Shayne Campbell: This is Shayne Campbell. It is 2:15 p.m., on March 9, 1990. I am interviewing for the first time John R. Lowey. This interview is taking place at the office of John R. Lowey whose home address is 4616 26th Street; Lubbock, Texas. This is part of the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project at Texas Tech University.

Mr. Lowey when did you join the United States Marine Corps?

John Lowey: I joined the Marines in... 1968.

SC: Why did you join the Marines?

JL: In 1968 I was a second year Law Student at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. The Tet Offensive of that year caused Law Students to begin to be drafted out of school. Uh... being drafted was eminent and I thought if I was going to go to Vietnam I wanted to go with the Marines. Uh... most of the males in my family had one time or another been Marines, World War II.

SC: What year did you finally get sent to Vietnam?


SC: What operations were you involved in during the Vietnam War?

JL: Well we were involved in allot of small unit activities that related to Operations Pickens Forest and Imperial Lake. And I believe most of what I did over there was in connections with Imperial Lake.

SC: What was Imperial Lake.
JL: I don't know. It was uh... quite a large, I believe lengthy operation and typical of uh... uh many small unit commanders. We knew are own parts in that operation, (interruption) but we certainly didn't at a Platoon Leader's level have that much of an overview as of what was going on. Now the operation took place West and South of Da Nang in the Qui Son Mountains, uh as they approached the Laotion boarder and we chased uh... main force N.V.A. (North Vietnamese Army) units. Um... very little of the V.C. (Viet Cong) type people were involved in that. The whole operation took place in uh Free Fire Zones and everything we did was a categoric tree operation, which is search and destroy operation.

SC: What is a Free Fire Zone?

JL: Free Fire Zone is a zone in which there are no friendlies (allies). So anything that moves... is presumably the enemy.

SC: Uh... Was there any other operations you were involved in.

JL: We did some other things that may not have been connected to either one of those operations. Uh once again I never knew or don't recall today what the overall umbrella of the operation was.

SC: What were the racial situations like?

JL: Well to me there were two real distinct worlds in which racial relationships took place. The first, that I was most familiar with, was the bush where I don't believe I ever witnessed a racial problems. Uh... The bush Marines, when they were out in the bush uh... were pretty harmonious group. I did witness and became involved in racial problems in the rear areas. And as Officer Of the Day I had an opportunity to become involved in.... gun point in some racial disturbances at Balty Combat Base where the Seventh Marine Regiment was headquartered.

SC: What was your fondest memory of the war... if you have one?

JL: I don't know about fondest memory, some of the things that stand out are the feelings... of being intensely... frightened for long periods of time and then having something occur that took you away from that and made you realize what a beautiful country we were operating in. Uh... although we didn't stop to smell the roses very often. A secure feeling in a hilltop position uh... in some jungle, beautiful jungle may give you a feeling just for a few moments that it really is a beautiful place. I don't know it would
characterize that as a found memory, but those are the ones that stand out. That it was not
all decor or show.

SC: What do you remember that you hated the most or you disliked the most?
JL: Well... I said early that we chased North Vietnamese Units. Uh, they for the
most part did not want to contact. Uh, or at least if they did make contact they wanted to
do it at their option. Chasing units particularly in a jungle is leading with your chin, your
going to walk into ambushes, your going to lose people. This will happen time and again.
And then finally you will corner enemy unit(s). And then we will bring, but that chasing,
taking casualties without being able to return fire and count bodies... was real hard on
everybody. And we might do that for week and weeks... takes casualties in the chase and
then in one big fire fight when we do corner an enemy unit that will really even up the
scoreboard. But everybody was very frustrated about taking casualties and not really
closing for combat.

SC: You mentioned the body count. Did you ever have any problems with higher
command lieing . about the body count?
JL: Well I don't know what hi gher command was saying. Uh... so I don't know
how to answer that. I know in my last set of duties I was an Operations Officer for
operations for the Fifth Marines Regiment. And I wasn't aware of any inflation of body
counts in that role. And I handled every report that came in contact (with enemy units).
When I was in the bush I would report to my Company Commander and I don't know
what happened from their.

SC: What is the bush?
JL: It is anything outside the parameter of your Headquarter base. Uh... there were
no front lines as there had been in most other military...... wars in the past. As soon as we
left Balty Combat Base, the parameter of Balty, and usually we left by helicopter and
went many miles off to be inserted. But even if we walked out of the base as soon as you
got beyond that wire you were in the bush as far as I was concerned.

SC: Did you ever receive any medals as a result of the war?
JL: I received the Bronze Star with a combat distinguish device and a Navy
Commendation, uh... a Cross of Gallantry from the Vietnamese government and all the
attendance medals.
SC: What was the Bronze Star for?

JL: It was for a fire fight that occurred in 1970 in which uh... there was allot of action for about, I think that fight lasted about twenty-three hours. And it was an exciting twenty-three hours.

SC: Do you remember the casualty count by any chance... a rough estimate?

JL: Well there's a good example of a place where it was strictly cave fighting. And, you know, we killed a few Vietnamese outside the caves, but most of the casualties were in the caves. And I don't know what they were, but there were. It was very active cave fight and uh... finished off uh the next day some perforated air strikes. I sure there was a good deal of a name taking there. Our own casualties in that particular fight were a couple people killed and probably a dozen people wounded.

SC: You mentioned the base parameter. What was life like inside the base?

JL: Couple of categories of life inside the base. The first is that of the bush Marine returning to the base after patrol. And generally our patrols would be two to four weeks in length, in which we would be in the bush for that period of time. Then we'd come back to Balty combat base. Normally helicopter back. For two to four days of getting cleaned up and re-equipped, new clothes. Then we'd heed off again on e another petrol. But (when) we were back et the base we were given the opportunity to catch up on administrative things, get the troops to the dentist, take care of allot of the rear echelon type things. So we rarely operated as a unit in the rear because your troops were ell broken up doing various things. Occasionally, we would drew guard duty to guard the perimeter et night, but, usually, we were left to drink allot of beer end get come food end just generally to recuperate. Now the other type of lifestyle in the rear is the guy who is permanently et Balty Combat Base. Which was e pretty small base, isolated, uh... I guess about twenty-five kilometers South of Da Nang. And people who spent their tour on e base like that lived e reasonably comfortable life. Uh contact was limited normally, there was occasional mortars end rockets end uh somebody breaching the wire. But it was e pretty secure existence compared to the bush. And they would have uh people routinely would have jobs that were seven days a week, twelve or fifteen hours a day, but there was always some off time, which in the bush there isn't any off time. Uh... we maintained a....
fairly high state of alertness all the time out there. And I did both. I spent time in both capacities of the community.

SC: Um... What was the situation like when you received FNG's, cherries or whatever you want to call them... new guys?

JL: Uh... totally determined by the person himself Uh... and I've seen both extremes in people that had no business wearing a Marine uniform and being out there. Uh... an example is people who just couldn't pack the gear. Uh... We'd be making a movement and IT WAS HOT and we carried allot of gear. And you had to be in good shape to handle that. And I remember a couple of new guys that came in that couldn't. And one of them didn't appear to be trying very hard. And he got left on the trail. And when you sit by yourself on one of those trails you get motivated to do your best. Uh... occasionally the squad leader would get physical with somebody that really screwed up that was new. But for the moat part I thought we had pretty decent people coming over. Allot of the enlisted men were on their second tours, also.

SC: Then finally, did you ever have problems with protestors within the unit itself?

JL: No....... no recall any problems in the unit that way. Now if your speaking of anti-war protestors. Sure had troubles when you were state-side, wearing a uniform. State-side obviously military. Uh I recall going over to Vietnam... I met a friend of mine in San Francisco and we were going to fly over together. We got there a couple a days early to just play around the city a little bit. And on the shuttle pigeon this guy to vibes because we had uniforms on. I recall troops going off on liberty or R and R (Rest and Relaxation) to Hawaii and there would be occasional problems between people right out of the bush and uh protestors in Hawaii. The protestors came out on shore leave with that same reason.

SC: When did you leave Vietnam?

JL: I belive it was... January or February of 1971.

SC: When you were at home or at work and you heard about the fall of Saigon. What did you feel? What did it feel like knowing that the war was over?

JL: Uh...... didn't feel particularly good. But... I was always able to differentiate the militaries performance over there. At least what I saw of it. Um... the... political
parameters that were put on the whole thing. And I considered that to be a policy decision
to just let Saigon fall.

SC: Is there anything you would like to add?
JL: No, I don't think so. Its a... its an experience that allot of people experience
very different things and that's probably true any war. It uh mind perceptions of what
went on over there I'm sure would be very different from somebody that could have been
standing ten feet away from me for that whole tour. Uh but basically I was real proud of
the way that the Seventh Marines fought that war over there. And they fought the way
you would want marines to fight. They looked like it and acted like it. And you could tell
they were Marines and not soldiers.

SC: I would just like to thank you for the interview and this concludes the
interview of John Lowey.