Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Jimmy Coffman on the 11th of April, 2000 at 4:40 p.m. in the Special Collections Library interview room. Mr. Coffman, would you please begin by giving us a brief biographical sketch of yourself?

Jimmy Coffman: Okay, my name is Jimmy, J-I-M-M-Y - not James - N. Coffman, C-O-F-F-M-A-N. I was born September 28th, 1943 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Born and raised in Sand Springs, Oklahoma, a small town approximately 7 miles west of Tulsa. Went to all the 12 years of school in Sand Springs, graduated 1961 and went to Oklahoma State University, graduated in 1966. I studied political science and pre-law while in college. Went through four years of ROTC. Graduated in 1966 with a BA in political science, decided against deferring military and going to law school, decided to take a break from school upon the advice of Dean Sneed, who was the dean of the OU law school at that time. Went on active duty 1966, infantry branch. You had to do a year at that time in your basic combat arms before they would let you go to flight school so I went to Ft. Benning, I went to infantry basic, airborne school, ranger school, went to Germany for almost 10 months before I started flight school at Ft. Stewart, Georgia outside Savannah in December of 1967. I got to Vietnam in August of 1968 fixed wing. How far do you want to go?

SM: That’s good. Let me go ahead and ask you about your college days and ROTC. What made you decide to go the ROTC route vs. another method of becoming an officer, OCS or whatever?
JC: Well, at that time in '61, '62, and '63 era, two years of ROTC was required at Oklahoma State. Oklahoma State was the 2nd or 3rd largest production of lieutenants up there with West Point and with Texas A&M. We had a large corps of about 4,000 strong but that was because they had mandatory ROTC for the first two years. Then, you had a choice of going to advanced and getting a scholarship so I got, I think, the sum of I think 28 dollars a month for the next two years and I liked ROTC and I just thought it was a good way to go get a commission and I was selected as a distinguished military graduate and got a Regular Army commission which is the same commission that the West Point officers get.

SM: So this was a land grant school?

JC: Yes, it is. Yes it is. It used to be Oklahoma A&M prior to 1958 at which time the name was changed to Oklahoma State University.

SM: Okay. While you were taking your ROTC classes either the first two years or the advanced courses, third and fourth years, was there much talk about Vietnam and the Vietnam War, what was going on?

JC: Not really, maybe closer to graduation; maybe '66, but probably when I was thinking about it, but the first two or three years, no.

SM: When you went on active duty and went infantry, went to Ft. Benning, was there in your officer basic course, ranger school, was there much talk about Vietnam?

JC: Oh yeah.

SM: At that point?

JC: Yeah. Every class began by the instructor saying, ‘If you don’t pay attention here, you’re going to die in Vietnam.’ That usually got your attention. But, after you heard it from every instructor, it kind of became…but yeah, that was the stress. If you don’t pay attention to this class, you’re going to…hello…you’re going to die in Vietnam. Must be a thunderstorm.

SM: Yes sir. Were many of your trainers Vietnam veterans?

JC: Yes.

SM: Anybody stick out in your mind as far as anybody with interesting stories or interesting object lessons with their experience in Vietnam and how it applied to your training?
JC: No, but I remember Lieutenant Calley was under…no, maybe that was ’72. Maybe that was when I was back with advanced course, but he was under house arrest. Yeah, that was ’72 that all that was going on. I was there when he was under house arrest and all that mess was going on.

SM: So nothing? No particular lessons stand out as being noteworthy that you can remember?

JC: No.

SM: What was the most important thing stressed in the military aspect of your training? That is, I assume it was conventional tactics, conventional warfare, European style tactics, stuff like that?

JC: Right, right. European style tactics. I’d say probably the most important thing stressed was physical fitness. Survival, a lot of escape and evasion courses, a lot of survival techniques, especially in ranger school. That’s in 9 weeks ranger school. But even the basic course, a lot of survival, a lot of navigation, a lot of map work on the 1 to 50,000. That was a lot of map work. A lot of navigation, physical fitness, survival, that type of thing.

SM: And what about weapons training?

JC: M-16 I guess, .45 probably.

SM: Okay, nothing advanced?

JC: No.

SM: Just basic weaponry?

JC: Just basic weaponry.

SM: Okay. What was your first unit of assignment?

JC: Let’s see. Actually, I went to a general staff headquarters in Munich, Germany, which to a second lieutenant was like a fish out of water. I worked directly for a full colonel and a two star command in Munich, Germany. Like a fish out of water, brand new [butter bar] in with an O6 and I learned how the Army worked at the top. I did that for 6 months, they closed the command, and then I went over to the other side of Munich to an infantry unit and worked in the 1st of the 21st, a mechanized infantry unit had a platoon of mechanized infantry; spent a long time at the training facilities at [Grafenwoer, Honefels, Vilsect].

SM: The mechanized portion of it, that was the M-113?
JC: M-113, M-114. The recon platoon had the little M-114, but the Chevy two ace 327 engine that the young kids could soup up. They had that stock Chevrolet engine in the M-114 and those 17 year old privates, they’d get out there and you could hear them in the motor pool, vroom, vroom, vroom. Those things could run so fast they were dangerous. They would do 60 or 70 miles an hour on the tank trails at graf and they had several wrecks and killed people because they were just too fast. They were lightweight; they were a lot lighter than the M-113, short. They were the real sports car of mechanized vehicles and those little Pfc. and spec 4s would tune those babies up and they could run.

SM: There were no regulations about that as far as preventing them from doing that or no control?

JC: When they would kill somebody everybody got upset. ‘Oh no, you got to put a governor on them,’ or whatever, but no.

SM: Put a governor on it then they take them off.

JC: They take them off, yeah.

SM: Any other interesting or important memories from your Germany experience that would be important when you…

JC: I remember I was in the field when my dad died. I had come home, this was September ’67, I had come home in May when he was real bad. He had emphysema, life long smoker, and I remember I was in a cold, cold jeep at Graf when my company commander came up and told me that my dad died, and so that was a long flight back to the States. But I remember being cold and that’s when I started drinking coffee. I made it through four years of college without drinking coffee, went to Germany and we were so cold I would have I think probably consumed anything warm, radiator fluid or anything, and we had a stupid commander who took all the heaters out of the vehicles because he wanted to make us tough. So we would run; we would tie a tent up over the exhaust of the tracks and we would run the exhaust all night long. So it was either a choice of do you want to die freezing to death or do you want to die of asphyxiation so we chose asphyxiation. At least we had a little air in there. That’s his idea of toughening us was take all the heaters out of the trucks, and you can imagine a cold piece of steel in the German winter. So I remember how cold and going over every morning and the only thing hot in the chow line to drink was coffee, so I drank coffee.

SM: Was this in other units or just this particular unit the commander did it?
JC: It was the idiot that we had.

SM: Just the idiot?

JC: Yeah, the lieutenant colonel we had was an idiot.

SM: I’m surprised there wasn’t a mass mutiny!

JC: No.

SM: Any object lessons or object lessons or anything like that that were important when you went to Vietnam that you had learned in Germany as far as the training and working with soldiers and stuff like that, leadership?

JC: No, no but it was kind of funny. We had a lot of jungle fatigues in Germany and I understand when I got to Vietnam they had a lot of tank tracks and treads, so the jungle fatigues were in Germany and needed in Vietnam and the tanks treads were in Vietnam, needed in Germany. So no, I didn’t really learn anything in Vietnam, I mean, in Germany that helped me in Vietnam.

SM: So you came back to the United States at the end of 1967 to go to...

JC: Flight school.

SM: Flight school…

JC: Fixed wing flight school.

SM: Fixed wing flight school, right. So what was that training like?

JC: It was basic, the first part of it was taught by civilians, contract. Basic flight school, I could go out here to the Lubbock airport and start flying a Cessna 172 and basic everyday…academics a half a day, fly a half a day. One week you flew in the morning, had class in the afternoon, the next week you had class in the morning and flew in the afternoon. You soloed, you had an MOI, you had a program of instruction, the instructors had lesson number 7, lesson number 8, and you had certain...then you took check rides all along. You had a phase, you had A phase and then B phase for sure which was more of a tactics phase where you went out and flew and landed in unimproved strips in the Georgia pines and little cow pastures and things like that. You learned short field landings and take-offs and then C phase was instrument phase where we flew the Baron T-42, twin engine Baron, and then D phase was really tactic where we learned to fly the Bird Dog. Then I went on to Mohawk transition after that.

SM: In the initial training, what aircraft did they train you on?
JC: The first phase, the first two phases was the T-41, the military version of a Cessna 172. C phase T-42, which is the Baron, D phase is the O1 Bird Dog, L-19.

SM: All of these tail draggers, aren’t they?

JC: No. T-41 is a tricycle gear.

SM: Oh, okay.

JC: The Baron of course is a twin engine Baron. You still see the Baron up at the airport twin engine tricycle gear. The only tail dragger is the Bird Dog.

SM: What did you think about that transition from tricycle gears to tail druggers?

JC: Difficult.

SM: Because that was the principle aircraft that you flew your first tour in Vietnam, was the tail dragger?

JC: After the Mohawk. After I ejected out of Mohawk.

SM: Oh, okay.

JC: I went over there, I went to Mohawk transition, went to Vietnam, punched out of Mohawk, hurt my back, and then went to Bird Dogs.

SM: Okay, so it was a hard transition? What was the hardest thing about it?

JC: Just landing the tail dragger was very difficult, very finicky in the wind, very critical in cross wind landings. It will ground loop. If the nose of the airplane or the tail, however you want to look at it, gets past 30 degrees off center, at this range more than 30 degrees, then it will go on around. You are a just a passenger at that point. It will ground loop on you which means when it comes around, the right landing gear breaks off, the right wing goes down in the dirt, and you usually don’t get hurt but you’re awful embarrassed.

SM: Did that happen a lot in training?

JC: Oh yeah. In fact, they had restrictions on if the crosswinds were, oh I forget what the restrictions were, but if the cross winds were like over 7 or 8 miles, you didn’t fly. Oh yeah, they were real sensitive about it.

SM: What did you think about the training in general that you received in flight school?

JC: I thought it was good, I thought it was good.
SM: Any problems besides what you just articulated as far as the transition from the tricycle to the tail dragger?

JC: I don’t think so, no. I thought it was good.

SM: The instructors were good?

JC: Yeah.

SM: Okay. So you went to Vietnam when?

JC: August of ‘68.

SM: And what was your first assignment there?

JC: Mohawk, 221st Aviation Company, Phu Hiep.

SM: What were some of the missions that you conducted there?

JC: Mostly night surveillance, what they call IR missions. Night weather, taking photographs. We would take a photograph maybe two or three o’clock in the morning if it was good intelligence. They’d radio maybe by seven that next morning there’d be a B-52 strike coming. I did that for about two months until I had double engine failure one night, ejected. The airplanes had gotten…the unit went over there. It was the 4th Brigade of the 4th Division out of Ft. Lewis at that time and it went over there with civilian reps and by ’68 the civilian tech reps had gone home and the little spec 4s and Pfc. from Ft. Rucker that were trained on the aircraft were really not properly trained. Maintenance was horrible. Replacement parts were horrible. The place they put the airplane, instead of putting it at an Air Force base where there’s like at Tuy Woa which is about five miles north of Phu Hiep it had10,000 feet of concrete where they had fighters. They put the Army, for some reason, did not want to co locate with the Air Force so they put us on a little bean bag, a little PSP strip, you know what a PSP is?

SM: I think so.

JC: [?], a little PSP strip with beanbag lighting about five miles south. So you’d come in after a four or five-hour night mission blurry eyed, rubbing your eyes, and you’re trying to look down there and see a runway in bad weather? It’s just a nightmare. They had fuel on the ground in fuel bladders on the ground, which caused the mold and when they found out my accident aircraft had a contamination of, had a fungus growing inside the fuel cells, it was like glue, and it was like cholesterol these days, and once it got to a point it clogged it up and then they finally, ‘Well we can’t store this fuel on the ground because the
rubber on the ground is moist all of the time.’ So I said bye-bye to that. I didn’t want a part of that. I was pretty senior captain at that time so I went down to a place called Phan Thiet and flew Bird Dogs until about the end of the tour and then I went to Nha Trang and flew Bird Dogs and then they had a Beaver at that time so I got into the - I think all of this is unclassified now - I got in sort of the special operations group with the Beaver, the CORDS group and the special ops group flying the Beaver U-21 time at that time also.

SM: Now what’s a Beaver?

JC: A Beaver is a larger tail dragging…a Beaver is the most popular floatplane that you see in Alaska right now. It’s the bush plane. It’s about a 6 passenger, the Havoline tail dragger. Real popular in bush because it’s real rough. Just a larger tail dragging airplane.

SM: To go back to your first experiences in Vietnam, the first unit with the Mohawks. When you talk about reconnaissance missions at night, what kind of equipment is actually conducting the surveillance and collecting the data, the intelligence?

JC: There’s a what’s called a SLAR, side looking airborne radar, on the side and that would take thermo images, infra red, IRA missions. We had special cameras that would also photograph. You’d go out assigned to map an area and it would map the transmit back or it would take photographs of a certain area of troop concentration or like the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We photographed that a lot. Or, any area suspected of activity.

SM: What kind of flight radius are we talking about?

JC: We’re talking 300 or 400 meters.

SM: Wow.

JC: It was a pretty fast airplane. This airplane cruised at about 315 knots or miles, 300 miles per hour, pretty fast.

SM: And so your missions were not necessarily concentrated around where your headquarters is?

JC: Oh no.

SM: You’d fly way out?

JC: Oh we’d fly way out. We’d fly Laos, Cambodia, when we officially weren’t there. And also during that time I had a, although I was not mentioned in the Ravens book, I had a short tour of duty with the Ravens. The Ravens book, the Ravens, the guy that wrote it, gave credit to all the Air Force pilots but what he didn’t mention was that a few Army pilots
who had a lot of time were rotated in on a TDY basis for a couple of months at a time so for
about two and a half months, about two months, I flew for the Ravens with Bird Dog.

SM: What units that you’re aware of benefited most from your intelligence? Was it
the Air Force that did bombing? Was it the Army as well?

JC: Well I think that, you know, the direct effect was the ground units on the ground
were the most appreciative, I think, of the intelligence, albeit indirectly. Those were high
level decisions. You know, to launch a B-52 strike was private Pentagon level so indirectly
probably the ground guys.

SM: How aware of the intelligence you were gathering were you? In other words,
you’re flying this mission collecting all this infrared intelligence, unit intelligence and things
like that on the ground. But, you wouldn’t be part of the processing of that in terms of
looking at the film so you wouldn’t know how many units were on the ground or anything
like that?

JC: We would probably hear later, maybe just by word of mouth but a crew chief
would come get the film canister and would take it back in for processing. In fact, I drove it
up the air base as a matter of fact. That’s why I don’t’ know why they didn’t put it down on
the airbase. Well, we used to piss…I’m sorry.

SM: That’s okay. There’s been worse said. Go ahead.

JC: We used to tick the CO off every now and then when the weather was really bad.
We’d land at the air base and we’d blame it on weather and it really was bad. We could have
probably gotten into Phu Hiep, but we were mad that we weren’t over there anyway so we
would land and we’d spend the night over there in the nice BOQ and then we’d fly out the
next morning. We always got an irate call that we just wanted a good breakfast in the old
club or whatever. We did that every now and then just to hack him off. Sometimes we had to
do it, but every now and then we did just to hack them off.

SM: How much of this conflict between the Army fixed wing and the Air Force and
the desire of the Army to be separate from them, how much of this was cognizant by you and
your fellow officers apart of this turf battle going on between the Air Force and the Army
over who should control air assets? You know, the battle between, ‘Well should the Air
Force have all fixed wing and the Army only have helicopters? Should the Air Force have
everything?’ So I mean in this period there’s a lot of conflict at the highest levels.
JC: Well it was pretty steep, Steve, because I was actually on orders to go to C-7 school which is a Caribou if you know what a Caribou is, and the Army Caribou was the life line at that time, ’64, ’65 to a lot of these little outposts. The Caribou is an incredible airplane that could approach an airstrip at 40 knots and almost stall land at like in 200 feet and this is incredible airplane and they would fly mail and supplies out to these outposts. These guys were stranded out there, these poor guys. No mail, no food, no…I mean, these guys were treated horribly out there. These Caribous would go out there and land on the road or they’d call and say, ‘Carve me out 1200 feet with your bulldozer and I’ll land.’ Well right before graduation in my orders they gave the Caribou to the Air Force because the Air Force was jealous. The Air Force did not want to have - and it’s continued to this day - the Air Force does not want the Army to have any sophisticated, fixed wing airplanes. It was okay to have a Bird Dog, but nothing multi engine and nothing sophisticated. So what happened was, unfortunately, when the Air Force took over the Caribou, then they came out with a policy of, ‘Oh, we can’t land on anything less than 3500 feet,’ which was the C-130 restrictions and all of a sudden these guys were stranded. Then we had to supply them in helicopters or I’ve flown out there in a Bird Dog before and dropped mail to them. I dropped cans of cokes and cases of cokes to them, whatever, and it really hurt. It hurt the guys in Vietnam a lot when the Air Force took over the Caribou. But my orders got changed from Caribou to Mohawk.

SM: Anything, any missions in particular stand out in your first tour with the Mohawks? Any incidents where you were shot at or anything like that?

JC: Oh yeah, a lot. Yeah, we took a lot of fire.

SM: Every mission, every other mission?

JC: I’d say every mission we took fire.

SM: How would the enemy train their anti aircraft fire on you? Were they using radar?

JC: Early in those days, probably in those days, it was more sound, kind of like Baghdad and they’d just fire a sound. They didn’t really have the sophisticated…when I went back in ’72 and was flying helicopters, they had gotten pretty sophisticated. Now up north, of course, when they’re flying Phantoms and things, they had more sounds. Of course they had a lot of [SAMs] up there but in the south they didn’t really have…of course we’re talking ’68, ’69, they didn’t really have that sophisticated of a weaponry especially at night, and our
missions were at night. So, we took a few hits here and there but we didn’t really lose that
many airplanes. Of course, the airplane I lost was not through hostile action. It was through
ground fire, I mean, it was through maintenance, whatever you want to call it.

SM: What was the average altitude of your missions?

JC: 500 feet.

SM: Real low.

JC: That’s why the…see, that’s why I got angry because one of our most important
instruments was the radar altimeter, which reads not barometric pressure but reads height
above the ground. That was your friend because if that thing started to drop you just pulled
up if your map was old. That was another criticism. Our maps, Steve, were pathetic. Even
the aviator maps were pathetic, they were so old. They were awful maps. Horrible maps.

SM: How old were they?

JC: I don’t know. Maybe the French used them at Din Bin Phu, I don’t know. They
were horrible, if you had a map. A lot of times you didn’t have a map. I mean, they were
horrible. So, maintenance was horrible, maps were horrible, mission was horrible, We’d
launch at 11, recover at 3:30, 4:00 in the morning so that’s why I just said bye-bye. Now,
when I went to the Bird Dog, most of the weapons that we encountered…of course the Bird
Dog only flew about 90 miles an hour and we were there before the Air Force really had
their…before the Air Force really had their FACs on board. We were the early forward air
controllers because the Air Force really hadn’t gotten their game together and they were still
flying Bird Dogs at that time, too. Later they came with the O2 and they came with the OV10
Bronco, but we were the…really the first air strikes were Army forward air controllers and
Bird Dog. Now the weapons we encountered there were small arms, .20 millimeter, 50-
caliber, but it was hindsight. I mean, there was nothing sophisticated. It was you see, you
shoot.

SM: With the Mohawks, were you fired on with similar weaponry, small arms,
usually?

JC: I think so. But it wasn’t a lot of hits because like I said, it was mostly sound.
You’d make one pass and if you made another pass, if you were afraid you didn’t get a good
picture or something it’s kind of dangerous to come back over.

SM: Any incidents where people were shot down?
JC: Yeah, we lost several. We lost several. I didn’t in the Mohawk. I got shot down in the Bird Dog, but not in the Mohawk.

SM: Any Mohawks get shot down when you were sent back?

JC: Yeah, yeah.

SM: Were the pilots rescued, or were they captured or killed?

JC: I think they were probably killed. I think I remember. I don’t think they were captured. I think they were killed.

SM: Because the speed of the aircraft at that low altitude, if they went down, they went down a ball of fire.

JC: If they went down, they went down a ball of fire unless they had time to eject. Now I’m sure at some time in history some of them ejected and probably got captured. If they got out, they were probably captured although the search and rescue at that time…when we had 500,000 troops on the ground over there in ’68, the search and rescue was real good. Only one time did I spend a lot of time on the ground. The rest of the time I wasn’t’ on the ground very long. ’72, ’73, different story. If you went down there, when you’re down to 50,000, 40,000, 20,000, 10,000…if you went down you knew you were going to walk out. No one was going to get you.

SM: Now given your mission and the fact that you were flying over places like Laos and Cambodia, what kind of a SAR backup plan did they have in terms of if you did get shot down over one of these places, did you and would you expect a pickup, because officially, we’re not supposed to be there?

JC: That’s right. Well, in the Ravens you don’t. Air America came after you, but that was it.

SM: So was there a working relationship there?

JC: Yeah, oh yeah.

SM: With Air America?

JC: Oh yeah.

SM: That they knew what missions you were going to be on and they would provide the SAR support for you?

JC: And the SAR support would come out of Thailand. They were stationed in Thailand.
SM: What kind of recovery time?

JC: Well, sometimes they spent a while. Sometimes they spent a while. They’d have trouble getting into it, especially if the area was real hot.

SM: What unit were you assigned to? What was the unit with the Bird Dogs?

JC: 183rd.

SM: That was the 183rd?

JC: The 183rd reconnaissance airplane company.

SM: Okay, now this was the Seahorses?

JC: The Seahorses, that’s right. That’s good. We had platoons at Phan Thiet, Dalat, Nha Trang, and headquarters at Dong Ba Thin which is right outside Cam Ranh Bay.

SM: As a forward air controller in one of the Bird Dogs, what units did you primarily support?

JC: Well, all the…let’s see, the Mac V and their firebases and…my throat’s…of course the Mac V units. They had the advisors. Let’s see, in Phan Thiet we had the 101st airborne, the 3rd of 506 and let’s see, Dalat had a lot of Vietnamese Army and we had a lot of Vietnamese Army units. In fact, in the Bird Dog, we’d carry most of the time, we carried a Vietnamese observer who was in the Vietnamese Army. When we weren’t supporting…of course when we were supporting the 101st, they had their own observers. I think Dalat, a lot of Vietnamese, I think they had probably the 196th up there. And then in Nha Trang, I think, Steve, I think we worked with the 281st recon and the Koreans, we helped them although they had a couple of their own airplanes, and the Vietnamese had a couple of their own Bird Dogs also. That’s kind of the general area of II Corps.

SM: So this was quite a radical change, then. You go from the night reconnaissance missions in the Mohawk to basically day support missions calling in fire support?

JC: Right, although we had a lot of night missions because the VC and NVA liked to attack at night so we were called out. We had two pilots on standby at all times so we were called out a lot. I got a lot of nighttime because we were called out a lot at night because they liked to attack at night.

SM: Now how would you operate as a FAC at night in terms of actually trying to locate…
JC: Very carefully. They would mark the position with some sort of flare and a lot of times you could see the firing going on back and forth between the units and you had a pretty good idea of where they area, especially...well, let’s say when an outpost was being overrun. I mean, with the flares that were going up and they would call out...the helicopter unit had a flare ship along with the Air Force would come in with their C-47 Dragon, the Spooky, and they lost a lot of flares so as a Bird Dog, we were operating pretty low. I mean, they were up there pretty...3,500 feet shooting these flares out and these were these huge flares that would float down on parachutes that would really light up the air. I’m not talking about these little pencil flares. These were huge, humongous flares that would float down and it would make it just about as light as this room. I mean, it was daylight.

SM: So you could still mark targets with relative precision?

JC: Oh yeah, and from 1,000 feet, 800 feet. You know, we’d make low passes at night over the position. We could see them if they were approaching the wire, if they were in the wire, and then we had white phosphorous rockets, which would, when we fired them, then it would light up the positions and then the F-4s or whatever would come in.

SM: So all this training on the OV-1, on the Bird Dog, was it the O1 Bird Dog?

JC: O1, uh huh.

SM: All that you received in country?

JC: Yeah, we’d never fired a rocket at Ft. Rucker and it was kind of ironic. The check out consisted of going up to the operation’s officer, making a couple of landings, firing a couple of rockets, and you were sent on your way. You got one ride, about an hour and a half, and you were given, as I affectionately like to say, you were given a map, you were given the keys to an airplane let’s say that just came out of maintenance, and they said, ‘Your unit is two hours south of here by Bird Dog, and we’ll bring the rest of your stuff down in a week or two when we get the Beaver running. We’ll bring your foot locker and your duffel bag down, and good luck.’ That was it.

SM: So when they said your unit was located about two hours...

JC: ‘Your platoon is located about two hours south.’ From Dong Ba Thin to Phan Thiet is about two hours flying time, something like that, hour and a half.

SM: Okay, now how was maintenance in the Bird Dog unit as compared to the Mohawk unit?
JC: Excellent. The company maintenance I thought was just okay, but we worked a deal because it was such a hassle to get the airplane from the platoon to the company for maintenance, for periodicals and maintenance. We worked out a deal with, when we got some good people, to do our own or most of our own maintenance at the platoon level, so we had direct control of it. At the platoon level it was good, a lot better than Mohawk maintenance. I thought Mohawk maintenance was terrible.

SM: And did you find that the maintenance specialists, the guys that were maintaining your birds, were better trained than the Mohawks?

JC: Yes, because it was, not degrading them in any way, it was a much easier airplane to maintain. The Mohawk was a very complex airplane with a lot of electronics and they were rushing them through Ft. Rucker, Steve, so much at that time. You know, I mean they were pushing the product out and they just weren’t giving them enough training at Ft. Rucker, enough hands on training, especially with the electronic end of it and the Bird Dog was easier to maintain. I mean, we just had basically had very few instruments and very few radios and it was a simple airplane to maintain.

SM: Step back real quick to the Mohawk unit. What was it that went wrong with your aircraft that caused you to have to eject?

JC: The glue that came loose from the fuel tanks that contaminated both engines and both engines heated up, over heated, fuel starvation, fuel contamination, and I punched out. I said I couldn’t find a place…and I was too far north. I did work my way back to about 20 miles north of Tuy Hoa, so I didn’t spend a lot of time on the ground that night. But, the atmosphere of Vietnam, the humidity, and the best way…well you were there. I don’t know if you were there during the worst heat, but I always tell people imagine a hot, wet sponge, large, being unzipped and you crawl inside of it and zip it up outside and trying to breathe and that’s what it was most of the year, all year long. And that moisture, that constant moisture would just get radios. The heat and the moisture would just zap anything electronic.

SM: Which made flying the Mohawk that much more difficult?

JC: That’s right.

SM: Because of the electronics on board?

JC: Because of the electronics.

SM: Any incidents where you mentioned a radar altimeter?
JC: Radar altimeter.

SM: Any incidences where that was affected by the moisture and that caused problems?

JC: Yeah, it didn’t work on me one night and I clipped the top of a tree. But, that’s how close the pull out was because it stuck and I thought I was about five or 600 feet and I wasn’t. I was about 50 feet and I pulled up and brought some tree limbs back with me in the bottom of the airplane.

SM: When you were supporting mostly infantry units, the 101st, the 196th…

JC: And the ARVN units also.

SM: ARVN, right.

JC: The Ruff Puff units, FNG

SM: Okay, so you worked with ruff puffs as well?

JC: Yeah.

SM: When you were supporting them, any incidences where Bird Dogs were shot down?

JC: Yeah, I saw several and I got shot down several times.

SM: You got shot down several times? Can you describe the actions that you were involved in that resulted in it being shot down?

JC: Usually small arms fire, although one time I took a 50 cal in the engine. I took a 50, fairly large round, in the engine and that did it. Most of the time the rescue was real quick because we had plenty. You know, in a firefight and it was always during firefights, there’s plenty of activity. You got helicopter gun ships, you got Hueys bringing in the troops, you got command and control helicopters, you got F-4s stacked up here. You’ve got a lot of aviation in the area, so you just get on the radio, you know, they know you’re going down and they can usually find you. But the most exciting time I had was a time I spent about two hours on the ground because I went into a jungle. I couldn’t find a clearing to crash in and I went through… I experienced a triple canopy jungle first hand and I was there about two hours and I had dug my little hole and I had my rifle and I had my M-1 carbine I had traded for with my double banana clip and I had 60 rounds and I had my map and I was talking to them and trying to tell them where I was and I could hear the little fellows…what was coming. I could hear them, I could hear them talking and I told her this but I think that time my biggest fear,
and I’ll tell you later or now if it’s a good time? My biggest fear...I wasn’t afraid of dying. I
didn’t want to die. I mean, I was a Christian, I did not have a death wish, but I wasn’t afraid
of dying. I mean, I really wasn’t. I had enough confidence in myself and I really wasn’t afraid
of dying. I was afraid of being captured and I just didn’t think I could survive mentally or
physically. You know, you never know what you can do until you’re put there but I just
didn’t think from what I’d heard, I just didn’t think I could survive five or 6 years in a POW
unit. Maybe I didn’t want to survive it, I don’t know. Maybe I didn’t want to be tortured for
8 years and come back all messed up. But I pretty much, in that two hours, I came to the
realization that I probably was going to try and make them kill me rather than take me
captured if at all possible. Rather than surrender I was going to use up every round I had and
probably try to make them kill me. I think that’s the decision in the two hours that I came to.

SM: Was that a perception, an attitude shared by many pilots in your unit?

JC: I think most pilots were afraid of dying and I think the pilots that were afraid of
dying were probably, I don’t want to say the poorest pilots, but probably the weakest pilots.
They were indecisive and they made mistakes. They let the fear, they let the fear take over
their decisional making process. Yes, you have a healthy respect for fear, but you have to be
able to, you have to be able to control that fear in situations where your life’s on the line
because if you don’t, your fear controls your emotions and once your emotions gets out of
control your emotions control your thought processes. You know, second tour flying Hueys
going in on a lift, we dropped off some troops and came back around. They got shot up the
minute they got out. It was a hot LZ, it wasn’t supposed to be. We came back around, we
were ordered to go back in and get the wounded. There was nobody back where they were. I
had a brand new, I had an FNG, you know, with me and I told them on the way around, I said,
‘I’m going to let you fly this just for the experience,’ because I flew it into the hot LZ. I said,
‘I’m going to let you fly this.’ I said, ‘I want to tell you something. Don’t look in the back.
Just wait until the crew chief and the door gunner tell you on your headsets, on your ears that
you are loaded, you’re out of here. Do not look back.’ ‘Okay.’ As...who was it looked back
on Sodom and Gomorrah, but anyway we’re sitting there, they’re loading, he just had to take
a look and we’re getting ready to lift off and he just had to look. I’m sitting in the left seat
next to him, he looked like that and it was such a gory mess that he fainted and he slumped
over the controls like this. So the helicopter, with a bunch of wounded on it, pitched up like
this. Well, I grabbed…the most critical thing at that time was the cyclic. I grabbed the cyclic and I grabbed him with my right hand and pulled him off the cyclic and got control of the helicopter and he was just out like a light and that’s what I’m saying, you know, if a lot of the helicopter pilots, I mean a lot of the pilots were I think…I think their biggest concern was the fear of dying. I don’t know that they had gone to that point yet about being captured. I don’t know.

SM: Did you guys talk about it?

JC: No, never.

SM: Unwritten rule? Just not supposed to talk about dying in Vietnam?

JC: Never got close to anyone, tried not to get close to anyone, and never talked about the war. Never talked about it. Even when you went to somebody’s memorial service or packed up their stuff in their room, you never talk about it. You just went about it. You went to their room, you went to their drawers, you packed up their shit, and you shipped it home.

SM: What do you think about that in hindsight?

JC: Well, I think it’s easier to lose someone that you don’t know. I mean, if I heard tomorrow that you got killed, I’d be sad, but if my wife gets killed tomorrow I’d be destroyed. Yeah, even if I’m sharing a tent with a guy I don’t want to know his life history. I don’t want to know anything about him. So, when we drink or something like that we didn’t talk about wives or girlfriends or kids or anything like that. We might talk about what we’re going to do when we get back home, but most of the time you didn’t talk about it.

SM: This was a coping mechanism?

JC: I think so, yeah.

SM: And this was pretty much unit wide?

JC: I think so.

SM: And it spanned to units that you were assigned to?

JC: I think so, and there’s a question on your question about drug use in Vietnam. The enlisted used drugs and marijuana to numb themselves and to medicate themselves. The pilots used alcohol because the pilots had a little more money, alcohol was more expensive than marijuana, so you developed a routine. When you could get to a club, if you were stationed in a place that had a club like Nha Trang had five nice clubs, nice clubs, and most posts had places that they called a club which was usually a bunker and some booze but you
learned, you experimented on yourself how much you could drink and still work the next day. What you wanted to do is you wanted to reach the point of intoxication to where you could stagger to a bed, you could collapse on the bed, pass out instantly without having any trouble going to sleep, and you could still get up at four o’clock the next morning and go fly. Now that meter waved. You usually learned how much you could drink to that point. Now when guys went home or guys got killed or Christmas or something like that you usually violated that and you went way over and there’s a few times where you couldn’t fly which they frowned on. So, we flew a lot of times when we shouldn’t. We shouldn’t have flown. That was a coping mechanism day to day. That’s how we got by many days.

SM: Not many officers used drugs that you were aware of besides alcohol?
JC: I don’t know any officers that used drugs. I can honestly say, in two tours, I never saw a pilot smoke a joint. I’m sure they were there, Steve, but I never saw a pilot smoke a joint. We were usually at the club and in the O Club.

SM: And what did your commanders, what were their restrictions, rules, whatever regarding alcohol use? Or were there any?
JC: None. If you were on alert, you had to be on alert. If you were on alert or you had to respond - the helicopters had fire teams, Bird Dogs, we had standby pilots - then no alcohol, but other than that, no restrictions.

SM: What was your average day like as a Bird Dog?
JC: We flew an early pre dawn reconnaissance mission, get up, have something to eat, go fly various missions or reconnaissance or whatever. You’d fly, oh, you’d fly 8, 10, 12, 14, 16 hours a day.

SM: What time did you get up?
JC: Usually 4:30, five o’clock. We had restrictions. At 90 hours you had to go see a flight surgeon. At 120 hours you had to see a flight surgeon. This is, I don’t remember this exactly so don’t hold me to this, I think at 150 hours you got a day off, and I think at 175 you got three days off. So there was guys, when you average that out, you figure that in a 30-day month and you figure how many hours a day we were flying; a bunch, a bunch.

SM: And your day would usually end about what time?
JC: Usually at dark, and then we had the standby guys that got called out a lot at night.
SM: And that would be duty that was rotated amongst all the pilots?
JC: Usually, yeah.
SM: Were there ever offensive operations that you supported at night, or were they mostly, again, defending against the Viet Cong or PAVN attacks?
JC: Mostly defensive, yeah. Not many offensives were launched at night, they were too difficult to support.
SM: When did your first tour end, your first tour in Vietnam?
JC: August ’69.
SM: Okay. And that was the Bird Dogs, was that the last unit you were assigned to your first tour?
JC: Uh huh. The Bird Dogs in Nha Trang, and then I had flown from the unit I was loaned to the special operations, the corps, and the Bird Dog I mean Beaver, we took a Beaver to at Pleiku and at that time out of Pleiku and Qui Nhon they were going out by helicopter which is something I got involved in second tour. they were taking what I call mercenaries out and they were taking them into Laos and Cambodia during the intelligence gathering and we would go up in Beaver, we had some of those special radios, we’d go up and make radio checks with them two or three times a day.
SM: Okay. How long did you do work with the special operations?
JC: A couple of months, a couple of months or so. Just kind of loaned to them.
SM: Was that something they rotate a lot of pilots through?
JC: No, I guess they ask for volunteers and it sounded good to me. It was a break, and I got checked out in Beaver too, which is good. I got to fly another airplane.
SM: What was check out for that aircraft like?
JC: A couple of trips around the traffic pattern. Okay, here’s your manifold pressure limits here are your RPM limits. ‘Now, just remember it’s a big Bird Dog, it’s a big ugly Bird Dog, and good luck to you.’
SM: Alright. What did you think of that kind of a training regimen? Did you think it was more to get in a combat situation or do you think it should have been better?
JC: I liked it better than the helicopter units where you flew right seat. You flew right seat for two or 300 hours and then you took a check ride before you were promoted to aircraft commander. I mean, and FNG never got in and made any decisions. Most of them quite
frankly were warrant officers and W1s, 17-year-old kids right out of Mineral Wells, you
know, right out of high school. I think the average age of a helicopter pilot in Vietnam killed
was 18 years old or something like that, so I liked their way of doing it a lot better with the
seniority that they had, with the more senior W2, W3, whatever rather than the fixed wing
were kind of loosey-goosey. Now the VIP units were better. The U21s that flew the VIPs
around of course were a lot better because they flew a lot of generals around. Just the basic
units, we didn’t have much of a training program.

SM: The work that you did with the special operations community and CORDS, how
much information did you receive on exactly what missions or what types of missions they
were going on, the guys that you carried in the back?

JC: Very little. We were housed in Pleiku and Quin Nhan. We were housed in
civilian compounds. We flew aircraft that weren’t marked. We wore civilian clothes. We
had an ID on us in Vietnamese and English that said, ‘This person cannot be searched,
stopped, detained, under any circumstances.’ We drove little green jeeps, not Army, the green
like land cruiser jeeps around. We were just told to be at the airfield when these guys loaded
on back and it was amazing. I saw C-130s bring in conex containers. They would open the
conex containers up and out would tumble brand new uniforms, brand new M-16s, no serial
numbers on them, and 100s of 1,000s of dollars in piasters, brand new, and they would give it
to these guys, these little 7, 8, 9, 10s and they would go out and get drunk and they’d come
back. We’d fly them out and all I know is they had a high freq. radio and a lot of the
intelligence we got…I thought the Mohawk had connections. These people could get a B-52
strike in a matter of two hours based upon intelligence; two hours. They could have bombs so
they were satellited to Bangkok which I think went to D.C. and they had the connections. I
mean CIA, anything they wanted they got. Unmarked C-130s would also just drop out of the
sky with all this equipment, these fancy radios and everything would just tumble out of the
back of this airplane and off it would go.

SM: Now the CORD, I assume you mean Phoenix, is that correct?

JC: That’s right.

SM: The area where these missions occurred, was it again pretty generally near the
DMZ…

JC: Laos and Cambodia.
SM: North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, the Ho Chi Minh trail...

JC: Almost exclusively, that’s exactly right.

SM: Any incidences where you were shot at?

JC: Shot at but never hit. We stayed pretty high because we were radio relay. We
stayed pretty high. Now second tour, because of my experience with that, they found out I
was back in country, they tried to hire me. They wanted me to get out of the Army and fly
Air America. I said, ‘You guys don’t pay enough money for me to do what you do.’ I think
at that time they were only offering like 25 grand or something. I said huh uh. But second
tour, they had brand-new Hueys. Oh we were…the people were jealous when they saw them.
They had brand new H models, brand spanking new, 0 time and we’d haul these same guys
out so when I went back in ’72 and ’73 when I got tired of flying Cobras, they were doing the
same thing we had done in ’68 and ’69. The old Beaver had worn out. They told me they
couldn’t get parts from Korea anymore so they had to shift to the Huey so we were inserting
some of those guys. Now that got kind of dicey. We got shot at, never got shot down, but
that got kind of fun.

SM: When you were flying the Beavers, you would air drop these guys?

JC: No, the other people were taking them out. We were radio relay.

SM: Oh that’s right, okay.

JC: That’s all we did. We’d just go out and make contact with them, yeah.

SM: Okay, you wouldn’t actually carry the person out?

JC: No. They were inserted by helicopter and then we’d go out and make contact
with them just to see if they were still alive. Sometimes they weren’t. Sometimes they got
into an area that was so hot that they never got out.

SM: Do you recall about how many times that happened where you would go out
looking for a team and there just wasn’t anybody left?

JC: Several times.

SM: Several times?

JC: Yeah. And then sometimes maybe one member or two members or they’d call for
emergency extraction and we’d go out and try to cover with the Beaver and try to arrange
some air cover for them, try to arrange some cover to get them out. Yeah, they’d scream in
on the radio we got to do this and that.
SM: Were there incidences where you would go out to look for somebody and they
wouldn’t be there but then they’d show up later?

JC: Yeah. They’d call and couldn’t talk. We’d go out, we had certain times when
they’d radio contact with them, we’d go out, nothing. Go back out, nothing. Go back out,
nothing. Sometimes days would go by and all of a sudden you go out one day and oops, there
they are. I’d gave up hope on them. They I say, ‘Oh, you’re down here now, okay.’ ‘Yeah,
we had to move, we ran into this supply base,’ or something. ‘Yeah, we had to move.’

SM: In your transition from the Bird Dogs to the Beavers, did you have to go through
a special security clearance at all?

JC: Yep, top secret. They did that.

SM: How long did that take?

JC: For them? Not long. I remember when I went to Germany that security clearance
took forever. Shoot Steve, I think they got that done in a day or two. I mean, it’s amazing.
These guys, believe me, my opinion, anything you hear about the CIA or NSA or anything
like that, believe it. From what I saw anything they say they can make happen, and did. I
believe, I’m probably gullible, but I believe anything you hear about the CIA or any of that
security stuff because they can make it happen. I’ve never seen anything like it.

SM: Now the time you completed your first tour in’69, CORDS and Phoenix, these
were pretty well established programs. Did you guys, amongst yourselves as pilots, did you
talk about the stuff that was going on?

JC: No.

SM: No?

JC: And even when we were integrated back into the unit people would ask us
questions or if we run into, when we’d come back to bring an airplane back or something and
have it worked on and we’d be driving around in these funny looking jeeps, guys would ask
us and we’d just say, ‘Real sorry, Joe, can’t talk.’

SM: But you didn’t even talk amongst each other even though you shared the same
clearances? Were you instructed not to?

JC: I think it was pretty much understood that it was hush hush and we did what we
were told, nothing more, nothing less. We didn’t ask any questions. If they told us to do this,
if we couldn’t do it, we told them. They told us what they wanted done, we didn’t ask why.
We did it if we could, did it to the best of our ability, and if we couldn’t we’d tell them that we didn’t ask any questions. We didn’t want to know what was going on, but we were told to wear civilian clothes or remove IDs, you know, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

SM: Were you allowed to grow your hair?

JC: Not much. Maybe a little bit.

SM: Okay, so do you have anything else that you want to talk about your first tour in Vietnam?

JC: No, there were a couple of times where I got shrapnel, plexi glass rounds came through. The vest they gave us was too hot to wear so we sat on it and it saved my bacon a couple of times. Rounds came through the cockpit that would have come up in my behind and it was so hot it was worthless. We were better off flying in T-shirts. That was really, you know, I say that I was protected in Vietnam by the prayers, the grace of God, by the prayers of my mother, my late mother. She prayed, my sister told me, she prayed everyday so I really felt like I had a strong faith and I was protected. My mother prayed everyday for my safety and I was not seriously injured mentally or physically.

SM: Were there any incidences where the enemy tried to shoot down the Bird Dogs, in particular since they were slow movers, with RPGs? Any incidents where they were hit?

JC: I don’t remember an RPG being fired at a Bird Dog, I don’t remember. I remember RPGs fired 2nd tour at helicopters, but I don’t remember RPGs being fired at Bird Dogs.

SM: So you left in late ’69 and where did you go?

JC: Ft. Stewart as an instructor. I went back to Ft. Stewart and taught on the flight line for a while, got tired of being scared by students and went to academics. Taught weather before I went to academics branch for a while.

SM: What was the scariest thing about teaching students?

JC: Some of the stupid things they would do…they wouldn’t listen. I mean, you know, we had lost the…and they closed the initial…the initial entry students weren’t bad because they were raw. The worst students we had were the helicopter pilots that we were trying to train to fly the Bird Dog and in the T-41 you’re sitting side by side and you’ve got a student over here who’s brand new in the Army so you can fairly control him, but in a Bird Dog you’re training a helicopter pilot in the fixed wing Q course, fixed wing qualification,
you’re teaching him to fly airplanes, this is their first airplane. Bird Dog’s a tough airplane for your first airplane and the instructor is sitting in the back seat and the pilot sits up high and the instructor sits in the back. Well you can’t see out the front of the aircraft, you have to look out the side of the airplane like this and the brakes, the student could have total control of the brakes. Your brakes in the back are very poor. I mean, you can’t override the student. He’s got control. The only way you could control the student was to reach up on his harness and choke him to death to get him off the controls sometimes. You didn’t have anything to hit him with which I would have liked to have had a club but if he wouldn’t listen to you, if he’d get locked on the brakes and we were going in strips out there, the Bird Dogs, after we taught them to land, we were going in strips with 200 foot pine trees around so once you descend below…I mean, you’re landing on a little narrow sliver of road or something like that. There’s not any room for error. These guys would get in there and they liked to…their biggest folly was that they did not watch the air speed indicator because when you’re flying a helicopter, air speed doesn’t matter. You just come in as you know and you slow down, slow down, slow down. You don’t watch the air speed indicator. In an airplane, the air speed indicator is everything because you’re going to stall. Well I’d sit there and watch the student and the air speed would drop, 110, 100, 90, 80, 70, and I’d say, ‘You’re going to stall. Give it a little power, give it a little power,’ and they would light the flare, like you do in a helicopter, at 100 feet. That was their favorite tactic. They’d light the flare at 100 feet, and I’d go, ‘You’re 100 feet off the ground! What are you going to do, land?’ And they would just come to a nice flare like that at 100 feet and the air speed would drop 90, 80, 70, 60 and I’d say, ‘Okay, go around. Throw the power to it.’ If you’re on a landing that’s okay but I got tired…I liked basic students okay but I didn’t like the transition course because the instructor was at such a disadvantage. I mean, you were just rolling the dice.

SM: Any accidents?

JC: Not in mine! I saw a plane, not mine.

SM: Were the instructor and student not killed?

JC: No, I saw an accident in a Cobra where they were killed, but when I went back for the second tour they were killed and no, they just bent the heck out of an airplane or two. Students get it off in the side of the ditch, and so I got tired of that after a few months and
went into flying. I always liked the weather, so I went in and started teaching academics and taught weather. Got trained up on weather and taught weather.

SM: How long did you do that?

JC: Oh, about another three or four months. Then I tried to get out of the Army and the Army said, ‘No, we think you have a Regular Army commission. You’re our 30-year type. So, we’re going to disapprove your application.’ I wanted to go to law school. I figured well I gave them four years and a tour in Vietnam, I thought I’d given them enough so they decided that I was candidate to go…they sent me a stack of orders that sent me to infantry officers advanced course followed by rotary wing Q course followed by Cobra transition in route back to Vietnam, all that in one set of orders. So they extracted another four years or so out of me before I could get out, and another trip to Vietnam.

SM: Now advanced infantry officer course, you were still branch infantry even though you’re flying?

JC: Yeah, because we didn’t have an aviation branch until ’84 I think. Oh yeah, we were still infantry branch and so yeah, this was ’71. I got back to Vietnam in May of ’72 and stayed until they turned the lights out in March of ’73.

SM: Now given the importance of the role of the aircraft support of infantry, do you see going to the advanced infantry officer course as logical or did you think it was kind of a silly waste of your time?

JC: It was mindless. They were still hung up on European tactics. They didn’t really teach jungle warfare that much which was crazy I thought.

SM: So at the advanced course…

JC: I thought it was wasted. I thought it was a waste of time. It was boring. I thought it was a 9 months waste of time. I sharpened up my golf game. I thought it was terribly boring. It was a real gentleman’s course. We rode around in starched fatigues on air-conditioned busses and it was just a real gentleman’s course. It was more academic settings, lectures and stuff.

SM: And no utility in terms of when you went back to Vietnam, nothing learned?

JC: No.

SM: What about instructors there, any combat veterans?

JC: Yeah.
SM: Combat veterans?

JC: Yeah. The program of instruction just wasn’t geared to jungle tactics. They were still teaching straight basic unit tactics. Squad, platoon, company, battalion, brigade, you know? They were still teaching like we were going to fight a ground war in Europe. I thought they totally glossed over what was going on in Vietnam.

SM: Did you talk about this amongst your fellow students, advanced course students?

JC: I think those of us who were pilots probably did. We were pretty disgusted with it. At that time I was trying to get out of going back. A lot of those guys weren’t going back. A lot of them weren’t even going for their first tour, so I was upset. I was on the phone about every week with the VA, ‘Why am I going back for a second tour when all these guys have never gone?’ and the answer I got was, ‘Well captain, the war is so delicate right now that we need experienced aviators,’ to which I replied one day when I knew that I was going, because I kept thinking I was going to get out of it. My orders would get cancelled. I told this major, I said, ‘Well excuse me major, but how in the hell do you think I got my experience, you know, going over there and getting my ass shot at?’ I said, ‘I got my experience.’ So you know, ‘Why don’t you send me to grad school or to a VIP flight battalion or something like that?’ ‘No, we need you in Vietnam. We need your experience.’

SM: I was under the impression that second tours were voluntary?

JC: No. If you had a Regular Army commission they weren’t. I was indefinitely extended. They would not let me out.

SM: So you went from the advanced course, infantry advanced course, to…

JC: Flying helicopters.

SM: Flying helicopters. Did you jump straight into it? You eventually flew the Cobra.

JC: Started out with an OH58 Bell Jet Ranger, made right here in Ft. Worth and then went to the Huey and then went to Savannah, Georgia to the Cobra.

SM: Was the transition from fixed wing to helicopter a difficult one?

JC: Once you learned to hover, no. But we thought we were pretty hot shit aviators because I had about 3,000 hours at that point so we thought we were pretty hot. That helicopter is a humbling experience. You think it’s so easy to hover, but it took about the same amount of time to hover the helicopter as it did to solo the airplane, about 7 to 9 hours.
It is that difficult to hover the helicopter. It is extremely difficult to hover a helicopter. Once you mastered the hovering, it was a piece of cake from then on. It was easy from then on except trying to fly instruments in the helicopter because the helicopter is inherently unstable and trying to keep it stable in the instrument environment and fly in the clouds and shoot an ILS approach, flying instruments in a helicopter are very challenging. But, once you mastered the hover, then it flies like an airplane once you learn how to hover.

SM: What makes the hover difficult?

JC: You’ve got the pedals, you’ve got the anti torque, you’ve got the collective, and you’ve got the cyclic and all this is being mixed and the amount of movement that it takes is about the size of a silver dollar, is all you need to move to move to control the helicopter and just over controlling. When you get a hold of it, the instructor says, ‘Okay, now get on the controls with me.’ He’s got it a perfect three-foot hover. ‘Okay, get on with me.’ ‘Okay, this is not so hard. Oh, I’m not moving.’ And he says, ‘Okay, I’m getting…it’s all yours.’ Well for about five seconds, it does fine but then it starts to move with you and you start to, let’s say you start to rear back a little bit and he says, ‘Okay, a little bit of forward cycling.’ Well when he means a little bit of forward cycling, he means a quarter of an inch correction. Well I’m used to flying an airplane where I crank the thing around, I mean, you know, slam the stick over here, pull it back here. I mean, I’m used to jerking it around. He’s talking about moving it forward about a quarter of an inch. I mean, they tell you think about moving and the mind is a wonderful thing. If you think about moving your finger and if you sit there and stare and you think, ‘Okay mind, make my finger move.’ You watch your finger, it will twitch and it will move and all you’ve done is think about it. So, all you have to do to move a helicopter is think about it. ‘Well, a little of forward cycling now captain!’ Oh, okay, a little bit. Well I move it three inches! Hello there! You pitch it up like this! ‘Little cyclic now.’ Well okay, I overcorrected. Oops, I jerk it back. Well then you’re just going woo, woo, woo, like that and he says, ‘Okay, I got it,’ just about the time you’re going to crash and he grabs it and then it just stops. So frustrating. It’s learning to anticipate what the controls do and learning, really, to control it before it really starts to move. Feel it, and then make very small movements to move it, just to squeeze it, just squeeze it a little bit, and that’s real hard to learn. It takes 7 to 9 hours to learn that. Then once you learn that it flies like an airplane does. It gets easy after that. That was very frustrating because we thought we were hot, we
thought we were good. Well that helicopter is a very humbling, it’s a very difficult airplane to fly.

SM: So what was more difficult do you think, transitioning from helicopter to Bird Dog or from Bird Dog to helicopter?

JC: Well of course I wasn’t in their seat but it looks like it would have been easier to go from a helicopter to an airplane than it was from an airplane to a helicopter. That’s probably a prejudice point of view but that’s what I would think and because of this reason; an airplane is stable. An airplane, the wings aren’t going to fall off. The tail’s not going to come off. It’s going to do predictable things and it’s inherently stable. The worst thing that’s going to happen to you, I used to say the worst thing that’s going to happen to you in an airplane is that the engine’s going to quit. In a helicopter, probably the best thing that’s going to happen to you is going to be the engine’s going to quit because then you can auto rotate but you lose tail rotor, drive shaft, pins, clutches, you’re a 10,000 pound rock out of control which was what I hate about helicopters is a 20,000 hour pilot, in many situations, have no control over the helicopter. You know, the V22 crashed out there. Those pilots may have had no control over that device.

SM: And the auto rotation phase of your training, how difficult was that?

JC: To really get good at it, very challenging but very rewarding. I mean, when you put it down on the spot where they wanted you to put it, made a successful auto rotation, it was very rewarding because when you fly around over the city or over the countryside, when you’re in a helicopter I always was thinking, ‘Okay, if my engine quit, where would I go right now?’ That was a constant, I think in most helicopter pilots, ‘Where would I go if I made a forced landing right now?’ But auto rotation was very exciting and a lot of fun when you got it down, when you did it good. It was very challenging.

SM: Was the first time a surprise, when they were training you? I’ve heard horror stories that they’ll just boom, throw it on you.

JC: Oh yeah. It wasn’t pretty, it wasn’t pretty. Of course they’re not going to let you crash, but see that’s the hard thing with an instructor. There were instructors that we had that would let the students go too far and get in trouble, either hurt themselves, hurt the airplane, get in trouble. Then we would have instructors, we had guys that wouldn’t let the students do anything. Wouldn’t hardly even let them fly because they were afraid of bending the airplane
or something so it was very hard for the instructor to learn that groove as to when to be
comfortable with a student and how much to let them do.

SM: Okay, this ends the first interview with Mr. Jimmy Coffman.
SM: This is Steve Maxner, conducting interview number two with Judge Jimmy Coffman on the 16th of June, year 2000 at approximately 1:15 in the afternoon. I’m in Lubbock, Texas and Judge Coffman is Arlington, Texas, is that right?

JC: Ft. Worth.

SM: Ft. Worth, okay. Judge Coffman, would you begin by discussing your second tour to Vietnam, in particular the circumstances surrounding you getting back there and the unit you were assigned to with the 201st Aviation Company and what your role was with the aviation company.

JC: Between tours, I attempted to resign along 1970-'71 time frame and I felt that I had given them almost five years and a tour in Vietnam and I wanted to try to resign and go to law school, but because I had accepted a regular commission in college through ROTC, the same type of commission that the West Point graduates, they had the authority to involuntarily extend me, so they refused my resignation and sent it back with orders attached to Vietnam in route to, or to helicopter transition, cobra transition, in route back to Vietnam which I thought was a nice payback. But, I did try to get out. I wanted to go to law school, but I kept complaining to the Pentagon all the time I was in training. I could see the war dwindling down, the troops being reduced, and I kept calling and asking, ‘Why am I going back for a second tour when there’s a lot of aviators that have not gone the first tour,’ and their answer was that the war was so sensitive at that time that they needed experienced people to which I told one major one time, ‘Well how in the hell do you think I got my experience?’ You know, going over there and experiencing it. But, that was not persuasive
so approximately May of ’72 I arrived back in Vietnam just in time for the TET Offensive or
the May offensive in Kontum. I had gotten there earlier just in time for TET of ’68, so I got
back just in time, started flying cobras in Pleiku with the cav unit for a short period of time,
and there were a lot of crazy pilots who were there first tour and they could see the
handwriting on the wall. They could see that the war was ending and they planned to make a
career out of the Army and it was very important for you to, if you have, it was very important
to have some ribbons on your record; things like purple heart, DFC, whatever you could get,
air medals was very important when it came for promotion in peace time, so they were doing I
thought crazy things, taking unnecessary risks. I only flew cobras for a couple of months
before I wrangled a job back down in Nha Trang flying Hueys and OH-58s for VIP people,
and then I finished that, went to January ’73; because I did have experience pretty much in
country I was drafted to fly the peace force, the peace keeping force when they were
negotiating with the Vietnamese on the turnover and on the surrender on the peace talks and
after the peace talks were signed in January ’73 the turnover talks would continue so I would
go out to the jungle land and we’d pick up VC officials, NVA officials, fly them back to a
designated city and they’d powwow all day and then I’d fly them back, and I did that until
March of ’73. I don’t know how many people were left but I remember one experience was
getting on the airplane with about six or seven different officers from different countries lined
up counting heads and I almost had the feeling as I approached the ramp to the airplane that
one of them would reach out and grab me and say, ‘Wait a minute, you can’t go.’ That’s kind
of the way I felt because they all just kind of stared at you as you were walking single file and
they were physically counting every body that was getting on an airplane leaving Vietnam. I
did that, and so when I got back in March of ’73 I went to Ft. Lenninwood and resigned and
started law school in Oklahoma at that time.

SM: Okay, now when you went through cobra transition, that training, was that a
difficult transition to go from the standard Huey to the cobra?

JC: No, it wasn't’ too hard. It was fun. We had a death; we had a student die in
training. He put the airplane in too steep of a dive; I really think he was showboating. Well, I
really think the instructor pilot was showboating and put it in too steep of a dive and couldn’t’
pull it out. I really think, because the instructor was known as a hot head and he rode a
Kawasaki 1000 and was known for speeding around the streets in Savannah and some other
things that came up during the investigation so I really think that the instructor was at the controls when he splashed and hit the ground.

SM: And both the instructor and the student pilot were killed?

JC: Yes.

SM: Wow. Were there any other casualties in your training?

JC: No.

SM: Okay. And the…what were the more remarkable differences that you experienced in terms of the aircraft, between the standard Huey and the Cobra?

JC: Well, the Cobra was just a magnificent platform for flying weapons, especially rockets; very stable, very slim, hard to hit. The Huey you could hit with a rock; in fact, you could knock the Huey down with a big rock, and the Cobra was very hard to hit and very maneuverable and as aircraft commander in the back I took over the rockets because I loved to shoot the rockets. The rockets were beautiful weapons. You could bring them in real close to the troops, I mean, you could put them on a dime. The mini gun in the front was erratic and the 40 millimeter grenade launcher was erratic so I just told the guy in the front seat, ‘You can take all weapons except the rockets, don’t touch the rockets,’ so I fired the rockets. They were very, very accurate. The troops in contact loved them because you could get low and you could shoot them out in front of their positions just right on the money. I mean, you could really put them in a hole. You could really nail them.

SM: Now when you say that the mini guns and the 40 millimeter grenade launchers were erratic, could you be a little bit more specific in terms of the problems that you encountered firing those weapons?

JC: Well, they just wouldn’t go where you pointed them. I mean, you could have the target sights, you could have the pipper is what we called, the little cross hair, you could have that right on the target and they just were not a very good…they were kind of all over the place. They were just kind of an area of coverage weapon and they weren’t that good, weren’t that good, but the rockets were really right on. You could put the Cobra in a fairly steep dive and of course the more…the steeper the angle of the dive, the more accuracy you got because there’s less chance of wind deflection. Of course, the steeper the dive, the more direct pact to the ground and less wind deflection.
SM: Now in Vietnam, for the time period that you did serve as a Cobra gunship pilot or aviator, excuse me, what kind of operations did you engage in? You said you got there in time for Tet of ’68 and also for the missions in May of ’68.

JC: May of ’72.

SM: I’m sorry, Tet of ’72, that’s right.

JC: It wasn’t Tet of ’72, it was actually May of ’72.

SM: Okay.

JC: The north Vietnamese, we were in Pleiku in a cav, 7 of the 17th Cav. The North Vietnamese launched a…

SM: The Easter Offensive?

JC: That’s right, in May of ’72.

SM: Yes sir.

JC: And they over ran Kontum.

SM: Got you.

JC: And we were in Pleiku which is about 20-30 miles away. In fact, on that same road, John Paul Vann was killed going to Kontum to pick up his Vietnamese girlfriend returning to Pleiku for a party. That’s how that all came down. You know, bright shining star and all that. But we would operate in teams. The LOH, the little OH-six would go down and really would stir things up and if we didn’t catch them outright, and there were several mornings where we just caught them outright, and of course we always hoped at that time that we had a load of flachette rockets on board which were nails and each rocket carried I think 5,000 little bitty darts, big long darts, and one rocket could cover 100 yards, and if you ever caught any troops in the open…it was not good for anybody that was covered, but if you caught anybody in the open and you had a load of flachettes on board, it was like shooting fish in a barrel. We did that one morning; there was two of us with two LOHs and we caught about 25 or 30 crossing an open field and I think we killed 20 of them on the first pass. I mean it was just unbelievable; it was like going to a penny arcade, going to a fair. It was just unbelievable.

SM: Now the flachette rounds, these were actual rocket shells that you would explode in proximity?
JC: Yeah, it’s a 2.75 inch rocket that is filled with approximately 5,000 little nails about an inch or so long and each little nail looks like a lawn dart; I mean just looks like a little dart, air dynamic and everything, little fins on it and little darts, and of course you fire them and then I forget what altitude they open, maybe 50 feet, maybe 100 feet, okay.

SM: So there was a fuse, a proximity fuse that would activate the round?

JC: That’s right, activate the round and then they all come out and they cover this area and they’re just a beautiful weapon.

SM: Sounds like quite an anti personnel…

JC: Oh, it’s just a beautiful weapon.

SM: So that was the standard type of operation that you would conduct with the 201st, is that correct?

JC: When I went down to the 201st we had a split down in Nha Trang. We had…most of our helicopters were out supporting the MACV units out with the advisors and then I had a platoon of Hueys that were mainly VIPs, mainly VIPs. I had 40 Hueys and a platoon of VIPs. Now the 58s would go out and stay all week with the advisor and that’s what John Paul Vann had. That’s what he had. He had a 58 dedicated to him by the 201st, so the MACV advisors, a lot of the advisors, would have a dedicated helicopter that would stay with them all week where as the Hueys of the 201st were mostly VIP units, were mostly VIP transports.

SM: What was the unit where you flew gunships, do you remember?

JC: 7 of the 17th Cav and the troop of…7 of the 17th, Steve, I don't remember the troops because we had two or three troops up there and we had trouble keeping the Cobras flying because the SAS system, the stabilization augmentation system had three axis to it and a lot of times it didn’t’ work, so maintenance of the Cobra was a pretty hard time. Like if we had eight Cobras, you’d be lucky to have four or five of them flying because it was tough. The weather there was just horrible, like on the Mohawks, the weather was just horrible.

SM: With the gunship operations, you said that you flew the typical Cobra LOH gunship operation, the LOH going in trying to stir up the nest and you guys going in and firing.

JC: Yeah, you’re going to have, usually, two Cobras and one LOH operating, sort of the hunter/killer team.
SM: Right, but when you mentioned using the Cobra in a troop support capacity, what units were you primarily supporting? These were ARVN units?

JC: Yeah, most of them, because the 4th Division had pretty much gone home by then. Most of them were ARVN units at that time which were pretty pathetic.

SM: Who would call you in for that support? Was that an American on the ground, an advisor?

JC: An American advisor on the ground, yeah.

SM: And were there any particular...you mentioned that a lot of the younger pilots that were there flying the gunships, that they were kind of hot-dogging it.

JC: They were crazy.

SM: They were risk takers?

JC: Yes.

SM: Any particular incidents stand out where that kind of backfired on anybody?

JC: Well, they would try to take on a weapon that was over their heads. Small arms is a lot different than taking on, let’s say, a 50 caliber or a lot different than taking on a 37 millimeter and they were very poor in recognizing what they were up against. They didn’t read their intelligence reports and they just didn’t realize what kind of shells were being fired at them and they would just go blazing into glory and they just didn’t know when to say no. They didn’t know when to pull back, turn down a mission; plus they also would challenge the weather. They would do dumb things in bad weather. They would fly in bad weather and we lost a couple of Cobras because of it, because of the weather.

SM: Now your unit, the 7th of the 17th with the Cobras, did you guys fly missions into Laos at all, because you’re pretty close to the border there?

JC: Officially or unofficially?

SM: Both.

JC: Oh yeah, oh yeah. I mean, Nixon was lying his behind off because when I was with the Ravens we were in Laos and Cambodia both. I mean, that was done quite a bit and he was just back here just telling the American people just a bunch of lies.

SM: And any particular missions that you can recall as far as memorable circumstances?
JC: No, but it was amazing what was coming down the Ho Chi Minh trail; I don’t care how much bombing and interdiction they did, Steve. It was just amazing what was coming down the trail. We were no more shutting off their supply lines from the north. I mean, it was just stupid the amount of material they were allowing being shipped from the north. I mean, it was just like a river of material and supplies coming down. Later in the war, of course, they came down in broad daylight. In ’68-’69 they did a little better of hiding when I was up hunting them in a Mohawk; they did a little bit better of hiding. But, in ’72 and ’73 I mean they’d come down broad daylight, and we did have…the only known sighting that I know of, I didn't see it personally, but a friend of mine who was a co-pilot, who was a brethren pilot of mine actually passed a north Vietnamese helicopter one day and like I say, I cannot vouch for it except I know this guy, I can’t think of his name, but I do not question his veracity and I don’t think he would make it up, and the pilot and co-pilot both saw it and saw a north Vietnamese helicopter coming south. I read about it. I never saw one, but he said he passed one, and its kind of like they went past each other and I don’t think either one of them wanted to really realize what they saw.

SM: What about MiGs? Any encounters between helicopters and MiGs that you were aware of?


SM: And in the Cobra, what ground weapon did you try to avoid the most. I mean, I think we discussed that any weapon being fired at you is a bad idea and a bad circumstance but you mentioned that some of the pilots had a hard time judging and made mistakes in judging. What did you really want to avoid?

JC: I think that it was called a ZSU. I think that the one that the NVA had was actually Russian, I think. It was four machine guns and I forget the caliber, somewhere around 50 caliber, mounted on a track. It was kind of like ours. Have you ever had anybody tell you, Steve, of our…oh, what they call ours, where they would mount four guns on top of a track and fire? They had them on the perimeter. They called them dusters.

SM: I’ve never heard of that.

JC: Have you ever heard of I think it’s an M-113 with like four 50 calibers tied up in unison on top of a track? They called them dusters. I think the worst one, what I was most fearful of because these four guns, they all fired in unison; they all fired at the same target so
putting out that much lead at you wasn’t just a single shot at a time. You were really up
against really a nest of four machine guns. I want to say ZSU-23; I don’t know why that
comes to mind, but something in the weapon recognition training, it seems to me it was a
ZSU-23. I thought that was probably the most dangerous one that I ever dealt with.

SM: And when you were low to the ground, were there ever any instances where the
enemy tried to use RPGs or anything like that against you?
JC: Not against me, but I saw a handheld rocket fired and took the tail off of another
Cobra; went right past me. Took the tail off the Cobra and of course killed the pilot and co-
pilot. But, what’s the word I’m looking for? A SAM, this SAM and I forget what they call it,
SA-7s or whatever they were took the tail off this Cobra. Of course, it was, you know…

SM: What altitude?
JC: Low, it was heat seeking. We basically were down on top of them.
SM: So its like our version of the stinger?
JC: Yeah, exactly, yeah, yeah. Exactly.
SM: Anything else that you want to discuss about your time in the Cobras?
JC: Well, you know, in both interviews, there’s a lot…I wanted to say this and I
thought about it after the time, you know, there’s a lot of gore and a lot of bloodshed that I
really have felt has been put forth in other books and in other media, you know, in videotapes
and everything. You probably have noticed I have chosen to…not to include that.
SM: Yes sir.
JC: Not that it bothers me, I just don’t feel that was necessary for me to tell a story.
Now for some other people, some grunt who had some vivid recollection, probably important.
But, for me to tell my story, all the harrowing experiences and all that, I really just didn’t
really feel it was necessary for me to really tell each and every encounter.
SM: Was there any particularly difficult experience that you had, a harrowing
experience?
JC: Okay, I’ll just tell one, and this is not gory. This is back to first tour and I don’t
remember whether I mentioned this or not; the longest time I ever spent on the ground. I had
several mechanical failures and I was shot down several times both tours, but one time in the
Birddog when I went through a triple canopy jungle and they couldn’t find me, and did I talk
about this?
SM: I don’t recall this one.

JC: Okay. And I had my survival radio and I had my…I had traded for an M-1 carbine with two banana clips, I had traded something for it because I didn’t like the M-16 and so I got away from the airplane not too far and I sort of dug myself in a little hole and I had my little map and my little radio and my little gun and they couldn’t find me because the jungle had sort of swallowed up, where I crashed, it sort of swallowed up the airplane and I’ll tell you, when they say triple canopy and you can’t see the sky, boy that is no joke. They were flying all around. Anyway, I spent about an hour and a half on the ground and I could hear the little people coming and at that point, I think I said this earlier, that my biggest fear in Vietnam was not dying; it was being captured. I didn’t want to die, but you know, I don’t know whether it’s because of my faith because I’m a Christian or what. I didn’t really have a fear of dying, it was being captured and tortured. That was my biggest fear and I had just about reached the point, during that time, that if at all possible I was going to try to get them into such a fire fight that they would kill me instead of take me capture…instead of taking me prisoner, and I had about an hour and a half to think about that and I went through…I remember consciously going through that thought process of exactly what I want to do if I’m not rescued, but fortunately they found me and they dropped one of these jungle penetrators down through the jungle and I hopped on it and they jerked me out. But, I could hear them coming. I could smell them; I could smell them. They really smell bad, eating fish and fish guts all the time and rice, but that’s probably…going through that thought processes of, say, ‘Okay, I’m not going to be taken. They’re not going to take me alive.’ How do you go about that? ‘Do I have enough ammunition to piss them off enough that they’ll kill me rather than just surrender?’ I think that’s probably it.

SM: Your move down to the 201st to fly I guess a lot of VIP…

JC: Yeah, I took over. They needed a captain with lots of time. They needed a pretty senior captain. At that time, I was a fairly senior captain at that time, so they really needed somebody to run. We had this monster platoon. We had this platoon with 40 Huey’s in it and a lot of sometimes some young aviators that didn’t know how to fly VIPs because it’s a totally different kind of flying, and a lot of these were single ship missions where we were sent out all over Vietnam so you really had to know your navigation and you really had to be prepared because if you went down and had an emergency in ’72 and ’73, there was not a half million
troops there that was going to come and get you. You were basically on your own, and you
were going to...if you went down, you basically were going to walk out because probably
nobody’s going to come rescue you. So, just to get those pilots in that frame of mind, the
different type of flying maybe more responsible. So yeah, I went down; of course I did a lot
of flying myself, I flew everyday myself. But, that’s what I did for the rest of my tour until
January of ’73 came along and did the peace keeping force deal.

SM: Any particular VIPs that you remember when you flew for the 201st?

JC: Well, I flew John Paul Vann a lot, but I can’t remember...no, I don’t remember
any, I don’t remember anybody in particular.

SM: And when you flew VIPs, I would imagine that you received some pretty decent
and thorough intelligence briefs to be able to avoid contact. Was that the case?

JC: No.

SM: You didn’t?

JC: No, we didn’t get much of anything.

SM: I mean, was that not stressed? If you’ve got a VIP on board you want to make
sure that you fly over friendly or safe areas.

JC: Yeah, but at that time about every area was enemy. I mean, you really had to be
careful, you really had to be careful.

SM: Even during the day?

JC: Yeah, even during the day. We really didn’t, you know, we really didn’t get that
good of intelligence either tour. I thought the intelligence was very poor. Military
intelligence is a contradiction of terms, you know; it just wasn’t that good. It was like
weather briefings. The only weather briefing I remember in two years was that a typhoon was
coming. That’s the only...your weather briefing was to walk outside and look at the sky. The
only one we got was when the typhoon was coming. Now, we did get word on that the
typhoon was coming. But I’m sure the Air Force, they had their own little weather tents and
weather briefings and everything, but Army guys, we were supposed to be tough. We didn’t
need all that stuff.

SM: Oh, I see. Were there ever any instances where you really wished you had
received a decent weather briefing?
JC: No, not really. You could predict monsoon season’s going to rain a couple times a day, and then the dry season. No, you could pretty much look outside. You could kind of tell what the weather’s going to be; I mean, hot and humid.

SM: How would rain affect your flying?

JC: Mostly low hanging clouds and the visibility down, especially in the mountains. See, in the highlands you’ve got to remember that the highlands are pretty high. Da Lat is 5,000 feet above sea level and then Pleiku and Kontum up in the highlands, so you get a lot worse weather up there. In fact, I have known pilots who have gotten trapped and their only escape was to climb on top of the cloud deck and head east far enough that they know that they could probably let down; they were away from the mountains and they could let down through the clouds safely down in a more coastal area and that’s the way they did a lot of times when they got trapped, if they had enough fuel to do it.

SM: Let’s see, and as far as other activities your second tour and the second…particularly the second half of your tour, the morale of your units…

JC: American or Vietnamese?

SM: Both the Cobra and the 201st, what was the morale like for soldiers that were still in country, Americans?

JC: Angry…

SM: How so?

JC: That we were still there; angry that we could see what the Vietnamese were allowing to happen. Areas that we had fought for such as Tuy Hoa Air Base, Cam Ranh Air Field, sand blowing over the runways, weeds growing up between the cracks, Vietnamese people carrying off the hangers block by block, piece by piece, and just giving up and laying down. Just areas that we had fought and died for four or five short years before, the Vietnamese were just throwing in the towel. They had no will to fight in my opinion. They were pathetic. They wanted somebody else…they were very…I guess it goes back, and I’ve read some since then, Steve, I didn’t realize at the time but I guess they’re a very peaceful type of people. They just wanted to live and be their rice farmers and they’re not warriors. So, if you’ll come in and do the fighting for them they’ll stand back and watch people fight for them, do the fighting for them. They don’t want to fight, they don’t like to fight, and they didn’t in my opinion. So, I thought the morale, especially those of us that were there for a
second tour, I mean it was real survival; I mean, it was get home. Your whole object the
whole tour was just to get home.

SM: Did that affect operational success do you think?
JC: I don’t think so.
SM: No?
JC: No, we still did the job; we were just very careful.
SM: Or at least some of you were.
JC: At least some…yeah. A lot of the first tour guys that still wanted to get their
DFCs and their air medals were kind of crazy.
SM: And did you guys talk about this a lot in terms of like at the officer’s club or was
it something that was talked about or was it inappropriate?
JC: We kind of kept an eye on the peace talks. We were pissed off about being there.
We could see that the handwriting was on the wall; that this was a lost cause and we wanted
to get the hell out of there. We didn’t want to stick around and be the last person killed in
Vietnam.
SM: And the guys that used to ferry around for the peace talks, did they talk? Did
you get a chance to talk to them much about what they were doing?
JC: No, we were given a set of coordinates. We would fly out to the jungle, we
would land in these coordinates, wait a few minutes, they would come out of the jungle, they
would get on the helicopter, we’d fly them back to the city, they’d powwow all day and then
we’d return them to where the coordinates was where we picked them up. Not a word was
said, not a word was said, so we had no idea what was going on other than they were working
out, you know, trying to work out the terms of the agreement.
SM: Well when you came…well, what did you all think when the terms of the peace
were disclosed in ’73 after the Christmas bombing? What did you guys think about the Paris
peace? Did you talk much about it?
JC: No, not really. I think we were concerned about the POWs because I think we
were concerned about the accountability and that there was no mention of the POWs held in
Laos and Cambodia or in the Vietnamese jungles. It seems like the only POWs that they
talked about were the ones at the Hanoi Hilton, and there was no mention, you know, there
was no really mention of accountability of the other prisoners held elsewhere so we were kind
of concerned about that. We really didn’t talk about that. We just went to the club and drank
and waited for our orders to go home.

SM: Happy to be leaving?
JC: Happy to be leaving, happy to be leaving.
SM: Now when you left Vietnam and you came back, where did you come in
through, San Francisco or Los Angeles?
JC: Seattle.
SM: Seattle?
JC: Yeah, McCord.
SM: Okay. Was that…
JC: Not a pleasant reception.
SM: Yeah, I was just going to say, what kind of reception did you guys receive?
JC: Not good. We were told to change clothes before we left McCord, put on the
civilian clothes and go to the airport and not to let it be known. But, they were angry. There
were groups outside the gate and there were groups at the airport so you just try to be
inconspicuous but when you’re carrying around a duffel bag and in civilian clothes and its
obviously pretty obvious you just came back from Vietnam…fortunately, myself, I didn’t’
really have any ugly encounters like some other guys did. I saw it, but personally I didn’t’
experience. I had the feeling, I know they were there; I saw the signs and I saw the
demonstrators, but I personally was not attacked or spit on.
SM: And where did you go from there? You got, what, a 30 day leave?
JC: Got a 30 day leave, went to Ft. Leonard Wood. They tried to send me to
Germany and so I called and I got on the phone from Vietnam and I called them and I said,
‘Look, I got ten people here that want to go to Germany that are going to stay in the Army.
Can’t you get it through your thick skulls I want to go to law school in Oklahoma? So, put
me somewhere in Texas, Kansas, or Missouri or Oklahoma where I can go to law school,’ so
they finally said, ‘Okay, we’ll change your…we thought you might just change your mind,
Captain.’ I said, ‘No, my mind hasn’t’ changed.’ So I went to Ft. Leonard Wood and ran a
basic training company.
SM: Okay, and how long did that last?
JC: 15 months.
SM: 15 months?

JC: Yeah, and then I got out and went to law school in August ’74.

SM: Now what did you think about your experiences upon your return? What did you think about your service in Vietnam, the two tours that you committed?

JC: I felt the first tour that it was justified, that I was doing something noble. For one thing, we had a half million troops there and I felt like my support, 99% of my support my first tour was supporting Americans on the ground while they were hanging their behinds out, so okay, I didn’t volunteer but I was ordered to go there but I felt I was doing something good because I was helping American troops. The second tour was just survival, like I said. We were supporting, in my opinion, worthless Vietnamese that were just…I was risking my life for nothing and I felt the 50-60,000 that had been killed was going to be in vane, so totally different feeling second tour than it was first tour.

SM: Has that attitude or has your perception changed since then?

JC: Well, I think the more I see, the more I think I realize the whole thing was a mistake. You know, of course 20-20 hindsight’s always easier to look back on, but I think the whole thing was a mistake and I hope that we have learned by our mistakes, you know, and maybe its prevented us from getting into some areas but I don’t know with the experiences of Somalia and Bosnia and Kosovo, I don’t know. It doesn't look like we’ve learned our lesson. But, I think something the politicians should really consider before we commit troops is its different to send money for supplies and tanks and bullets and things like that but before we put an American fighting person in, I think we ought to have a definite hard concrete strategy and see, look at the quagmire we’ve got in Bosnia right now. I remember four years ago, January, Clinton sent those troops in and said to be home by Christmas. Well, 8,000 of them are still there. Kosovo, same thing. We’ve got troops there and we have no policy to get them out. I know George Bush has said he’ll get them out, but look at the disaster we had in Somalia. If we learn something from it by only committing troops when we have to…I just cringe every time they think about sending troops in and I think the day and age of America being the world policemen, Steve, I think that has a pontifica here. I think we need to hang a sign up, ‘No room at the Inn,’ and we need to take care of our own. I don’t mind sending troops on a multi-nation peace keeping force, a small force to go with the United Nations, I
don’t have a problem with that. But, for us to go in and have to do all the fighting, I think is a mistake.

SM: What was the most important thing you took away from your war experience, for you personally?

JC: Probably the faith that my mother gave me in being able to go do something like that, keep my head about it, keep calm enough not to panic and have faith and of my faith, how strong my faith was. I think that was instilled in me when I was a little boy, and then know that I could go and keep my wits about me which a lot of guys just couldn’t…they couldn’t handle the pressure and with a lot of them it wound up costing them their lives, especially pilots. So, I just think trusting in God and realizing that and strong faith that my mother instilled in me as a little boy.

SM: So it reinforced that?

JC: Yeah, sort of reinforced that, yeah.

SM: And what lesson…you’ve pontificated, as you’ve said, about certain aspects of being careful of how we conduct our foreign policy. Are there any other major lessons that you think we should take away from the Vietnam War as a nation for foreign policy or for domestic policy, for domestic issues?

JC: I just think if we’re going to do something, we need to do it and we just need to think about what we’re doing. We need to be honest with the American public. The Nixon administration and the Johnson administration was not honest with the American public and we just need to really think long and hard before we get into one of these quagmires like Vietnam and it was absolutely a quagmire. I mean, we should learn from history. We should have been able to read the history of the French in Indochina from 1945 to 1954 and we did the same thing - I mean, we did the same thing - and, make sure that we have a national interest before we go in there. Now in Kuwait, our dependence on foreign oil, sure. I think we had a national interest there. Bosnia and Kosovo, excuse me, I’m sorry what Milosevic did, but our national interests are, ‘I don't think so.’ Somalia, what the hell national interest do we have in Africa? None as far as I see. So, I really think that we should not just give lip service, Steve, to what national interest we have before we invest time and money and mainly men and women into those conflicts. Foreign policy should really be something that should be looked at and not just casually blown over.
SM: What about rules of engagement?

JC: Oh yeah, that’s another thing; one hand tied behind your back. ‘Okay, you can bomb here and you can bomb there and if you’re fired upon you can shoot but you have to call and get permission,’ you know, that was a joke. That was a total joke some of the things you are supposed to do. What a lot of us did, if we saw a target, we just called in and said we were being fired upon and we rolled in hot on them.

SM: Now was that for both tours? Were the instructions you received different from one tour to the next tour?

JC: Pretty much the same. No, no, no; we were restricted, followed rules, supposed to go through the Vietnamese and get clearance to fire and all that other stuff, and a lot of times we didn’t do that. It was just crazy. It’s like when they bombed the north, ‘Okay, you can bomb this part of Hanoi but you can’t bomb this part of Haiphong Harbor where all the ships are unloading all the supplies from Russia and China.’ ‘Wait a minute, excuse me? Why don’t we go in like we did in World War II and level the place?’ which is what we should have done, see. We should have taken Hanoi off the map like we bombed Europe. That’s what we should have done, but we didn’t.

SM: Anything else you’d like to add?

JC: No, I just appreciate what you all are doing. I was very impressed, and I’ve tried to tell some people and I’ve gotten some cards and if I get some more… I was very impressed with your library and the work you’re doing and if the world’s still around I hope the students…you know, history repeats itself, so I hope anybody that reads this or studies Vietnam can grow up and be a senator or a congress person, be a leader, and learn from history. Learn the mistakes we made in Vietnam. We don’t need another Wall, we don’t need another monument. We can replace tanks and airplanes but we can’t replace people and when you see the lives affected by the loss of 56,000…we just need to stop and think. I think a lot of us are indebted to you guys that are doing this at Tech. I think it’s just a magnificent gesture of what you all are doing to preserve this for the students that might come along and might want to read and study this so they can perhaps learn and help make it better for the future. I was very impressed with what you all are doing and I’m sure the reaction…let me ask you, what has been the reaction at all the reunions you’ve gone to to what you’re doing?

SM: Great; very positive.
JC: Good.

SM: The veteran community has been very receptive to the idea of preserving their history and participating actively in that.

JC: That’s good.

SM: You know, the thing is, thank you very much for your compliments and we’re indebted to you. We’re indebted to you in two ways; the service you provided our country and your willingness now to contribute to the history, so thank you.

JC: Well, I just think it’s been wonderful what you guys are doing there. I’ve never heard of anything like that and I try to spread the word whenever I can of what you all are doing. I enjoy reading the quarterly that you send me; thank you for doing that. I enjoy seeing the new periodicals that are out and the new books that are out and I’ve got several books off there to read and it’s very interesting to see that and maybe someday I’ll go back to Vietnam. I don’t have a hang up, I don’t have any hang ups about going back, I don’t have any bones to uncover, but you know, someday maybe I wouldn’t mind going back and just seeing what it looks like. Of course, my wife asked me if I would like to and I said, ‘Yeah, but my problem is I would want to see it from the air,’ and that’s expensive renting a helicopter. I saw several tapes of guys that have gone back on tour and they just ride in the back seat of a car or a bus and they say, ‘Okay, this is this battlefield and this is this battlefield.’ Well see, I didn’t see it from the ground, I saw it from the air, so to properly really see the areas that I want to see, I would want to see it from the ground. Until I win the lottery and can go rent a helicopter for 10,000 dollars, I probably won’t do that.

SM: Okay. Alright, well let me go ahead and end this officially. This ends the second interview with Judge Jimmy Coffman. Thank you again.