command structure.

TS: So the combat fighting forces, as I'm listening to this, really from the Republic of Korea and the United States Army.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: And those present, whether it's the United States Navy or the Marine Corps or the Air Force or...

JV: Well, the Air Force is very much present. They've got two fighter wings.

TS: Right. I guess I'm thinking about actual bodies perhaps, actual number of people. The United States Army would have more people in South Korea than the United States Air Force?

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: So the United States Army forces and the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, if I've heard this correctly, is the largest numerically, the largest component piece of the U.S. Army Command. Is that right?

JV: Right. It is all of the U.S. Army.

TS: Okay. And that includes the headquarters or support and supply.

JV: Headquarters of U.S. Forces Korea of course had Army people in it, but they belonged to the U.S. Forces Korea and not the 8<sup>th</sup> Army.

TS: As you describe these, just to get back to what you said a few moments ago, where are the points where these players, if you will, might rub up against each other?

JV: Between the U.S. Forces Korea and the United Nations Command, for example. In the United Nations Command, my job as commander of the United Nations Command was to keep the interest and respect and the hope for genuine reinforcement from these countries if indeed hostilities were to break out. So I needed to pay attention to the ambassadors from those countries and to officials from those countries who would come to visit Korea, for example. Needless to say, with that panoply of nations, we didn't always have total agreement between them and the United States about what should happen in Korea or what should happen in the world in general.

TS: This is a public affairs almost part of your job isn't it, or public relations. It's conversations you're having with people about the mission or about to stay committed to this.

JV: Yes. Right. If the Prime Minister of Australia, for example, was one of the contributors to the United Nations Command and one of the contributors to the honor guard. If the

Prime Minister of Australia were to come to Korea, which he did, then it was my duty to bring him to the United Nations Command Headquarters and give him a brief on the situation between the allies defending Korea and North Korea, and again to thank him for continuing to provide the members of the honor guard and pledge support to reinforce it if war to come along.

TS: So almost a general presentation about how things were going. Today we might call this a Power Point<sup>6</sup> presentation, where we have some images and some statistics.

JV: Except I'm non-Power Point. (*chuckles*) If you're going to get it from me, you're going to get it on a series of charts that I have made.

TS: I've seen photographs of you delivering these back in the 1980s, so that is correct. But there were visuals, so it would be a general talk and a conversation.

JV: Right.

TS: Can you characterize those kind of meetings as generally on the surface, or were they nitty gritty talks that could actually produce differences of opinion?

JV: Surely they could produce differences of opinion, because all those people came after having been thoroughly briefed by their own diplomatic force and military force about the Australian view, for example, of the strategic situation in Korea. So clearly most of those people were smart people; they weren't dummies that came there. And I must say there wasn't much disagreement. I think the change in the makeup of the North Korean armed forces and the amount of modernization that had taken place – I think most nations were sort of like the United States: they viewed it as a stable situation, whereas North Korea was devoting more and more effort to strengthening their armed forces.

To give an example, there were things that when I was first looking at the situation in Korea. If the North Koreans were to move certain military outfits to these positions, we would consider that a dangerous move and we would need to pay more attention and be alert to it. Well, during all the years that I had some responsibility for looking at Korea, which really started with the Director of Operations job on the Army staff, all these things had moved. The warning signs had occurred. Each year there would be...and so we would be adjusting our warning signs. It was as though we would say, if they did this we might be thirty days away from a potential attack. If they did this, then following that, once they had done this then if they went to the next step it might be fifteen days, and if then they went to the next one we might be three days.

So by the time I was assigned as the commander those available warning times had been reduced substantially. In talking to representatives of the other nations, many of them were at the thirty days, where we were at the one week or less period. So there was always a little debate about that.

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<sup>6</sup> PowerPoint: proprietary computer presentation software program developed by Microsoft; launched 1990.

TS: This is the concept of a stable situation, I mean from an outside perspective one might look at Korea even at that time and say, it's been more than two decades since hostilities ended – this seems to fit the definition of a stable situation. And what you're saying is, from the United States Army's perspective, that wasn't entirely the view.

JV: Yes. From the point of view of the overall commanders in Korea, not just me, but particularly the South Korean military organization, [who] could see what had happened and probably had a better view than we did.

TS: You mentioned ambassadors. During the time you were there, there were two, as I did the research, two U.S. ambassadors. That would be Richard L. Sneider<sup>7</sup> and William H. Gleysteen.<sup>8</sup> What can you say about them and your relationship with them?

JV: Dick Sneider and I were born on the same day. (*chuckles*) I would say there was a little bit of tenuousness in the relationship when I first arrived. I think that the two Dicks, Dick Sneider and Dick Stillwell, bumped heads occasionally.

TS: Personality?

JV: A little bit personality on both sides. But I think by the time Dick Sneider left, Dick Sneider and I were I'd say good friends. He's long since died, but we've stayed in contact with his widow. Dick and I had, if not a coincident view of the situation in Korea, at least it was very close. We also played a lot of golf together.

TS: He'd been appointed by President Nixon or Ford?

JV: Ford I believe.

TS: His replacement, William H. Gleysteen, was appointed by President Carter.

JV: Right.

TS: Did the tone change with this new appointee?

**(28:20)**

JV: Long before that President Carter had announced his plan to withdraw forces from Korea, so I don't think changed so much. I think for the most part Dick's staff remained the same when Gleysteen took over, so the relationship did not change materially. I got along better with Dick Sneider than I did with Bill Gleysteen, but I got along well with both of them and respected both of them.

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<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Sneider (1922-86); U.S. diplomat. Ambassador to South Korea, 1974-78.

<sup>8</sup> William H. Gleysteen (1926-2002); U.S. diplomat. Ambassador to South Korea, 1978-81.

TS: How regularly did you, as the commander, meet with these gentlemen as the ambassador?

JV: At least once a week; we had weekly breakfast meetings. At least once a week, and usually I'd say more than that if there were something unusual happening – and it seemed that something unusual happened with regularity.

TS: You've been mentioning how North Korea was.

JV: Yes.

TS: At the meetings, these regular meetings, what did an agenda typically look like? What were you there to talk about?

JV: With them principally it was the relations with the Republic of Korea. Of course it could range all the way from misconduct of U.S. military forces to how do we move to a democracy, and the fact was that I had better access to the Korean president than did our ambassador. Park Chung-hee was a former military man, and I think I can say without question that I was invited to the Blue House<sup>9</sup> by Park Chung-hee more than was the U.S. ambassador. But that imposed a duty on me. I didn't want Park Chung-hee dividing the United States mission in Korea. So it was my duty to keep Dick Sneider and later Bill Gleysteen totally informed on what took place between me and the Korean armed forces and the president of Korea.

TS: But these meetings with the ambassador were pretty much just to keep each other up to speed on what was happening.

JV: Yes. Right. And how we could support each other.

TS: And you found both these relationships to be positive ones, as far as working relationships.

[REDACTED]

TS: So on a regular basis [you are] interfacing with U.S. ambassadorial staff, Korean armed forces, representatives or delegates from the United Nations Command, Central Intelligence Agency. Is it your job then to kind of coordinate how this information is used and interpreted?

JV: Certainly my job within the responsibilities of the U.S. military establishment in Korea and the combined military establishment, because I had operational command of the Korean forces that were committed to the defense of Korea. So that puts a special burden

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<sup>9</sup> Blue House: executive office and official residence of the president of South Korea. Located in Seoul.

on the commander. He happens to be an American commander, but most of his forces happen to be Korean.

TS: That's an interesting relationship, and how did that work in reality? I can imagine if the shoe was on the other foot.

JV: It means more meetings with the Korean military than with almost anybody else. I think it might be well to go back to the beginning of my arrival in Korea. We had a change of command ceremony on the parade field, and the United Nations Command, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army Headquarters. I had said beforehand that immediately after the change of command ceremony I would like to go to the operations center and receive an intelligence briefing and an operational briefing from the J-3 of U.S. Forces Korea and also United Nations Command. ... [He was] a wonderful intelligence officer, had a great deal of knowledge about Korea, had been around a long time.

We were walking from the parade field to the command center and he said to me, "Well, General, the first thing I want to tell you is you don't have to worry. We'll tell you when the North Koreans are going to attack." So I said to him, "Jack, I'm sure you will tell me when you think they're going to attack, but what I don't know is whether or not I will understand what you're telling me, when you're telling me that. So I think that you and I, for the next few years, need to sit down regularly and make sure we understand that I understand what you are seeing that makes you tell me that they're going to attack or they're not going to attack, and what you base that on. And that you understand that I'm going to act on your recommendations, and you need to understand what those actions are that I'm going to take, so that you understand the impact of what you're telling me."

I'm not sure we ever got to the point where we each understood the other, but at least we worked at that for the next several years. And the same with the operations people, understanding that my duty was to make sure that the North Koreans understood that they could not make a successful attack and so we are going to examine every indication of North Korean moves to decide whether we should do something or should not do anything. But the ultimate goal is making sure that the North Koreans understand that they cannot attack successfully.

So we went to that briefing and had the briefing and I don't want to go through it in detail, but had a better understanding of what my views were and they understood where I was coming from on this issue of business with the North Koreans.

Then we had a general staff meeting with the members of the American staff and, mind you, this is 1976. This is sixteen years after the beginning of the Korean War and it's thirty-one years since the United States had had forces in Korea. So my first question of them was, "How many of you can ask your way to the men's room in Korean and understand the answer?" I must have had 250 people in the room and I think there were four hands that went up. So it was clear to me that we needed to do a better job of understanding each other. If we couldn't find out where the men's room was...

**(39:00)**

TS: And just to make sure I get this, we'd had troops in Korea since 1945, right?

JV: Since 1945.

TS: And this is a regular ongoing presence?

JV: Yes.

TS: And that was the answer.

JV: Yes.

TS: What did that tell you when you saw only four hands go up?

JV: That we in the United States hadn't paid enough attention to getting along properly in a place we'd been in for a long time.

TS: Does that suggest perhaps a sense of hubris as far as how we carried ourselves in relationships like that?

JV: Yes. Yes. As one Korean once explained to me, he said, "Your view of consultation with us is that you tell us what you're going to do and we tell you we're not sure we like that, and you go ahead and do it anyway."

TS: He may have smiled when he said that, but it was serious.

JV: Yes. When I saw four hands come up, what occurred to me is that I couldn't raise my hand. I wouldn't know how to ask my way to the men's room and I certainly couldn't understand the answer if I had asked it. So the first it said very clearly to me is, that you've got to do a lot better.

TS: Were you not aware of this before you really asked the question?

JV: No. I thought we'd have a lot of real experts on Korea. We had some. We had some people who were really expert among those four hands, who were top notch experts on Korea. But there weren't very many of them, and certainly I was not among them.

TS: Did this become a priority of yours then to ensure that we...

JV: It did indeed. It did indeed. Just addressing the language problem alone. Of course I knew I would get a Korean aide, so I asked the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for a fellow who was a fairly good English speaker who might assist me in learning Korean, as an aide. He did that, and I got with him and laid out a program for myself. Each morning we met, I've forgotten whether it was five-thirty or six in the morning, and I had a Korean lesson on Korean language for use today. We'd look at my planned schedule. I would go to visit a Korean headquarters, and I would do that far more often than American, because I had almost ten times as many Korean troops as I had American troops. So I spent probably ten times as much time with the Koreans than I did with the Americans. So we're going

here today. So here are the names of the commanders and here's the mission of the outfit and then here are potential questions that I could ask, in Korean.

Then in the afternoon or in the evenings I met with a Yonsei University Korean instructor to teach me grammar, writing, reading Korean script and so forth. And then we had a house staff that was Korean, but they'd been working for Americans for many years and their English was fine and so Avis and I made an agreement with them that if I were home at lunch time we were going to use only Korean at lunch time. And struggle though we would.

TS: Sure. But you decided to do it.

JV: Yes. I gave myself an almost unachievable goal – I said that in a year I will make a public speech in Korean. I didn't do it in a year, but I did it in a year and a half.

TS: Korean is a tough language too.

JV: It's an atonal language. Most of the Asian languages are tonal, and blessedly Korean is not. Korean has some similarities to German in that the last word in the sentence is the verb, but it has some differences too. For me it was an easier language than my futile attempts at Vietnamese and Laotian and Thai and so forth.

TS: You're setting a pretty high bar for yourself. Are you setting an equally high bar for those who work for you?

JV: I immediately went back to the Chief of Staff of the Army and to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and explained this language problem as I saw it, and I asked them for instructions to go to the Defense Language Institute to get two courses in Korean other than the general course. They had a two year course in Korean for Korean linguists to be, and I wasn't looking for Korean linguists, I was looking for people to come and serve in Korea and get along with the Korean people.

So I asked for a short course that we could give to every American coming to Korea, every American service person coming to Korea, that would (A) let him ask his way to the men's room, and (B) understand the answer (*chuckles*) and help keep him out of trouble in the Korean community. Then the second course was longer and more involved for commanders that would have close relations with the Korean forces or with staff officers who would come to work with both Korean armed forces and the American armed forces. And that was done.

TS: Okay. So by the time you're there for a while, these have been implemented. People in country are gaining some cultural language skills and those to be sent to Korea are getting this front loaded.

JV: Right.

TS: What difference did you notice this language and culture training actually having?

JV: More confidence among the Americans of the Koreans in their relationship with the Koreans, and more confidence in the Koreans and their relationship with the Americans. When I came there I sensed a certain amount of, I don't want to say distrust, but the idea from the Koreans that I as the senior Korean armed forces officer know that you Americans know more than I know about the situation with North Korea and you're not telling me what you know.

**(48:30)**

TS: Was that true actually?

JV: Not to the extent that it was felt.

TS: But perceptions can be powerful.

JV: And exactly the was true with the Americans, that they felt that the South Koreans knew more than they knew about the actual tactical or strategic situation than we knew, but they're not telling us.

TS: You mean that each side believed the other knew more?

JV: Right.

TS: And wasn't saying.

JV: Right.

TS: How did we get to that place?

JV: Twenty-one years of still having an American guy in command with a staff where only four people could ask their way to the men's room in Korean. I think that's sort of a simplistic answer, but...

TS: I think it gets at the heart of it, which is, we're not really here to understand you.

JV: Right. No. For the American service person it was called a short tour. They were there without their family. They're there for a year or whatever it is. Kiss your wife and kids goodbye. Go to Korea. Survive. Come home. It's over. It's a hardship tour, and you won't have to do it again for four or five years or five or six years, something like that.

TS: So it's a different kettle of fish from the beginning than going to Germany, for example.

JV: Right.

TS: So the challenges here are personnel and personal and cultural. That's what you're dealing with. You're dealing with lots of different understandings and potential

misunderstandings with people who are part of the UN Command or the South Korean-United States relationship.

JV: Right.

TS: Is that the majority of what you're doing, is in a sense making sure peoples' feathers aren't ruffled, if we can put it that way, and make sure we're all playing on the same team?

JV: I wouldn't say making people feel that their feathers aren't ruffled. I think it's more finding ways to make sure that the cooperation that we have is as effective as we can make it and first, finding the common ground. We both agree that hey, we don't want a war here and what are we going to do to prevent that? And how best can we use the strengths of each country and the armed forces of each country to prevent that? So, yes, it means extra effort. Once a week I had breakfast with the Minister of Defense of Korea and had usually at least a two hour or two and half hour meeting. We met in each other's homes. That is, one week we'd meet in his house and the next week we'd meet in our house.

TS: Was this something that had been done prior to your arrival?

JV: I don't know. And I met regularly with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff of Korea and with his service chiefs on problems.

TS: When you went to meetings like that, who typically accompanied you?

JV: My Korean aide typically accompanied me to the meetings, but didn't necessarily sit in. For example, I met with the Minister of Defense, whose English was at the beginning a little better than my Korean, which was almost zero. But if we needed an interpreter his aide and mine were sitting outside having breakfast together and we'd call them in or get one of them to come in. I think by the time that we left, the fellow who was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs when I first arrived became the Defense Minister later, and so he and I had been meeting for three years plus by that time and knew each other well and communicated well, either in one language or the other or both languages when we met.

TS: How productive do you think these regular meetings, for example with the Minister of Defense, were?

JV: I think very productive. [REDACTED]

we have enough trust among each other and if there's something that we're forbidden to give just say, we're forbidden to give that to you, and we'll find a way to work around it rather than spying on each other.

TS: Building relationships has been a consistent theme since we first started talking about your time in the United States Army in the 1940s, and it sounds like this is a higher level but updated version of the same thing. Those are important to you.

JV: They were important in having a successful defense of Korea and defending the United States interests in that part of the world.

TS: Yes. Relationships with the Koreans, the Minister of Defense. In what ways did you personally interact with, for example, President Park Chung-hee?

JV: He was president of the country. When he asked for a briefing on something, I gave it to him. I would say we had a pretty good relationship. When American congressional delegations or people from the State Department or Defense Department were to come to Korea he would always ask that I attend the meeting. Now at first Dick Sneider wasn't very pleased with that; Dick thought he should be the senior American present and I acknowledged that yes, according to the Eisenhower Doctrine of Operations in Foreign Countries the U.S. ambassador should be recognized as the senior American present. So we finally had good agreement with Park Chung-hee that on any of those visits we would both come to the meeting.

**(58:00)**

TS: Did you meet with him regularly?

JV: Fairly regularly. Well, you should understand that the Carter announcement of withdrawal of forces in Korea [in 1977] changed things dramatically in Korea. The outlook towards the United States.

TS: Weren't there already certain tensions? I mean when you think of the whole Koreagate scandal [of 1976], which was widely reported and investigated in Congress, about Korean political figures trying to gain influence with [ten Democratic] members of the [U.S.] House about appropriations or troop levels in Korea. That's just one example.

JV: Right. The Koreans were trying to ensure defense of their own country, and I think that if we fail to understand that people who feel endangered, particularly nations that feel endangered, with enemies that have, for example, come with raids on the house of the president of their neighboring country; have assassinated the wife of the president of their neighboring country; have killed cabinet members of the neighboring country... If you can imagine Canada and the United States, with Canada assassinating Michelle Obama and killing several ministers of the cabinet of President Obama.<sup>10</sup> Particularly if the United States felt that Canada might be stronger militarily than the United States, you can imagine

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<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama (b. 1961); President of the United States, January 2009 – January 2016 (end of term).

the position that the people in South Korea were in and the extent to which they would go to ensure help from their major ally.

TS: Okay. President Park Chung-hee was himself not without controversy.

JV: Indeed.

TS: Again, just to insert into the record here, he was born 1917 and died or was assassinated in 1979. Park was a Republic of Korea general and later president, from 1963 until 1979. He seized power in a military coup, and again was president from 1963 until he was assassinated on 26 October 1979. He was the president of a strategic ally of the United States, and yet he generated his own partisans on both sides. How would you size him up, as someone who met with him regularly, to deal with?

JV: He was a Korean through and through, that is, the defense of his own country was uppermost in his mind and the wellbeing of his own people was uppermost in his own mind. Park Chung-hee lived comfortably, but I think the evidence shows that he did not amass wealth in the office that he held. He had fairly strict ethical accountabilities for the way he conducted his business, but he was in fact, I think you'd say, somewhere between tough and ruthless.

TS: You kind of preempted my next question. I don't disagree with what you just said, but also sources suggest that his treatment of political opposition within his own country was questionable.

JV: Unkindly I would say, at best. He wanted to move toward a democracy. It was clear that he wanted to move toward a democracy, but didn't have the foggiest idea how to do it. He wanted a transition that would take him out of governing the country, but again, he didn't see anybody on the horizon that he thought he could trust to keep the country both safe and moving forward. You look at his record, and in the time he was in power he moved the country from a rural farming country with a per capita GDP of about fifty or sixty bucks to one with a per capita GDP of about \$2500.

TS: Economic development was writ large in the five year plans that his government developed.

JV: Indeed. And of course his idea was stability in the country. He feared any evidence that the country was not united might incur an attack from North Korea, so demonstrations against his own government or against business and so on and so forth was certainly discouraged, to say the least, or tolerated as long as it was moderate in size. He had a good understanding of his own country in both the culture and the economics of it.

He had three major groups to deal with: farmers, fishermen and factory workers. The factory workers were growing and increasing in prosperity, but he wanted to keep a balance so that there wasn't a big draw from the farms to cities, so that the cities would

become pockets of poverty before there were jobs available for the people moving from agriculture.

Our own agricultural department had proposed all sorts of ways to modernize agriculture, to increase food production. One of those was the use of mechanization rather than animals, and Park Chung-hee vetoed the idea of four wheeled tractors and instead got the farmers in Korea equipped with a two wheel tractor, a walk behind tractor, that could plow and cultivate and do all the things you could do with a four wheeled tractor but only fast enough to walk behind. It sounds maybe sort of dumb when we talk about it here today, but in fact it was an enormously wise idea because it slowed the modernization of agriculture to the point where the farmers could still make a living and still had work to do and were less drawn to jobs in the city.

TS: Is that to say that rapid or broad modernization of agriculture would throw a lot of people out of work and they would flood the cities faster than the industries could absorb them?

(1:07:10)

JV: Right. Fire in Korean villages – the roofs were traditionally straw roofs. Park Chung-hee inaugurated a program for modernizing the village housing, with tile roofs. But it was a do it yourself project; that is, the government provided a certain amount of help and would provide a certain amount of material, but the villages had to take on the task themselves to do the modernization. Modernizing the *ondol* heating systems, which was the traditional charcoal under the floor heating system, which was very efficient except that carbon monoxide was a particular problem.

So Park Chung-hee instituted a system for modernizing the heating system, but again it was a do it yourself project. I personally thought that Park Chung-hee was very wise in the way he modernized, and certainly the Korean business with the *chaebol*<sup>11</sup> was something that certainly the SEC<sup>12</sup> would have frowned on. (*chuckles*)

TS: Yes, I think so.

JV: Yet it seemed to suit the Korean society. And at the same time there was a great program to maintain Korean culture and history. A remarkable man in many ways.

TS: You've kind of brought up the dichotomy that is Park Chung-hee, in a way that one almost must admire his zest for or zeal for modernizing this country and raising the living standards of people, and on the other hand one might have wished for a little more even handed treatment of political opposition in development of political structures.

JV: Right. As I said before, he had no idea how to do that and was suspicious of people around him. I think we talked about our class at Leavenworth and Kang Young-hoon and his being banished to New Mexico. And yet Park Chung-hee had a great respect for Kang

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<sup>11</sup> *chaebol*: South Korean business conglomerate.

<sup>12</sup> SEC: Securities and Exchange Commission. Government agency which regulates the securities industry.

Young-hoon and later on when he perceived himself to be in more serious trouble, he called Kang Young-hoon to come home to Korea and be a minister in his cabinet, because he recognized the wisdom of this man and his understanding of Korea.

TS: You mentioned economic development. Before we move away from that, you traveled around a lot. As you traveled around the Korean countryside, how much of this industrialization or industrial development transferring could you see literally?

**(1:11:10)**

JV: A great deal of it was occurring during my time in Korea, so you could see a lot of it. And I got to know some of the Korean business leaders. The founder of Hyundai, [Chung Ju-yung], absolutely remarkable man, who came to Seoul at the end of the Korean War on a bicycle with knife and scissor sharpening kit on the back of his bicycle and built Hyundai industries, which makes cars, supertankers, railroads, whatever. Indeed some remarkable industrious people.<sup>13</sup>

TS: So you could see this, the transformation of the countryside, with literally smokestack industry?

JV: Yes. Chairman Chung from Hyundai told me one day that he was building a shipyard down on the southeast coast of Korea, north and east of Pusan. At any rate, he was going to make supertankers. That seemed like a bridge too far almost. I may have told you the story about going down there and being briefed on the shipyard construction and their plans for building the first supertanker. I accosted the managing director of the operation, a bright young fellow, and I asked him if he were a naval architect or what was his background, what got him into building supertankers and he said no, he was a business grad from Seoul National and had gotten a Master's in business administration from Harvard and that Chairman Chung had told him that he was to build the shipyard and build supertankers. He had told Chairman Chung that he really didn't have a lot of knowledge about that, and Chairman Chung had told him, "Your father was a tailor. Building a ship is just like making a suit. You cut the pieces out to the right size, put them together in the right order and then you have a suit. The same thing for a ship. Cut the pieces out to the right size, put them together in the right order, and you have a ship." (*chuckles*)

TS: Just to connect to that, as you traveled around Korea, what did you most appreciate or most like about the Korean countryside or the Korean people? You've got a lot of things to compare it to. You've been lots of places.

JV: I think the arable land in South Korea is hard to find, and the fact that at that time there was a great push among in the Korean society to be self-sustainable, that is, to feed yourself. Of course they were operating in an economy where they were pushing exports to earn hard currency and then reduce the need for imports. One of the needs had been food through the years, so they were looking to increase food production. It was the ability of the Korean people to keep the Korean countryside looking as it had – I use the word as it

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<sup>13</sup> Chung Ju-yung (1915-2001); South Korean business leader.

had always looked and I'm not sure that it had always looked that way, but it had certainly not changed much, with small villages with small tracts of land for the people in the villages and cooperation among the people in the villages for farming those tracts, and then cooperation in improving the life of the people in those villages. As I pointed out earlier, moving from thatched roofs to tile roofs. Moving the heating systems to get rid of the charcoal heat and the danger of carbon monoxide. And yet the countryside looked the same, except the roofs of the houses were different. The Koreans are a proud people, proud of their country and proud of their own culture, and convinced that ginseng tea and *kimchi*,<sup>14</sup> if a person gets the proper amount of each of those, you can perhaps live forever. *(chuckles)*

TS: What kind of quarters did you and Mrs. Vessey have in Korea?

JV: We had a house called Hilltop House. The Korean mythology is that the person in charge ought to live on top of the hill. This house had been constructed for the commander of the United Nations Command. It had never been lived in by the commander before. We were the first ones to live in it. It was newly modernized. It was the expectation that Dick Stillwell would move into it, but he never did because they didn't quite finish it before he left, and we were the first ones in it. It was built with Korean money and American money going into it. The Korean government provided money to help turn this house, which had been there all along, as the U.S. military quarters in Korea, but it just happened to be the house on top of the hill. The Koreans thought that the commander ought to live on top of the hill. It was a pleasant enough place to live and had room for a pretty decent garden.

TS: Was it what we might call an American or Western house, or was it what we might call a Korean house?

JV: It had some aspects of both. It certainly wasn't a warm, comfortable house. That is, I mean physically warm, not architecturally. Architecturally it was fine. But it was drafty, not particularly well insulated.

AVIS: And we found out after we moved out that there was nothing underneath. It was just like the living room, like this. There was nothing underneath it. We always wondered why it was so blasted cold all the time.

TS: Was it a wooden house?

JV: Yes. It was a combination wood and cinder block. But it was fine. It was in a nice place. I'm sure it's still in existence and still in use probably.

TS: The last thing I'll ask before we conclude today: you've talked about things you like to do in different locations you've been at when you're not working. What did you most enjoy doing in Korea when you didn't have responsibilities?

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<sup>14</sup> *kimchi*: traditional Korean fermented dish.

JV: You always had the responsibility, I think.

TS: Or when you weren't on the job.

JV: You were on the job 24 hours a day. (*chuckles*) Wherever you went, whatever you did, you were on the job.

JV: [I played some golf.] Golf had been introduced to Korea by George Decker when George Decker was the 8<sup>th</sup> Army commander. I think he was also commander of U.S. Forces Korea. They built an 8<sup>th</sup> Army golf course on the grounds at 8<sup>th</sup> Army Headquarters. I think it was the most efficiently used land for gold course building. I've never seen an 18 hole golf course on less land than that one, and it was a pretty good golf course. The Koreans took to golf like a duck to water, and all you have to do it look at what's happening in even the LPGA or the men's.

TS: Both of them have a number of very good Korean golfers.

JV: Right. So we had regular golf matches with the Koreans. I played every week, it was called the Prime Minister's Tuesday Morning golf club, that met on Thursdays. (*chuckles*) It had one of the former Prime Ministers of Korea; the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court; the editor of the *Dong-a Ilbo*, which is the *New York Times* of Korea; the Minister of Defense. A great group of people, and we played nine holes of golf and had breakfast and went to work. I played often with the Korean JCS, with three members of the Korean JCS. We were able to get at least three out of that group and form a foursome most Saturdays. And many times played golf with Dick Sneider. So golf. I liked to hunt and the hunting, pheasant hunting, was good in Korea, but I didn't get to do much of it because the time didn't permit being that far away for that long.

TS: You mentioned a few minutes ago about being on the job 24/7. Was that the case that whenever you went out or did anything that you could never really put the job aside?

JV: (*emphatic*) Never. Never.

TS: Is that new? I mean you've had jobs in the past, when you were at Fort Sill, for example, you had lots of time to go out hunting and fishing.

JV: Yes. Right. When you're stationed in the United States, but that was certainly the case in Laos and Vietnam, where you're on the job 24 hours a day. You'd always have communications with you at all times.

TS: Those were, shall we say, war situations in a way and Korea on the surface isn't?

JV: But the potential for war was so great, or perceived to be so great, that it was absolutely essential that the commander himself appear ready at all times, even if you look back and

say okay, nothing happened other than the few incidents that we had and peace was maintained, could have left the radio behind most days and it would have been fine. But what it does is create an atmosphere of readiness among your subordinates that, hey, this is a thing we have to pay attention to at all times.

TS: You're the top of the pyramid here.

JV: Yes. Right. This is something that we have to pay attention to at all times. Clearly the old man is doing it and it behooves us to do it as well.

TS: You saw yourself and you were conscious of the fact that you were setting an example, whether you wanted to or not.

JV: Yes.

TS: That's very good. With that, if it's okay with you....

JV: Time to wrap up for today, and get on to more important duties. [it's the interviewer's wife's birthday]

TS: Yes, Sir.

**END OF INTERVIEW**