

Narrator: Gen John W. Vessey, Jr

Interviewer: Thomas Saylor, Ph.D.

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Avis Vessey comments at times during recordings. Identified: AVIS

TS: Today is Tuesday, 18 September 2012. This is another of our interviews with General John W. Vessey, Jr. My name is Thomas Saylor. Once again we're here at the Vessey residence on the outskirts of Garrison, Minnesota, on a beautiful fall day.

General Vessey, we wanted to start with some additional points you wanted to make about your time in Korea from 1976-79, so I'll let you speak to that.

JV: We covered a bit of the formation of the ROK/US Combined Forces Command, which changed the operational command relationships of the forces defending Korea and put the Koreans more into the game of strategic planning for the defense of Korea. A very important move that was a long needed move, I might say.

TS: Why did it take so long to move to that stage then?

JV: Again, the American look at the Korean situation as being a temporary situation. First, it wasn't a war, it was a police action. We didn't have a peace, we had an armistice. We were there to help the Koreans, but we were certainly going to get out when the opportunity availed itself. We talked about the reluctance of the United States to improve such simple things as barracks and showers and latrines for soldiers that were there. So it was well, this is not a big problem. It will sort itself out in due time when the change comes. Well, the change never came, and of course the main change that never came is that there was never any peace.

So the Combined Forces Command, with a combined Korean/U.S. staff for the major defense operations of the Korean peninsula, was an important change. And as I said, President Park Chung-hee was very much for this. The Koreans provided all the money to build a new headquarters building on the old Yangsan Compound, which was the headquarters from Japanese occupation forces, when Korea was occupied by Japan [before 1945].

But at any rate, it was the beginning of a new era, particularly for the Koreans, and it changed things for the Americans as well. Of course we had a grand ceremony when the Combined Forced Command was formally activated. I hadn't mentioned before, but earlier on, perhaps a year earlier, President Park had made me an honorary member of the Presidential Security Guard. Had a little dinner and [also there was] Cha Ji-chul, who until he was killed was the head of the Presidential Security Force. They presented me with a saber, which was a ceremonial saber given to officers in the Presidential Security Guard. It

was a very fancy saber, and I had it appraised and it was appraised at some dollar figure that was beyond what was within the American law for me to accept. So I in fact turned it in. You turn those gifts in to the State Department and they do something with them. But at any rate, I asked that it be sent to the Crow Wing County Historical Society here in Brainerd.

A year or so later when the Combined Forces Command was activated they were going to have a cake cutting ceremony and some coffee and so forth after the formal parade, and Kim Gye-won, who as we discussed before was a Leavenworth classmate of mine and then Secretary General to the President or we would call Chief of Staff, called and said, "The President wants you and he to cut the cake with the saber that he presented to you (*chuckles*) as a member of the Presidential Security Force."

TS: You hadn't told them up until now of the regulations requiring that you turn this in.

JV: No. Well, they certainly knew of the regulations. But at any rate, there we were with not knowing what to do. I told Kim Gye-won what had happened. He said, "Just get a saber." (*chuckles*) So we scrambled around. Somebody had their old West Point saber in their affairs. I think it was Harry Griffith, who was then the commander of the military advisory group to the Koreans in providing U.S. weapons and so forth. Anyway, we got Harry's saber and when it came time to cut the cake the saber was brought out and of course President Park looked at it and said, "Oh, this is not the right saber!" I said, "Oh, isn't it?!"

TS: So you feigned confusion?

JV: (*chuckles*) Right. That was Kim Gye-won's suggestion that I not tell President Park we had turned this saber in. Of course the President finally figured it out. He admonished me. He said, "That was not a gift to the United States State Department. That was a gift to you and I wanted you to keep it."

TS: Is this saber still at the Crow Wing Historical Society?

JV: I don't know whether it is or not. I have been meaning to go there. Somehow the word got around that I collected sabers. So I was through the years given a number of sabers. The first one I ever got was from the King of Laos. In fact it's in the other room here.

TS: Okay. So this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more you get them, of course ... You're collecting them and then people think, Vessey collects sabers, so...

JV: Right. So in the long run I got a saber from the King of Saudi Arabia. I got things that looked like sabers and turned out to be bayonets or something like that from armed forces all over the world. So by the time I left the military service we had a great knife collection, which is now at the Minnesota Military History Museum, [at Camp Ripley,] or most of it.

TS: This Combined Forces Command, the idea wasn't completely new, was it?

JV: No, no, no, no. It had been batted around for a number of years.

TS: What responsibility do you want to give yourself for bringing this to fruition?

JV: The impetus really was President Carter's withdrawal decision. We really needed to get into action to assuage the Koreans' concerns about the lack of support for the defense of Korea. This was a major step. Fortunately the Koreans had done much more planning than we had. We'd sort of paid lip service to the planning for the idea; there were some old plans floating around. My predecessor had been reasonably serious about it, but not enough to bring it to fruition.

As I think I pointed out in our last interview, Lew Byung-hion, who was the first Korean Deputy Commander of the Combined Forces Command, had himself headed the Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff planning group that did much of the planning, and we were able to integrate that. I had some top notch American officers that we could put together in that group and bring the thing to fruition fairly quickly.

(11:55)

TS: Bringing the Koreans into a more equal relationship?

JV: Yes. Yes.

[REDACTED]

(20:45)

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TS: Right. Let me ask you, I mean in December 1979, you are Vice Chief by this time, how were you brought up to speed on the Soviet SS-20 developments and NATO's possible response to that?

JV: It was very much a part of the United States strategy. Of course a major activity in the United States Army was the development of the Pershing II. So it was a big deal for the Army and for the Vice Chief of the Army.

TS: From a lay perspective, can you describe the Soviet SS-20 program, what that was and what kind of threat it represented?

JV: Of course we knew the Soviets had tactical nuclear weapons. We had tactical nuclear weapons. But they were so-called "battlefield nuclear weapons," plus the intercontinental strategic weapons. Clearly the Soviets could have undertaken nuclear attacks on the

¹ SALT = Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. Two rounds of bilateral talks and corresponding treaties between the U.S. and the Soviet Union on arms control.

² SS-20: Soviet intermediate-range ballistic missile, with nuclear warhead. First deployed 1976.

³ Pershing II: U.S. medium-range ballistic missile, with nuclear warhead. First deployed 1983.

⁴ Warsaw Pact: Cold War era mutual defense treaty, between the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. Founded 1955. Similar to NATO.

capitals of Europe using aircraft, and I suspect using some of their missiles, but it was generally looked upon that the missiles were aimed at the United States and not at the European capitals. But the SS-20 medium range missile was a good modern missile, and they were deployed in a fashion so that they could take under attack any part of Europe. All of the NATO capitals for example.

TS: By definition, as a medium range missile it was unable to reach the United States.

JV: It was unable to reach the United States. It wasn't aimed at the United States. Clearly aimed at NATO. And of course as we've discussed before, at that time and as we know now, the Soviet Union was also dabbling deeply in the politics of the European nations, pushing governments that were anti-NATO, pro-accommodation with the Soviet Union. Understandably the populations of Europe were mixed in their views of this whole business, that suddenly they're under threat.

TS: In West Germany for example at the time, on the one hand we have the CDU⁵ and the FDP,⁶ conservative parties that support this Double-Track decision to deploy Pershing IIs. We also have the Green Party,⁷ which essentially owes a lot of its existence, its beginnings, to an anti-nuclear movement.

JV: Yes. Right.

TS: So you're right. There are different conversations going on in countries about what the nature of the threat is, and the appropriate response.

JV: And not only in Germany, but in the Lowland Countries and France and the other elements of NATO. In my view the deployment of the Pershing II, the successful deployment of the Pershing IIs and the ground-launched cruise missiles into the NATO nations, was one of the major reasons that the Cold War eventually came to an end. We matched, we more than matched the Soviets with those weapons systems, and of course you wound up with an agreement. We took out our nuclear medium range nuclear systems and the Soviets took out theirs.

TS: Because the SALT II treaty, the SALT II negotiations rather, that danced around these issues of weapons systems and delivery systems, ultimately there is an agreement signed to limit strategic launchers, in June 1979. President Carter and [Soviet leader] Leonid Brezhnev⁸ sign a treaty, but SALT II is never ratified by the U.S. Senate. So we have difficult negotiations and conversations even domestically about appropriate response here.

⁵ CDU: Christian Democratic Union; post-1945 liberal-conservative political party in Germany. Center-right.

⁶ FDP: Free Democratic Party; post-1945 economic liberal political party in Germany. Center-right.

⁷ Green Party: environmental/green political party in Germany, founded 1979. Center-left.

⁸ Leonid Brezhnev (1906-82); leader of the Soviet Union (officially General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party) from 1964 until his death in 1982.

JV: Right. At that time the Soviets are developing the SS-18,⁹ which was a big, long range nuclear weapons delivery system with multiple warheads that was clearly a major threat to the United States.

TS: As Vice Chief of Staff by the end of 1979, talk about the kind of conversations that were going on at the highest levels of the U.S. Army about the Soviet SS-20 program and the appropriate U.S. response.

(31:00)

JV: The appropriate U.S. response had already been determined; that is, develop the Pershing II and the ground launch cruise missile system. What hadn't been done is working out all the agreements for deploying those weapons systems.

TS: Did these weapons systems have to be, in a sense, sold to NATO members? I mean the idea.

JV: Yes. I think the weapons systems were sold to NATO in the beginning, that, Yes, this is the answer. We will answer. But saying, we're going to put a ground launched cruise missile station in your backyard, here at this particular place in the United Kingdom or Sicily, or we're going to deploy the Pershing II to this particular spot in Germany or the Netherlands, that hadn't been worked out. So that was left to be done. By the time I left the Vice Chief's job to the Chairman's job, the sites had been picked, but the arguments weren't over.

TS: What do you remember about site selection and the arguments in that three year period when you were Vice Chief, about moving this forward?

JV: Frankly I don't remember a lot of the details, other than that the arguments were vitriolic in a number of cases.

TS: Talk about that, because this is a point of tension.

JV: It was by and large worked out through the NATO councils and the NATO military committee, so we had a number of places to influence it. Of course for the Americans, our part was to ensure to help the local military establishments assure the local people that these things were safe and that there was no danger to them. And that in fact their nations, and NATO in general, was more secure by having the missiles deployed to these particular sites. You remember we had huge demonstrations everywhere I think in NATO where it was about to happen, with the opposition parties. I remember going to Britain and demonstrations were primarily women demonstrating against the deployments of the weapons.

⁹ SS-18: Soviet long range nuclear weapons delivery system with multiple warheads. First deployed by 1977.

TS: How did that strike you, those protests? Because we weren't having the same protests here.

JV: Yes.

TS: How did that make you feel? I mean how did you find yourself thinking about and responding to those, to seeing that?

JV: The first thing you do is imagine yourself in the same position, if somebody said they were moving a nuclear weapon launching facility into the woods across Crow Wing County here, and we're facing an avowed enemy that also has nuclear weapons and particular weapons that can probably target that site. How do you feel about it? Well, it seems like they might find another place for it.

TS: Did you make trips specifically to NATO countries to talk about this?

JV: When I was Chairman I did, but not as Vice Chief.

TS: As Vice Chief how were you involved in negotiations or discussions circled around this question of deployment?

JV: Only peripherally. As Vice Chief the major job was to see that our part, that the Army's part in this, was carried out. That is, that we completed the development of the Pershing II on time, that the crews were well trained for the Pershing II. Without any protests, it was a huge job. If you've ever looked at the Pershing II transporter system and then looked at German roads, just the idea of taking one of those things down the road in Germany or anywhere in the world required extremely well trained soldiers and leaders to be able to do it. I mean that was basically our job as Vice Chief.

TS: What made the Pershing II itself such an effective weapon?

JV: Cheap transistors. A wonderful guidance system that we could build for it. It was the most modern missile system that we had at that time.

TS: Is that because of the guidance system that you're talking about? Is that what made it so effective?

JV: The guidance system, the warhead. The Pershing II was a wonderful development. It was developed in a fairly short period of time, and deployed on time. I think we were actually under budget or close to the budget. In a way, it's a demonstration of what can be done in the defense procurement business, and in a way it's a tribute to the idiocy of what was going on in the world at that time. That is, I've forgotten what the cost of developing and fielding the Pershing II was, but it was not insignificant and required a tremendous amount of effort. And it was barely deployed when we came to an agreement with the Soviets to eliminate both the S-20s and the P-II.

TS: But the value in those systems, as you alluded to earlier, was that they represented the deterrent effect.

JV: Exactly. Exactly. And it was a demonstration to the Soviet Union that you're not going to win this nuclear business.

TS: Concurrent to this we have the ongoing Strategic Arms Limitation Talks that have been going on for a number of years. They pre-date of course your time as Vice Chief. How closely did the United States Army follow those talks and the agreement that was signed in June 1979, which did limit strategic launchers but was never ratified?

JV: Closely, because the JCS position is very important to that. So the Army staff, like the staffs of all the services, have a section devoted to supporting the Chief of Staff of the Army and his role as a member of the JCS on the nuclear issues and positions to take and advice to give to the President.

TS: What kind of conversations did you have with Chief of Staff Meyer about this?

JV: First I'll point out we put some of our best officers in the part of the staff examining the nuclear weapons and the position of the United States, and tried to come up with a rational and sensible position for the Army to take in the JCS when it came to, how did we view the proposed agreements.

TS: How did the Army view those proposed agreements? Or was there more than one opinion within the Army itself at this highest level?

JV: It has escaped my memory, to tell you the truth. First, the nuclear weapons issues, the strategic nuclear weapons issues, were not number one on the Army's agenda.

TS: When you were Vice Chief.

JV: Right. They were important to the United States, yes, and it seemed to me that we agreed with the rest of the JCS on the SALT II agreement, that it was okay.

TS: What other questions or concerns ranked higher, were above this then? One might think nuclear weapons or nuclear weapons reduction are a serious matter, and yet you said were not the most important thing in the Army at the time. What other concerns...

JV: We were trying to rebuild the Army at that time. We were trying to assure that we could field the conventional force, our commitment to NATO. We talked earlier about the greater integration of the active Army with the reserve components, particularly with the National Guard, and the building of the Round Out divisions. And making sure that our own tactical nuclear weapons were in good shape; not only did we know how to use them, but that they were safe and secure and reliable.

We had the so-called Big Five procurement issues, plus a number of other major things that we were procuring: the multiple-launch rocket system, the so-called engineer fighting vehicle, all of which were big money programs for the Army and all of which we were trying to push into production as fast as we possibly could, to get both the development and production budgets for those programs in shape. Plus continuing to refine our recruiting system to give us the human power that we needed to man the Army. I would say the other major thing we were doing was refining the training system for the Army. This goes back to the Abrams vision, and we were attempting to fulfill that vision. We activated the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California.

TS: Was this something that was redeveloped or was this brand new?

JV: Brand new. Up until that time, when you maneuvered troops in a force-on-force maneuver, the commanders on each side would deploy their forces and when they'd have a contact there'd be umpires out there that would then evaluate the potential firing positions and the fire power available and then make scores and make some judgment on who had won that particular engagement. It's as though last night when the [National Football League] Broncos were playing the Falcons,¹⁰ what you do is line up the two teams and then run the plays but don't have any football. (*chuckles*) Then the officials would decide how the play came out.

TS: And spot the ball for the next non-play.

(48:15)

JV: Right. But our goal was to take all the bang, bang you're dead out of the maneuver training, for the Army particularly. Now the Air Force had done this. During the Viet Nam War the Air Force developed a program called Red Flag, which was a very modern training system for fighter pilots. It became the gold standard of the world for training fighter pilots. What we were trying to do is look at what the Air Force had done and bring this to the ground battle. It's a little more difficult to bring it to the ground battle, because you have many more people involved whereas you have two or three fighters on each side against each other in the air. In the ground battle you have maybe hundreds of tanks and many hundreds of infantrymen. But we did it, both with electronics which were fairly primitive in those days compared with what they are today. But we actually did it.

We developed laser systems that had about the same range and accuracy as a given weapon system. For the rifle, about the same range and accuracy as the rifle. If you could hit the target with a real rifle you could hit it with the laser system, and the same with the tank guns. Then we had detectors to detect these lasers, that were on the soldiers on the battlefield or on the tanks. If you shot your tank gun or your anti-tank weapon at a tank and you were actually accurate enough, it would set off a smoke grenade in that tank, and it would also set off an electronic system that stopped the tank and took it out of the fight. It was a huge jump forward from what we had done earlier in maneuver training.

¹⁰ Atlanta defeated Denver, 27-21, on Monday 17 September 2012.

TS: This sounds like a quantum leap. How did you assess the results to ensure that it really made a qualitative difference in training soldiers?

JV: The whole goal in the past, training soldiers, was training in the competence of the use of the weapon and training in physical fitness and training in tactics and then putting them on the battlefield. But it was all a big jump. The jump on the battlefield. So the first day's casualties for a new unit were always probably the highest of the war, unless they met disaster of some kind later on. But in the general run of things the first day casualties were certainly much more than we wanted, but also could be decisive on the battlefield. If you collapsed on the first day, day two comes tomorrow and it gets harder. So the whole idea is to have people immediately prepared to go to battle, so that the battlefield is not new to them, that they know what to expect.

TS: Because by the time a soldier actually steps onto a battlefield, we've spent months if not years and a lot of financial resources in training them to get to that point.

JV: Exactly. Exactly. Huge investment. Not only in him and his equipment and so forth. But at any rate, we were confident that this would work. There was some debate in the Army. Back in Abrams' time, we assembled the retired four stars, all the active duty four stars, and Abrams ran them through exercises. They were asked, is this a good idea that we do this? Our idea was that we'd send units through this training program at the National Training Center, then grade them and tell them what they did right and what they did wrong, but make it an outline for the training that they needed to go through in the year ahead.

TS: So reading these lessons back, in a sense, to improve the training before people even come to training.

JV: Right. And for the particular units that went through the National Training Center, in the past if a commander did poorly in the maneuver you made a decision: you relieve this guy and put somebody new in who would likely do better? We decided that we would not use this as a tool for relieving commanders, but actually as a tool to give to the commander so that he himself could then go train his unit, could see what the deficiencies were, what the actual battlefield showed up as deficiencies, and he could go train his unit and then in theory come back a year later or something like that and have those deficiencies corrected.

Some of the old timers thought that this will disclose the weaknesses of the commanders for soldiers, and that soldiers will not have confidence in their commanders and that we didn't want the soldiers to know that their commanders weren't geniuses. *(chuckles)* I remember that I went out to inspect the first brigade going through the National Training Center. It was supposed to be a good brigade. Came from the 1st Division. There were two things that happened. We had this force-on-force, this instrumented force-on-force maneuver that they had to go through, and then we had a live fire exercise that they had to go through where they fired against pop up dummies and things like that. The force-on-force maneuver, the whole of the National Training Center wasn't completed at that time, so the critiques by the company and platoon level were

being held in tents with sand tables that were replicas of the terrain over which the unit maneuvered.

I went into one of those critiques and was not identified as being in the critique. I came in the back of the tent and the critique was being conducted by one of the evaluators at the Training Center. What he was doing was asking each of the soldiers in this particular platoon to explain what happened in the battle. They got to this one particular soldier and asked him what was his part in the battle and he said, "The lieutenant told Smith and me to take the track," which was their infantry fighting vehicle, a M113 at that particular time, "and go up this hill here. We got up to the top of the hill and we could see we was in a screwed up situation." The lieutenant jumped in and said, "Yes, and I screwed it up. My reconnaissance was incomplete." And he turned to his platoon and said, "I put you guys in an impossible situation because of a decision that I made, and I want you to know I won't do that again. I'll make a better reconnaissance next time and know more about what I'm doing. But I'll need your help to do it." I thought, wow - this thing is a success. If we can replicate this in every platoon in the United States Army, we've got a winner.

TS: Is that in a sense what you were envisioning?

JV: That's what we were looking for.

TS: Did you let on that you were in the back of this meeting?

JV: No. I left and went and radioed Shy Meyer and told him, "We've got a winner, and we should go ahead and spend [the money]." Because we still didn't know whether we would continue to do this. This was sort of a sample of what to do.

TS: Did this National Training Center, as it got up and running, become a model or a one off for future training?

JV: It became a model for future training. It's enormously expensive, because it's transportation costs. You know, to ship somebody from Fort Drum, New York, to ship a tank battalion to Fort Irwin, California, with all their equipment ... And of course what we did is, we trained a so-called Red Force, an opposition force, in Soviet tactics and we got either replicas of Soviet equipment or some Soviet equipment that we actually bought on the market in Third World places. So we had a Soviet force there. We probably had the best trained Soviet tank battalion and mechanized infantry battalion in the world. Their duty was to oppose our forces using only Soviet tactics. They could not deviate from Soviet tactics. Of course that was tough for them, because sometimes Soviet tactics would get you into trouble.

TS: But as a training exercise it had to be that way.

JV: Yes. But that was the model for the revolution in training.

TS: As Vice Chief, this is something that interested you?

JV: Not only interested me, it was a major project because first, it's big money, whether or not we're going to continue to do that.

TS: As much as you were able during your years as Vice Chief, what additional projects or interests did you pursue or want to move on?

JV: The training, the development and production of the new equipment, and the recruiting command. Those were the three major focuses of my life.

TS: On a continuum from not successful at all to completely successful, how would you place your performance on all three of those after three years?

JV: I don't know about my performance, but I would say the Army made great progress in all of those. We got all five into production, the budgets were under control reasonably, we won the battle with the tank. I don't know whether we've talked about that one hearing with the tank or not.

TS: Talk about it now, because if we did it was a while ago.

JV: The M-1 tank, the Abrams tank it was eventually named, was a radical change. It had a turbine engine in contrast to the diesel engines that had been in all the preceding tanks. It had very modern armor, had a laser range finder that we thought had a good first shot jump on Soviet tanks, and had a new 120mm gun that we were convinced would penetrate Soviet armor.

TS: But the M-1 or the Abrams tank, the idea, this dragged on for a while, the development and the procurement process.

JV: It did. It did. In fact the predecessor to the Abrams tank had been started a long time ago then was cancelled and then restarted during the Nixon-Ford years and carried on through the Carter years. But it was an expensive tank. It was considerably more expensive than the earlier tanks. But it brought speed on the battlefield. It brought first round hit capability better than we'd ever had plus protection for the crew far better than anything we had in the arsenal at that time. But there was a lot of political opposition to it. A lot of people in the Congress thought we were overspending.

TS: I remember some of these debates. How do you remember the difference of opinion on this?

JV: It wasn't a regular newspaper feature, but it was oft times repeated and the opponents provided plenty of publicity. There was an organized anti-M-1 tank lobby, a woman named Dina Rasor.¹¹ She stirred up a lot of anti-M-1 business. I guess it was in the spring or early

¹¹ Dina Rasor (b. 1956); investigator, journalist and author. In 1981, Rasor founded the Project on Military Oversight, a watchdog group.

in the winter the year following my return to the Vice Chief's job, a hearing was called by one of the subcommittees of the House Armed Services Committee. Sam Stratton,¹² I remember, was the chairman of the committee, a congressman from New York, and generally considered pro-defense. He was a Democrat who was pro-defense, as long as it had to do with procuring something in the Watervliet Arsenal, which happened to be in his district. *(chuckles)* But otherwise he was skeptical. Anyway, he called a hearing on fairly short notice. He'd asked for Shy Meyer to come, and Shy either had something he was doing somewhere else in the world or he found something to do somewhere else in the world. So it meant that I was invited.

I'd been pretty well up on the development of the tank when I was Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, but after three years in Korea I had other things on my mind. *(chuckles)* I found out that I had to make this hearing mid-week, the following week. So I called my aide, a fellow named Bill Nash, and told him to set up a trip to Fort Knox, where the tank was being tested.

I generally knew what was going on. The GAO¹³ had criticized the Army for not testing the tank adequately and there were a number of things that the GAO contended that the tank didn't do properly and that the Army needed to fix, so that tank was sent back for more tests. This testing was being done at Fort Knox. So I told Bill Nash to arrange a trip to Fort Knox for Monday. Called and told them we'd be down there Monday, and told them that I would like to drive the tank through the test range. And that I would like to fire it through the test range. We headed out.

(1:09:45)

TS: They knew you were coming.

JV: Oh yes. Right. The program manager was coming from Detroit and the commander at Fort Knox would be there. We got there pretty early, and we got there earlier than anybody else got there. It seems that there were weather problems in Detroit or something like that and the program manager hadn't yet arrived. The commander at Fort Knox had some difficulty. Anyway, Bill Nash and I wound up with maybe six or seven sergeants that were out there doing the testing, and the one in charge said, "Sir, we got the word that you wanted to drive the tank through the test range." I said, "That's right, Sergeant." He said, "Well, first Sir, I understand that you've never driven an M-1 tank." I said, "No, I haven't." He said, "Well maybe it would be a good idea if you just rode it through the test range the first time." I said, "Sergeant, that's a very good idea. We'll just do that." So they put me in the commander's hatch of this tank.

TS: Which had a crew of how many?

JV: Crew of four. We drive through the test range. *(chuckles)* I've forgotten how long it took, but by the time we got back I was mud from head to foot and my ribs were battered from the battering they took from being banged against the sides of the commander's hatch of

¹² Samuel S. Stratton (1916-90); Democratic U.S. Representative from New York, served 1959-89.

¹³ GAO: General Accounting Office

the tank. We got back there and we sat down with the sergeants to talk about the tank and how the testing was going. It occurred to me, it probably should have been self-evident a long time earlier, that the people who knew more about that tank and what it could do and what it couldn't do were that group of sergeants sitting in front of me.

By this time the program manager had shown up, as had the commander of Fort Knox. So we were down to details about what needed to be done with the tank and the sergeants had such things as, the air cleaner was very important on that tank. It turns out that getting at the air cleaner to clean it was very difficult. The way to open that hatch was almost guaranteed that, unless the soldier had somebody looking over his shoulder to make sure that he undertook this difficult task, he'd probably skip it. So they said, we need to fix that, and a few other things. And they were relatively minor things that needed to be fixed. But by and large that crew was very favorable about the tank.

TS: Let me just ask, in situations like that when you have enlisted men, even sergeants, even senior sergeants, talking with someone like yourself who walks in there with four stars on his shoulder, how do you read conversations like that to ensure that people don't just tell you what you want to hear? Because after all, they don't have four star generals come see them all the time.

JV: I made it very clear what I had to do. I said that I was going to a hearing that was probably going to decide the fate of the tank, whether we were going to get it or not, that if this subcommittee voted no, we probably weren't going to get the tank. So I needed to be as informed as I possibly could be about what was good and what was bad about the tank and what we needed to do and whether it was underway. And they understood that.

So by the time the day was over it became clear to me that if I needed any backup at that hearing, it was in that group. Not the major general, because I knew he was going to be there anyway. So I picked out two of those sergeants and I asked them if they were married, and they said, yes they were. I asked them if their wives would object if they came with me to Washington late that afternoon, and if they had a good fresh green uniform that they could wear, and they agreed that all that was possible. So we put them on the airplane.

The hearing was to be the following day. I called Sam Stratton and told him that I was bringing a couple of extra people, that I'd have these two sergeants from the test team. He said, "You can't bring them. You're the witness. You're the only witness we want to hear from." I said, "Mr. Chairman, these people know more about this tank than I do, and what I'd like to do is bring them so that you could ask them questions if you have to." He said, "You can bring them, but they can't talk." So I said, "Thank you."

Congressman Bill Nichols¹⁴ from Alabama was on the same subcommittee, a World War II vet. Had lost a leg in World War II as an artillery forward observer. He and I had a little bit in common. I hadn't lost a leg, but we'd both been artillery forward observers in World War II. From Alabama. Wonderful, dedicated. The type of guy that you wish you could see 435 of them in the Congress. Anyway, I called Congressman Nichols and told him

¹⁴ William F. Nichols (1918-88); Democratic U.S. Representative from Alabama, served 1967 until his death in 1988.

the same thing I'd told Sam Stratton and I said, "I called the chairman and he's told me I can bring them but they couldn't talk."

(off task comment deleted)

The next day we showed up for the hearing and the first witness was the Deputy Director of the General Accounting Office. He's reading his testimony. He probably never saw a tank himself, but this is the report that he had. So he was talking about the deficiencies of the tank and these two sergeants are sitting there fidgeting, and Bill Nichols interrupted the testimony. He said, "Mr. Chairman, I believe that one of the sergeants has something to say about what Mr. Smith is testifying to." Then Bill Nichols and Sam Stratton had an argument about what could be done about this. Finally they closed the hearing.

We all went out and we came back in and Chairman Stratton said, "Mr. Nichols has agreed to give up his first round of questioning if he can ask one of the sergeants here a question now." Bill Nichols said, in his wonderful Alabama accent, "Sergeant, it looks as though you were a little concerned about something Mr. Smith was saying." And this soldier stood up, put his thumbs down the seams of his trousers, and said, "I did, Sir. Sir, that's a bunch of crap." *(laughter)* I don't think I can justify this argument totally, but that saved the M-1 tank.

TS: You think so?

JV: It was all downhill from there for the GAO.

TS: What did the sergeant say that was so important to this debate?

JV: He said that that's wrong. That it's not correct. That what the GAO chief is testifying to is incorrect. That that's not true.

TS: Because we have four other programs at the same time that you're also monitoring or trying move forward, right? With equal success?

JV: We didn't do that with any of the others, but the others came through in much better shape. The tank seemed to be the target of most of the opposition.

TS: When we look at these five programs that were kind of stuck in place, or running in place I guess we might say, they all are moved forward during your time as Vice Chief.

JV: Yes.

TS: Which coincides with the decision by the incoming Reagan administration, for part of that time, to appropriate or get more funds for the military. So can we figure out really how to decide what moved these programs forward? How much do you want to say your own involvement in marshaling these forward, and how much is it a budgetary question?

JV: It's all of the above. I don't want to paint myself as the savior of all five of those programs, because we had hundreds if not thousands of people working on each of those

programs and all really busting their tails to make the program a success. But it was my job to make sure that we did have good program managers and that they got the support from the rest of the Army staff and the Army budget to do what needed to be done. I think the two that were the most difficult were the Abrams and the Apache.

TS: What was the challenge with the Apache helicopter?

JV: Again it was much more expensive than the helicopter it was replacing. There were many people even within the Army that couldn't see spending that much money for each new Apache. But with its capability and its Hellfire missile system it was one of those game changers on the battlefield, in my view, and we needed to get it into production.

Being in a hearing in the Congress and being asked the question: Did you know you can buy five Cobras for the price of one Apache? Why isn't it better to go ahead and buy the five Cobras? At that particular time my youngest son was an instructor in the Cobra, and I was getting constant reminders from him of crews that were getting killed in training in the Cobra, and of course with the Apache one of the major things that we wanted to do was keep the crew alive. In addition to having a battlefield system that was successful, we wanted one that kept the crew alive when it was under fire or even hit or went down. It was much improved over the Cobra. Of course that was my point to that particular committee of the Congress. Hey, our major investment is in the crew that's in that helicopter, and we're going to keep that crew alive even if the helicopter itself is destroyed. **(1:27:00)**

TS: You've mentioned a couple of hearings before Congressional committees or subcommittees. Did you begin to get the hang of how those hearings work? Is there a pattern to what to expect and how to manage those?

JV: Oh, yes. Correct. Each of the services has a congressional liaison crew, and you usually put very good people in that job. For example, Fred Weyand, who became Chief of Staff of the Army, once had that job. John McCain¹⁵ had it for the Navy at one time. So that's the sort of people that the services put in that job.

TS: Top people, because it's of great significance.

JV: Right. Not only are they top people, but they're people that can get along with everybody.

TS: What makes a good liaison person?

JV: What makes a good liaison person with the Congress is one that can at least get some insight into the staff of even those who are violently opposed to the defense budget. And understand what the arguments are, so that when you as the witness at a hearing go up there, that you know who's going to oppose your point of view – where they're coming

¹⁵ John S. McCain (b. 1936); Republican U.S. Senator from Arizona, first elected 1986. Previously U.S. Navy captain and naval aviator, served 1958-81. POW in North Korea, 1967-73.

from and why they're coming from that particular position, whether it's because of their constituency or their own personal background or their staffers that are feeding them information or whatever it is. So that you're well armed and not surprised by something in the hearing. And then keep your cool. (*chuckles*)

Great line from a soldier, a replacement in the Viet Nam War. He was asked why he got off the airplane in Tan Son Nhat in the middle of the night with his dark glasses on. The reporter said, "You've got dark glasses on and it's the middle of the night. Why do you have your dark glasses on?" The soldier said, "It's cool, man, it's cool. If you ain't got cool, you ain't got nothing."

TS: Is that the way you tried to approach these hearings too?

JV: So I would say, "If you ain't got cool, you ain't got nothing," when you're going to a congressional hearing.

TS: Did you get the impression sometimes that you were being baited?

JV: Sure. Sure.

TS: So it's verbal jousting, in a way?

JV: Yes.

TS: But you still have an agenda. You're there to give testimony or to make a point of view as well.

JV: Yes. Don't lose sight of the objective when you're up there.

TS: Do you feel that in a sense these experiences you had when you were Vice Chief with committee chairs served you well when you were Chairman of JCS?

JV: It sure helped. (*chuckles*)

TS: You didn't take long to answer that one. The other thing you mentioned as one of your three tasks was recruitment. This is interesting, because it's now since the early 1970s that we have transitioned to all-volunteer, non-conscription force. What are your objectives, or what are your goals with now taking on the recruitment question?

JV: First is ensuring that we have the right people in the recruiting command. First, it's expensive to recruit. Ideally you want the recruiter to meet his or her objectives out there and get the people into the service, but you also want the people they get in to complete their training and go on into the unit that uses their particular skill effectively, and that the person has a successful tour in the United States Army and leaves with an honorable discharge and perhaps some sort of a token for outstanding service. Or re-enlists and stays in the Army.

TS: So getting past that raw number of did you deliver X number of bodies.

JV: Right. It isn't so much how many, but what was the quality of the person that you enlisted.

TS: That suggests that we want to do more pre-enlistment screening of potential candidates?

JV: Yes. Right. And not only that, but how do we incentivize the recruiter personally to enlist people that are going to be successful soldiers and not just fill their quota?

TS: So how do you incentivize?

JV: Money, pride, next assignment.

TS: There are a number of carrots you can dangle. Because you mentioned I think last time that jobs in the recruiting command were not necessarily plum jobs, or considered plum jobs.

JV: Not considered plum jobs.

TS: How did you feel about incentivizing with money? A skeptic might say, boy that comes off kind of like a car salesman mentality.

JV: It does indeed, and we're not able to do much of that other than offer some prizes or something like that. The main incentive is career enhancement. That is, if you do well in this job it gives you an opening to a better job somewhere else. And the first way you do that is put somebody to head the recruiting command who is bound to be promoted after he heads the recruiting command.

TS: So we don't want people in any level of this recruiting process who are at the end of their career, because that removes the incentive.

JV: Right. Right. But again, at times you'll find people who are at the end of their career, who know how to do this. For example, people who have done it once and then gone on and been successful that want to come back to recruiting command and go ahead and be a recruiter. Take advantage of that, for the successful ones. But again, it's developing the measures that measure what they do, that is, keeping track of what happens to the soldiers they recruit.

TS: Does this mean the U.S. Army is becoming more data driven in a sense?

JV: Right. It is data driven.

TS: What you're describing sounds like, for the education world, tracking things through. We look not only at do you bring in numbers, can you recruit, but can you retain and can you train and can you turn out successful graduates?

JV: Right. Same problem. And really it's very parallel. You want someone who not only winds up with a successful career, but recognizes that that success came because he did in fact go to Concordia or joined the Army and he or she is a spokesman for the Army afterward. The Marine Corps has done this much better than the Army, through the years. Once a Marine, always a Marine. The Marine Corps recruiter has an easier job than any of the other recruiters.

TS: How come? I mean, we think of the kind of reputations of all the services. How is it that they have the easiest time?

JV: They have a fancy uniform and a song that everybody can sing. (*chuckles*)

TS: If it only was that easy, right? We look at the statistical part, the analysis part of recruiting and retaining, is there a front end? Is it changing the visual experience or the initial experience for a potential recruit when he or she walks into a recruiting office? Does that change, the kind of experience that that young person has?

JV: You want them to have a great experience. We've gone cyclically through this business of promising benefits for joining. Have help with your college education. You get a nice room to sleep in and so on and so forth. Get your choice of training. Join up and I'll make sure you don't have to be an infantryman and work hard. I'll get you a job as a clerk in the commissary or something like that.

TS: These stories are legendary from back in the day of people being promised anything and everything. It was patently false, right?

JV: Right. Once the Army gets its hooks into you, you're going where they want you to go. (*chuckles*)

TS: I guess people should know that up front, right?

JV: Right. Be honest.
(1:38:30)

TS: So when a young woman or young man comes into a recruiting office, did you help to develop or want to develop some kind of standard procedure that happens? When a young person comes in, of what that initial recruiting experience is like?

JV: It would be nice to have a standard procedure. At that particular time we didn't know enough about whether a standard procedure would work. We were still trying a whole bunch of different things to make it work. All the way from the experience in the recruiting office to what sort of advertising we put in at the football games or wherever it happened

to be. And of course the Vice Chief's job is just picking the top people and holding them accountable and reviewing what they're doing and giving them the support, budgetary support, and the pats on the backside that they need to get the job done. And blessedly, I'm sure that between Shy Meyer and me, we both take credit for it, but I'm not sure which one of us deserves the credit for picking General Max Thurman to head the recruiting command in our time. It was probably one of the better decisions that we made in that particular period.

TS: You mentioned his very positive impact on this whole process.

JV: Yes.

TS: You've mentioned more than once about picking the right people for assignments. You literally can't have your finger on the M-1 Abrams tank and recruiting offices, et cetera, et cetera. But you've talked about over the years having a fairly good hand in identifying the right people for the right positions. How would you describe your ability to do that? Because not everybody gets that right.

JV: I'm sure I didn't get it right a number of times too. (*chuckles*) It's (A) knowing the people, knowing what they've done, knowing their education, knowing their background, what have been their successes, what have been their failures.

TS: Okay. That's a paper CV. I can read a paper CV too.

JV: Well, it's not the paper. The paper only helps you decide who you get to talk to.

TS: Okay. That's what I want to get onto. When you identify somebody, one of your subordinates hands you a folder and says, "General, we've got some candidates, potential candidates." And you look through the paper CVs and you say, "I want these four, based on..." Then when you get people in conversation, what are you looking for, when you talk to people?

JV: First, their grasp of the subject matter. More important than anything else is, how you would expect them to deal with people. Even the people you pick, if they're not team builders, they're not going to succeed. I don't have any outline of how to do this particularly for any given job.

TS: What you're describing is intangibles, though.

JV: Yes.

TS: And so there is the tangible record, which is a two dimensional thing, but there's also this third dimension. Is it a gut feeling you get from talking to someone?

JV: Yes. And then you have to go and talk to people who know them, people they've worked for in whom you have confidence, people that have worked for them in whom you have confidence.

TS: So it's once again what's been important to you from our past conversations, is personal relations. It's how well do these people, how do they get along, how are they part of team building or cooperating. That's important to you. That's what you're describing, I think.

JV: Right. What sort of characters are they? What sort of ethical stance do they take? What's right and what's wrong?

TS: Given this outline that we're talking about, what would be something that would rule a candidate out for you? What's something you could hear from a subordinate or a former coworker that you would say, on paper looks good, but no.

JV: Abusive to subordinates. Dishonesty. Questionable honesty. I've often said that, for choosing somebody, I'd like to play eighteen holes of golf with them and sit in a nighttime poker session.

TS: That says a lot about intangibles. Really feeling comfortable about and learning about someone out of the uniform and beyond their CV.

JV: Right.

TS: How often do you feel over the years that your instincts helped you get it right?

JV: I'd say usually. But I've been wrong.

TS: You've made a lot of decisions over the years. If you were batting a thousand, you'd be on someone else's team.

JV: Right.

TS: A couple other things before we break here, if it's okay. I just want to make sure we don't forget to talk about, because of your connections to Asia in the mid-'70s, the Taiwan Relations Act of 1979 and how that impacted military or U.S. Army strategic thinking for the area, for the region. Again, just to recap, the U.S. recognizes the People's Republic of China and breaks relations with the Republic of China-Taiwan. Big deal or not such a big deal for us at the time?

JV: It was a big deal for the armed forces, because we had through the years provided a lot of equipment and training. And in fact we continued to do that after the Taiwan Relations Act. I'm trying to remember the first guy we sent over there, an ex-CIA who later came back and was in the Defense Department. Richard Lilly. [REDACTED] [REDACTED] knew him very well. Grealy had him and his

wife and Avis and me over for dinner so that we could talk with him about what we could do within the law and what we couldn't do, because we had a lot of good personal contacts with the Taiwan defense forces. How to maintain those without breaking the law. So it was a particularly difficult time for us.

Anna Chennault was a great supporter of Korea. In fact Anna Chennault and I, and I've forgotten who else was there, but we were two of the principle U.S. representatives to Park Chung-hee's funeral, and of course she was a great supporter of Taiwan. Anna and I had a number of conversations about the Taiwan Relations Act and its impact on the United States.

TS: How did those conversations go?

JV: Her point was the same: how do we stay within the law and still maintain the relations that we have? Because we certainly don't want Taiwan to be anti-U.S.

TS: At the same time we're entering into a new chapter in our relationships with ...

JV: ... mainland China. Right.

TS: What did it mean for the Army as far as a reset of our strategic thinking for the region?

JV: There wasn't so much for the Army as it was for the U.S. and the JCS. Certainly in the past Taiwan was an easy stopping place for aircraft and ships, and we were welcomed. So now it meant sailing past or flying over.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TS: From your perspective of the United States military, did you see the Taiwan Relations Act as a step in the right direction or maybe not?

JV: It was probably something that had to be done in order to further our relationships with the People's Republic, but it wasn't viewed well in other parts of East Asia either by our other allies, particularly the South Koreans, who had had a long and fairly close relationship with Taiwan. But in the long run I think it has turned out okay.

TS: The last thing I want to ask you about, before 1979 is over [there is] another event I think we should talk about. The Soviet Union invades Afghanistan on 24 December 1979. How surprised were you or were those around you in the highest levels of the military by that?

JV: I frankly don't remember being surprised. My own reaction was, how dumb can they get? By that time I had read a number of accounts of the various British invasions of Afghanistan [in the 19th century] and the calamities that had ensued.

TS: Not a lot of happy endings in those stories.

JV: No.

TS: And so Afghanistan continues to be a place where large outside powers come in and find things not to their liking or to their preconceived notions.

JV: Yes.

TS: The Soviets, as you viewed this from a military perspective, what were they doing there, and did they have the right forces to accomplish that?

JV: They obviously didn't, and for us it was an opportunity to test things that we couldn't otherwise test.

TS: By searching out partners like the mujahedin or other Afghan resistance parties?

JV: Right.

TS: How involved were you with those kind of negotiations or those kind of decisions to search out...

JV: Very little. Very little.

(1:54:50)

TS: Were you kept informed on a need to know basis on what systems we were shipping over there?

JV: Oh, yes.

TS: Talk about that. We know that we developed a relationship with a number of groups. Some of those relationships after the Soviets left turned out in different ways, but nonetheless we had them in the '80s.

JV: Yes. Of course one of the things that we did is we let Stinger missiles go in there. I for one was chary about letting Stinger missiles go anywhere. In the first place, we thought our technology was better than anyone else's. If you get it into the fight that you're not involved in, sooner or later the Soviets were going to get it as well as the people using it. But we did it, and of course it was very successful in making the Soviets finally decide to get out of there.

TS: In your time as Vice Chief – this is almost a full three years that this happens – how often was this a concern? I mean, the Soviets were a concern, but how much was the Soviet presence in Afghanistan something that was on the front burner, something to be concerned about?

JV: Generally, looking at it personally at that time, the Soviets are in a mess that they deserved to be in. If they're dumb enough to go into Afghanistan, it clearly was a tragedy for the Afghan people but at the same time it was a tragedy for the Soviet Union.

TS: That invasion and ten year occupation of course stretched through your three years as Vice Chief and through your three years as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and beyond. I want to pick that story up again when you're the Chairman, because the Soviets are still going to be there.

JV: Right.

TS: That's the last specific thing I wanted to bring up about your Vice Chief period. Obviously I suspect I've neglected some things that you may want to bring up.

JV: I know we discussed it, but I'm not sure we recorded it. After the Chun Doo-hwan coup in Korea, and the trial of Kim Dae-jung in Korea for the Kwangju Uprising and his being sentenced to death, the relationships between the United States and Korea deteriorating, at least the relationships here in Washington and in Seoul deteriorating as a result of all that.

TS: That's one thing. I'll write that down so we can take a break here soon, but I want to make sure that while we're on the train that I identify these things for you.

JV: But at the moment I think we've covered...

TS: The five weapons systems and then training and recruitment, the other two main pillars that you mentioned. We covered a number of international incidents, relations with the Soviet Union, major Double-Track decision. We didn't touch on the B-1 bomber program, although that's of course another program that is shelved and then resurrected, as it were, by the Reagan administration.

JV: I think one of the things we haven't mentioned is the relationship with Clifford Alexander, who was Secretary of the Army during the Carter administration.

TS: Okay. I'll write that down and we can talk about that relationship, because obvious Clifford Alexander is a person that is central to that narrative.

JV: Yes.

TS: Very good.

END OF INTERVIEW