Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone. I’m conducting an Oral History interview with General John Arick. We are in Lubbock, Texas at Texas Tech University at the Special Collections Library interview room. Today is January 22, 2003. It’s about 11:20 a.m. Sir, lets start with some basic biographical information. Can you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your childhood?

John Arick: Sure, if you’ll stop calling me sir (laughter). I was born in Washington, DC, in 1940. I was raised in the Bethesda suburbs by a father who was an attorney for the Internal Revenue Service for 40 years and a mother who was a librarian at the Library of Congress for 20 years. I went to high school with my now wife of 40 years at Bethesda Chevy Chase High School. When I finished that I went into the Naval Academy.

RV: Did you grow up in Washington?

JA: I grew up in Bethesda, in the suburbs of Washington, DC.

RV: What are your memories of Bethesda?

JA: Nothing like what it is today. Bethesda was a one-horse town with a main street and hot shop and a bank and a funeral parlor and a high school when I grew up. Now it is the town of a thousand restaurants, high rises and two-lane highways. The footprint is still there but I can't afford to go back and buy a house there these days. It is unbelievable.
RV: Wow. So it’s really changed.

JA: My high school days were just like the ones that are depicted in the ‘50s movies; crazy dancing. Elvis came on the scene when I was 13 or 14 and hit his heyday during our high school years. I dated my now wife, as I said. She lived right behind the high school so it was very convenient for me to go and help her do her homework. It was just a regular nuclear family that Ned and Mary Catherine Arick raised. I have a brother and a sister younger.

RV: Both are younger?

JA: Both are younger. That’s correct. I played football in high school. I wasn’t very good at it, but we had a championship team.

RV: What position did you play?

JA: I was an end and a linebacker.

RV: In the days when everybody went both ways.

JA: Absolutely. Yes. We played single wing at Bethesda Chevy Chase High School. It was an interesting experience.

RV: Great. Tell me about your youth before high school. Do you have any memories? What sticks out about that time period of your life?

JA: That’s interesting. Nothing. I had a lot of support in school. I can remember a third grade teacher that told me she wanted to visit me in the White House when I became President. I can remember being encouraged by my family and my teachers everywhere I turned. And for that reason I think I have become a reasonably good teacher in my old age here. Working on somebody’s self-esteem I think gets you 95% of the way to making them a successful individual. Maybe not 95% but a whole bunch of it.

RV: So that teacher sticks out in your mind.

JA: Absolutely.

RV: Was education emphasized in your household?

JA: Yes it was. My father was an attorney and my mother was a librarian so yes it was.

RV: I have to ask this as a history person who loves libraries, did you go to visit your mom at the library often?
JA: I did on occasion. Not a lot. I probably went and visited her a couple of times. Actually she was kind of famous for the fact that she was the one that cataloged the Guttenberg Bible when the library got the Guttenberg Bible, and you know about the Guttenberg Bible.

RV: Of course. So what kind of jobs did you have in your youth?

JA: I delivered newspapers for the Washington Post. I started in fifth grade and I delivered my last newspaper on the morning that I left and went to the Naval Academy in the summer of 1958. That was the only job I had.

RV: Did you do this on your bicycle?

JA: I did it on my bicycle. I pulled a wagon on Sundays because the papers were heavier. Actually my brother and I delivered one route. I can still remember 1950 when the front page of the paper advertised the fact that Charles Schultz was starting Charlie Brown or Peanuts was starting back in 1950 it showed up in the paper. There was a lot of hype on that. I was ten years old.

RV: Did you get a chance to read the paper and look at it while you were delivering or before?

JA: Not while I was delivering. I read the comics, I read the sports when I learned how to read comfortably which was relatively early. But I wasn’t a world events buff. I hate to say that in front of a historian, but – at least at that stage of the game.

RV: How about your parents? Were they news worthy? Were they following world news and national news?

JA: They were. Having been brought up in the military after I left home, I’m a Conservative. My parents, I will never forget were dyed-in-the-wool Liberal Democrats who loved Hubert Humphrey. At that point in time when I was little it really didn’t make any difference. Actually, it didn’t make any difference any time. We never discussed politics other than the fact when my mother would applaud Hubert Humphrey, I would not.

RV: Did you consider yourself or looking back do you consider yourself a good student?

JA: Yes. I do. I was an A/B student. I wasn’t an exceptional student but I was an A/B and I had to work hard at that. It does not come naturally to me. None of my
graduate work has come naturally to me. I’m not a good reader but I think I learned the
value of education early on and went for it.

RV: And that continued through high school, your A/B work?

JA: Yes.

RV: What were your favorite subjects in high school?

JA: Cheerleaders. (laughter). Football.

RV: What years were you in high school?

JA: I was in high school from – I went into tenth grade in ’55 and I graduated in
’58. So that was the Happy Days I guess. My favorite classes were probably math which
is what I have my teaching certificate in secondary math - mainly because it was more
black and white than anything else. History I was afraid of because I had to memorize
stuff and that’s how it was taught anyway. I’m going to blame it on my teachers for that. I
wasn’t a real good reader. But math, I could go in, get a formula, figure it out and I also
had some very good math teachers too. And I had good history teachers and good English
teacher. I had some very good teachers all the way through school.

RV: Did you parents emphasize going to college? Was that kind of expected?

JA: It was a forgone conclusion. It was just, which one are you going to go to and
then how are we going to be able to afford it?

RV: Which colleges did you have your sights on?

JA: Well I got an ROTC scholarship and I applied to Princeton and I applied to
Rice. I got accepted at Rice, not at Princeton. Also of course I applied to my
Congressman for the appointment to Annapolis. And I got a second alternate appointment
from one of our senators, Senator Butler. The first alternate had a principal appointment
from another congressional member. And the principal didn’t pass all the entrance exams
so I got moved up in the queue.

RV: And that’s how you got in.

JA: The rest is history, yes.

RV: Now why did you choose to apply for an ROTC scholarship and look at the
Naval Academy? Where was the military influence?

JA: It was nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. I had to do, I had a military obligation.

Everybody had to put some time in the military back then. I didn’t have a clue what I
wanted to do when I grew up and I still don’t for that matter (laughter). I’m still
wallowing around. The military would get me a good quality post-secondary education
that we could afford. Basically my family could not afford to pay for my post-secondary
education. So I had to either get scholarships and I got a couple or I had to take the
NROTC scholarship or the Naval Academy so that’s why I applied to both of them.

RV: Why the Navy?

JA: I liked the uniforms better. That and Annapolis was closer to home. I actually
applied to the Coast Guard Academy also and was accepted there. But when I made my
visit to the Coast Guard Academy, they were not nearly so hospitable as the folks at
Annapolis. So I chose Annapolis.

RV: Do you remember what your parents thought about that? Were they
supportive of Annapolis or something else?

JA: It was kind of interesting. I was upstairs in my bedroom and my father came
in the front door on a Saturday and said something to the effect that, ‘Hey, I think you’re
going to enjoy this letter.’ I didn’t see my father or my mother right after we found out
that I had been moved up in the queue but I can picture them now doing back flips and
they weren’t athletic people. But they had to have been happy for it for any number of
reasons. Number one, Annapolis, I felt was a relatively prestigious place to go to school
and the price was right. Well, I said prestigious, you could get a good education there. I
can talk a little bit about Annapolis if you like.

RV: I’d love it.

JA: Very quickly. It’s changed a lot since I was there, which is a good thing.
When I went there it bred immaturity in my estimate. You had everything done for you,
more so as a first year student than the last year. But all years you got up at the same
time. You had your laundry done for you. You had your shoes done for you. You were
told when you could go here, when you could go there. And most important, the
curriculum was set for everybody. It was a trade school with academics thrown in. About
midway through my stay there, Admiral Rickover came on the scene and started making
changes. We got some electives my last two; I could have taken electives my last two
years of school there. I started out with one and decided it was too much trouble adding a
course, so I stayed with the regular curriculum.
RV: Which was that?
JA: Math. Matrix Algebra was the course. I can't imagine why I remember that. But I started and I dropped it, which was not a good thing to do at Annapolis. You don’t start something and stop it. But at any rate, after I left, the curriculum became more and more varied and now I believe you can even do pre-med at Annapolis and probably the other Academies too, which I think is wonderful. If a kid came into Annapolis who was not particularly mature, he could get into some serious trouble. And I saw folks and here’s one of those things. As a third classman we had one weekend I believe a semester that we could leave the campus and go away. I stayed drunk the whole time. Not literally. But I drank far more than I should have and partied far more than I probably should have. But that’s why I say Annapolis bred immaturity. I didn’t continue that and certainly my body can't handle anything like that, but it still scares me to think of some of the things that we did. But they were all legal at the time but not very smart. And some of my classmates actually were killed in automobile accidents and in other situations or damaged themselves or did stupid, enduringly stupid things, which was kind of sad.

RV: Can you give me some examples of some of the things you guys would do?
JA: Okay.
RV: You don’t have to.
JA: I will tell you right now and I will leave his name out, but that somebody who cares can figure it out, the person who ended up as my best man and the godfather of our first child at one of our parties first class year we were drinking heavily. One of my buddies went outside for a walk. And I decided to just kind of follow him. So keeping in mind that we were both somewhat inebriated. At any rate, he went down the street and around the corner. I went down the street and decided I’d cut through a bank parking lot and head him off and say ‘Boo!’ to him. Well, cutting through the bank parking lot and trying to climb a wall at that time of night which actually it wasn’t too late - it was about 11:00 - was not a real smart thing to do because the next thing I knew I was in a policeman’s spotlight saying, ‘Stop!’ Okay. And the next thing I knew, I was in his back seat and my friend was sitting there pleading with the policeman, ‘Nah. He’s okay. There’s nothing wrong. He wasn’t going to do anything.’ And I’m sitting there telling my friend, ‘Let him take me to the police station. No sweat. I can take care of this.’ And
finally my wife-to-be and my friend and a number of others dragged me out of the car  
and the cop said, ‘Stay clean.’ This was 1961 or ’62 back when there was a lot more  
tolerance for stupidity. Unfortunately there isn’t or maybe fortunately there isn’t as much  
tolerance for stupidity in the general populace today as there was back then.  

RV: What do you remember most about your Naval Academy days?  
JA: I remember the fact that everything was regimented. I had to march to class in  
small groups. I remember there was not much freedom when I was there. We had three  
weekends a semester when we were seniors. Two weekends a semester away from the  
campus. Two weekends as juniors, one weekend as a sophomore and none as a plebe. I  
remember the hazing during plebe year. There was severe hazing during my plebe year  
and I was in one of the companies that was the toughest, 24th Company. 10th and 24th  
were the ones that hammered their plebes the most. Fortunately, I ended up or  
unfortunately I ended up in the 24th Company.  

RV: Is that by pure happenstance?  
JA: By happenstance, yes.  
RV: Can you give any examples of what you had to go through?  
JA: Sure. Let me think. One of the most grueling hazing experiences probably  
wasn’t life threatening as some of them were but I had to crawl on my stomach the entire  
length of Bancroft Hall. And that’s tiring if you’ve never done it. I don’t recommend it.  
But I had to do that. You had to get up at 4:00 in the morning, do some stuff and then go  
do extra duty or march or whatever we did. The days were 20 hours long as a plebe.  
There was something, it wasn’t Russian roulette, it was some other name. Anyway, you  
stuck you hand in a bowl of water and then you flipped the light switch over the sink a  
bunch of times, with the light bulb out, flicked it and then put your finger in the socket  
and if you’re lucky it came up off. That’s enough of that. But that’s one of the, that could  
have been life threatening I suppose but that was one of the more painful experiences and  
scary ones.  

RV: So yours came up on.  
JA: Most of the time. Whenever it came up off we’d figure out a way to fake it or  
something, which wasn’t very good. We had to walk in the middle of passage ways,  
square all the corners, run up and down stairs, sit on the edges - you’ve heard of this - sit
on the edges of our chairs at meal time and a lot of things that don’t go on now days.
Now there is a lot of discipline, there’s good discipline down there and I think it’s a much
better place for a maturing adolescent to mature some more. When I was there I didn’t
agree with a lot of the structure that was there.

RV: Did you fight against that or did you kind of try to fit into that?
JA: No. I fit in. I didn’t know any other way to do it at that point in time. That’s
definitely a good thing because fighting it would not have made it any better. And I did
see classmates try to fight it, particularly the ones that had been it the service before they
came to Annapolis who had been through say Marine boot camp and they came to
Annapolis. The more they fought, the harder it was on them. I didn’t fight it. After I
became an upperclassman, me and my roommates just had fun with the plebes. And you
can have a lot of fun with them, joke with them and not hurt them and still train them.

RV: Right. What did your parents think about your Naval Academy experience?
JA: Actually I didn’t talk to them a whole lot about it. I know they were very,
very proud. I ended up on the Brigade staff as a first classman. I was a three striper and
got a chance to march at the front of the Brigade at all the football games, which was not
a bad thing to be able to do. My parents were proud and they were happy I was getting a
degree. My mother was not real happy when I made the decision to go into the Marine
Corps. My father was kind of ambivalent. Well, he gave the impression of being
ambivalent anyway.

RV: What about your brother and sister? How did they feel about their older
brother being in the Navy or going into the Naval Academy?
JA: I don’t recall any kind of feelings from them at all on that. We in later years
have become much closer than we were actually when we were growing up.

RV: You made the comment that the Naval Academy kind of bred immaturity.
Did you feel like you once you graduated after four years there that you had achieved
some level of maturity that you did not have before you came in?
JA: Absolutely. This is somewhat self-serving. If a person, if a kid 17- or 18-year-
old or 19-year-old entered the Naval Academy with a good, firm, mature outlook on life
as much as somebody that age can have one of them, a sense of values from whatever
source, then they were fine. They’d go through there and they’d come out and they’d
become admirals and generals or just very, very good soldiers. But if there was somebody
that went in there with a wild hair or so to speak, an attitude - well, attitude is okay - but
somebody who was just looking to party or didn’t take it seriously, they probably
wouldn’t finish Annapolis to begin with, but if they came out they would struggle in the
military environment and some of my classmates did. It wasn’t a free ride for me
obviously. I struggled but coped reasonably well.

RV: Were you able to maintain your academic standing that you had up to that
point?

JA: A/Bs. Yes. We had 900 and, I’ll say 970 graduating and I was about 180 or
190.

RV: So you were there, if I’m correct here, 1958 to ’62. Is that correct?

JA: Yes.

RV: Tell me what you thought about President Kennedy when he was inaugurated
at this time.

JA: What did I think about President Kennedy?

RV: I’m sure your mother was thrilled.

JA: Oh, absolutely she was. We marched in his inaugural parade and my mother
served me and some of my closest friend beef stroganoff that night because it was
snowing. It was cold. We lived in the outskirts. What did I think about John Kennedy? I
didn’t think politics very much. I was pretty much intent on surviving my Naval
Academy experience at that point in time. I was real interested in the debate. Was it
Nixon and Kennedy that debated? I heard that on the radio. I listened to it on the radio in
my room and to this day my opinion of that debate was that Nixon had won the debate.
You’re this historian. Am I right?

RV: Most people who listened to it on the radio thought Nixon had won. Most
people who saw it on television thought Kennedy had won and it was the whole dawn of
the new T.V. politics and Kennedy’s good looks and his polished demeanor versus
Nixon’s kind of sweaty herky-jerky not so polished. Interesting. You confirmed that.

JA: I confirmed it. I’m just one in a million. But I was thrilled with him. I think he
did everything right. I remember where I was when he was assassinated and I was
crushed, as was everybody. If you didn’t like him, you’re crushed when your president
gets assassinated. Or you better be. I think he would have done great things. He did do
great things. I think the Cuban Missile Crisis was a great achievement. Certainly it had to
have been. We prevailed. At least that was my perception of it. I was not involved in the
Cuban Missile Crisis because I had just been commissioned and I was in the basic school.
It was January, no, October of ’62. October ’62. Yes.

RV: You said you didn’t follow politics too much. Were you aware of national
issues and foreign policy and things like that?

JA: No. That’s another thing. I wasn’t required to be. I didn’t have time. We did
get the Washington Post in front of our door everyday. And as plebes we had to read it
and give reports and as an upper classman I also read the Post. But not to the extent that I
was involved or drew any hard conclusions because I was more interested in being able
to pass my history exam or my chemistry exam or whatever it was going to be and
going the heck out of the Naval Academy in one piece. No, it was mostly, me, me, me
then.

RV: What did you think of the military training that you had at the Academy?

JA: Good to excellent. My training, my preparation for the Marine Corps was
totally absent. It’s much, much better now. As a matter of fact, it scares me now. I
wonder why any midshipman decides to go into the Marine Corps and sticks with it
because they have to go through physical and mental and other Marine Corps-oriented
trials. There was a summer, our third class summer, our second class summer, half of that
was spent at Little Creek in amphibious training with the Marine Corps. I didn’t do that. I
stayed at Annapolis and trained the new plebes that came in for Plebe Summer. So I
missed that. When I was there, my training for the Marine Corps was zero, nothing. I
couldn’t even blouse my trousers when I got to basic school. I had to depend on folks that
had been in the Marine Corps to show me how to do that. But again, I’m a quick study,
which is one of the reasons I’m still alive today. I’m able to I guess rise to the occasion
reasonably well. But as far as Annapolis was concerned, in my day, they didn’t prepare
future Marines particularly well at all. Today, totally different.

RV: You’ve been back to the Academy.
JA: Yes. I’ve helped some youngsters get into the Academy from various sources and vicariously I have experienced some of the new and better programs that they have down there in Annapolis nowadays. I’m no expert on them though.

RV: But you experienced what you did in ’58-’62 and you have a chance to look at in now, you would consider it more improved.

JA: Absolutely, academically and professionally.

RV: Did you feel like you got a good academic education there?

JA: Yes. Absolutely. It prepared me to go on to three additional graduate experiences. It was a good springboard. The reason I went to Annapolis, the reason I chose Annapolis, the reason I chose a military academy was because price was right, probably not the best choice and the education was good but it was well-rounded. It gave you a snapshot of any number of different areas that might be a career area ultimately once I got out of the military. That’s why I was there.

RV: And that worked apparently.

JA: It did. Yes. (laughter) Here I am.

RV: Well, you were able to make some good choices. You had an array of choices for yourself I guess once you got into it.

JA: I did. I chose the Marine Corps.

RV: Tell me why.

JA: Well my wife’s, actually my girlfriend’s sister married a Marine and he impressed the heck out of me and I liked the uniform and I wasn’t really enamored with going to sea and floating around on a boat in the North Atlantic. I did that as a plebe or as a sophomore on my sophomore cruise. A mid watch in the engine room of a destroyer in the North Atlantic is not my cup of tea. I like the idea of being out and about. I also spent one cruise at Annapolis on a submarine, a nuclear attack boat. That was one of the most wonderful experiences I ever had. But, I didn’t like the idea of being cooped up on the ocean for 10, 12 days at a time. The Marine Corps offered me any number of things that I could do that wouldn’t require me to be at sea.

RV: Did they actually come recruit you or you just simply had to check a box?

JA: Well, you had to be qualified. I’m going to struggle here and try to be able to describe to you exactly how it worked. There was a service selection night; I think there
still is. In my day, the class was cut into four parts. Academically, upper half and lower half and then each of those were flight qualified and not flight qualified. So from each of those four quadrants, there were certain quotas and for each of the at the time four services - Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. Now, you could only go into the Marine Corps and the Navy out of Annapolis. 60 or 70 of my classmates went into the Air Force in 1962 and that was a travesty according to everybody. Two or three years later they cut out Air Force commissions. But at any rate, four quadrants, upper half flight qualified, upper half not flight qualified, lower half … and in each of those there was a quota for each of the services to get a cross section, diversity or whatever. And I had decided my first choice was going to be Marine Corps and lo and behold when my quadrant, I was upper half flight qualified, when it was my turn I said Marine Corps. I did have two people come to my door that night and say, ‘How about changing your mind and swapping with me,’ which was kind of sad because these guys were, both of them were ones who had relatives, if not a father, as Marines and they did not make the cut so to speak. When I say not making the cut, the lower half not flight qualified took some Marine candidates and other service candidates also.

RV: How did you get flight qualified?

JA: It was physical. It was purely physical. I guess there were some aptitude tests that we took also. Is this view upside down or right side up and things like that. Just very rudimentary other than the eyes and the rest.

RV: What did you do that summer after you graduated that spring?

JA: Celebrated. (laughter) What I did was go to Quantico. Our orders were to Quantico. I was in Easy Company Quantico which was, I think it was Easy Company. Anyway, it’s a transient company. I had to call in every day. I had most of the summer off. I started to basic school, I guess, January ’63 [should be July ’62]. I think so. That summer’s kind of a blur. I did some administrative work at Quantico. My wife was then working at the State Department in Washington. We lived in an apartment in Washington.

RV: So you got married that summer or previous?
JA: I got married three days after I graduated. My wife and I, it turns out went to
the same church in Chevy Chase, Maryland and we were married in that church three
days after I graduated and we’re still married.

RV: So, had you ever been to Quantico before?

JA: Yes. On a trip from Annapolis after I had chosen the Marine Corps and the
bunch of us had been identified as being midshipmen going into the Marine Corps. We
took tours of various Marine Corps installations and got briefed on the Marine Corps.
That was the first time.

RV: I was just wondering what your impression was once you started in January
'63 [July ‘62] when you got into basic school what your opinion was of Quantico.

JA: I thought it was absolutely fantastic. It was wonderful. You could buy a six-
pack of beer for 75 cents. I was smoking then. I could buy a pack of cigarettes for 25
cents. Notice I’m a materialistic guy, very shallow. It was great. I was learning
something. I had no clue how to be a Marine. And the basic school is where you were
taught to be a Marine. I didn’t do particularly well in basic school. I never completed the
obstacle course in time. I’m still not sure why I was graduated but I’m just as glad.

RV: It was a 12-week course, is that correct?

JA: No. It was six months. I think it still is six months.

RV: Tell me what they taught you.

JA: Well they taught us small unit tactics, how to arrange a squad and assault a
hill small unit tactics. They taught us weaponry - everything from small arms rifles to
artillery and tanks and things like that.

RV: How did you handle the weapons training?

JA: I thought that was great. I enjoyed it. You had live fire. I even got a chance to
use the old flamethrower, which I remember to this day. I didn’t hurt myself either or
anyone else for that matter which was probably a miracle. But they also taught us
leadership and management. They taught us ethics. They taught us even languages then.

RV: Such as…

JA: French was my language. I’d taken two years of French in high school, two
years at Annapolis and I continued it in basic school and actually got an MOS, Military
Occupation Specialty in French. I think it was called, I wasn’t a translator. No, I was a
translator, not an interpreter, translator, the lower qualification. I could understand French but don’t push me too far beyond that. That’s what they taught us. Its also physical training.

RV: How did you do with the physical training?

JA: Fine, except I never finished the obstacle course. I was good. I could run as fast and as far and jump as high as most people, but when it came to pulling myself up on a bar, my upper body strength sucked and it still does and it always has. I did at one point in my career in the Marine Corps in the mid-’70s when the Marine Corps went to having to do chin-ups as part of the physical fitness test. I did get myself up to 17 or 18 chins. I’m pretty proud of that as you can tell. I’m taking your time now telling you.

RV: That’s excellent.

JA: Well, I couldn’t do a half a chin right now. I’d probably injure myself irrevocably if I tried to chin right now. No upper body strength so I couldn’t do all those things particularly well.

RV: What kind of weapons did you train on? The M-1?

JA: The M-1 and the .45. Those were the personal weapons. And then of course the Bazooka 3.5 rocket launcher, flamethrowers, M-60 Machine Gun. Then there was the BAR. I think we still had the BAR. It’s a lot to remember.

RV: What did they teach you in the classroom? You said you did some language training. I guess they did a history of the Corps and you said ethics and things like that. What did they try to emphasize to you?

JA: Well, here goes. The Marine Corps depends on the people, its people. And the emphasis was always on what you are learning now you will use to take care of your people in one way or another. That’s just an absolutely wonderful lesson. I’ve got to say this on record. The Army’s new slogan, an ‘Army of One’ is embarrassing and I’ll just leave it at that. You don’t do anything by yourself. You depend on the people around you, not just the people above you but more important the people below you to do your job or do the job that you need to get done. I don’t mean to lecture but that’s what I remember. Leadership, be honest, have integrity, all those things, absolutely. Nothing against them but in the end take care of your people and they’ll take care of you. And I’m alive today because of it and there are a lot of other people that can tell stories like that.
RV: Yes. Tell me the difference between the Naval Academy discipline and what was going on with the Navy versus what you experienced at Quantico.

JA: Well I’ll tell you it wasn’t much difference. No hazing at Quantico obviously. We were officers then. We had much more freedom at Quantico. But the Naval service at that stage of the game, I would say probably the discipline at Annapolis, the disciplinary program at Annapolis was probably an offshoot of Marine discipline for any number of reasons not the least of which is you need to teach young men, well men then, ultimately women, what the extent is of their tolerance for pain, I guess, and pain at whatever level and whatever definition of pain. One of the reasons, there’s a lot of in your face stuff at boot camp. I had a young Marine one time when I had my squadron come up to me and ask me, I think it was in my office, I’m not sure what he was there for, either counseling, but he said, ‘Why did my drill instructor scream and shout bad things about my mother at me at boot camp?’ And I probably learned more in the next frantic 30 seconds of trying to come up with an answer to that, that I could give a kid that was really interested in an answer and deserved an answer. As far as I know he may have already gotten one but he was testing me. At that point I didn’t consider that. Why would somebody put you in that position to do that when they don’t even know you? I mean, that’s just terrible stuff. Well, my answer was and its one of the better answers I’ve given on the spur of the moment was, ‘It’s because you have to learn what the extent of your tolerance is for the unknown, for the unexpected. What would you be doing, how would you respond to sitting in a foxhole and watching your best friend’s head get blown off. That’s a horrible thing to imagine. But equally as horrible and equally as horrible is somebody sitting there blaspheming your mother right in front of your face.’ I did tell him I’m not sure that would be my technique for teaching you what your tolerance is for horrible things. But boot camp is there to teach the kids how to cope with absolutely unbelievable situations among other things. And that’s why the drill instructor is being such a jerk.

RV: How did he react to this?

JA: He liked the answer. Most important, I liked the answer too. I was relieved. I like it today or I wouldn’t be talking about it today. I’m not sure I deserve to like it. I’m not sure it’s the best answer but I needed to have an answer to that question as much as the kid needed an answer to that question. ‘Why am I in the Marine Corps where
somebody would do something like that?’ Again, my technique and if I were in charge of
whatever unit it was doing the training, I would not allow my people to use that
technique. However, I would allow them to use as much as they needed to get the kids
taught what their tolerance is or get them familiar with what their personal tolerance is
for pain. Again, pain is a euphemism for stress.

RV: Looking back at your career and what you just said that answer, did that
prove true in your personal career in the Marine Corps and your stress in combat?
JA: I never went to boot camp. I went to officer training.
RV: As far as the…?
JA: Yeah. As bad as it was and as immature as it was, the hazing experiences I
went through as a plebe at Annapolis did teach me something, did teach me my tolerance.
I had a wonderful benefit when I went to Annapolis. I had not a clue what it was going to
be like. I didn’t know hardly anything about Annapolis. I knew the plebes had to walk
around in the middle of the hallway and they had to run up and down the stairs and they
had to sit on the edges of their chairs but I had no idea that the hazing was going to be as
extreme as it was. So I just went in there and said, ‘I guess this is the way it’s got to be,
so I’ll just do it.’ I didn’t fight it other than to cope I guess. If I had gone through boot
camp and then gone to Annapolis and had some first class jerk telling me to do these
ridiculous things, I’m not sure how I would have coped with that.

RV: So it worked out timing wise for you where you could deal with that stuff
early on and then once you got to the basic school you were seasoned and you were
basically taught how to be a Marine.

JA: Yes. I was seasoned to the extent that I knew what the military was. I knew
what my tolerances were. I knew what I didn’t know and that’s a very important thing as
you well know. It’s almost more important to know what you don’t know than it is to
know what you know. My ‘Yogi-ism’.

RV: What kind of Marine did you turn out to be there after you basic school?
JA: As a result of basic school I was an average Marine. I got average grades on
my fitness reports. I considered myself an excellent superb professional Marine who
could do the job that needed to be done, but in the group of Marines that graduated, I was
probably somewhere middle edging maybe somewhere towards the top but nothing
spectacular.

RV: So your wife, did you guys have on base housing?
JA: We ultimately did. She went and got pregnant and so once that happened she
had to quit her job up in the State department and we went into housing at Thomason
Park at Quantico. I think it was a two-bedroom townhouse. Have you ever lived in
Quantico?

RV: I’m familiar with that area, yes. I’m from North Carolina so I’ve traveled
through that area quite a bit. So what did you do after you finished basic school? What
was your assignment?

JA: Well, my assignment was for the first six weeks to have a baby because I
couldn’t be transferred right away so instead of going to the Ft. Sill Army artillery
course, I was assigned the MOS of artillery, 0802, 0801 initially until I got my
qualification I went 0802. At the time Quantico had an artillery demonstration battery and
a basic artillery officer’s course. So I was fortunate to stay there at Quantico while my
wife couldn’t travel while she finished having our first-born and I finished the artillery
school there. I did a lot better in the artillery school than I did in basic school. I may have
been one or two in the class, small class. Then after that I was a platoon commander in
the artillery demonstration battery there at Quantico. We stayed there until our daughter
was born in April and we probably left in early May for our first duty assignment in
Hawaii.

RV: In Hawaii?
JA: Yes. We drove across country in a ’61 Ford Falcon stick shift, no radio, no
air.

RV: Wow.
JA: But those were the good old days.
RV: With an infant in the car.
JA: With an infant in the car, six weeks old. Wait a minute, she was born in April.
I think she was younger than six weeks. But anyway that’s immaterial, Route 66, ended
up spending the night in Amarillo. I remember that vividly. There was a sandstorm that
night. We drove to San Francisco, dropped the car off to be floated across to Hawaii and
then we went to Travis, flew across…no that’s not right. We took a boat. We went on an MSTS ship, Terry and I and Debbie. It was about five days float across the ocean.

RV: What was your duty there in Hawaii?

JA: I joined G Battery 3/12 which was a 105 battery. I started out as forward observer with Charlie Company 1/4, spent about six months doing that, moved back to the battery and took over as a platoon commander, firing platoon commander, three guns and that was the rest of my stay there in Hawaii I was the firing platoon commander. I put in for flight training after about eight months there, and was accepted. So we actually left Hawaii 14 or 15 months after we had gotten there.

RV: So 1964.

JA: Yes. Summer of ’64.

RV: You were in Hawaii then when Kennedy was killed.

JA: Yes. I had just finished a nuclear weapons course and was in the car listening to the radio on my way home.

RV: Tell me a little bit about, you said you took a nuclear weapons course, what other kind of training did they give you there in Hawaii? I’m interested because it’s preparing you for your experiences in the future.

JA: Sure. One of the things that I volunteered for and one of the schools I volunteered for was guerrilla warfare school. And we were hearing all kinds of things about Vietnam, people going over there for 30 days on-the-job training programs and my - I wished I could have gone over there for 30 days on-the-job-training. The next best thing was to go through a three-week guerrilla warfare course. We rappelled, we did the slide for life, we did jungle warfare and there’s some pretty good jungle in Hawaii. Actually there probably aren’t as many today as there were back in ’63, ’64. That, the nuclear weapons. I can't remember. Probably a legal course because at that point in time, junior officers were being designated as defense council and trial council for court-martial cases. That stopped probably late ‘60s early ‘70s when the Marine Corps got smart and said we need real lawyers and they got them in. While I was in Hawaii, we deployed to Taiwan on an exercise. I thought it was great. I loved the Far East. Thought it was exciting. I still wanted to get to Vietnam so I decided the best way for me to get to
Vietnam, the fastest way for me to get to Vietnam was to go back, become a helicopter pilot and then go to Vietnam.

RV: Can I interrupt?

JA: Sure.

RV: Why did you want to go to Vietnam?

JA: Because that was the thing to do. There was a war going on or there was a war brewing at the time and I was in the Marine Corps and I was tired of listening to people telling war stories. I wanted to have my own war stories. I wanted to stop the spread of communism, too. So there were any number of reasons, but most of them, I’m in the Marine Corps, if I’m wearing the Marine Corps uniform I ought to and if there’s combat somewhere I ought to go there. So I made the giant step or I took the giant step and applied for flight training and was accepted and so in the summer of ’64, the Arick family left Hawaii to go back to Pensacola. Not six months later while I was in the middle of my flight training at Pensacola, my unit shipped out to Vietnam. So I could have stayed right where I was and gotten there. But I am ever so grateful for the opportunity to have spent my two tours in Vietnam as a helicopter pilot, more particularly as an attack helicopter pilot rather than an artillery officer.

RV: Right. Let me ask you, before we get into your helicopter training, how much were you aware? You talked about you knew there was a war brewing in Vietnam. Were you keeping up more and more with world politics, world diplomacy, what was happening on that kind of thing?

JA: No. I hate to admit this. It’s about the third time I’ve said this. Maybe this is something I don’t want to add, but that’s alright. It was just me. No. I was interested in the fact that there was guerilla warfare going on in Vietnam. I was interested in learning how to fight guerilla warfare, how to conduct guerilla warfare. I was interested in the extent to which the U.S. was becoming more and more committed or would become more and more committed. But the underlying politics, I wasn’t involved in that at all. That went the entire Vietnam War even when I was in Monterey, California going to postgraduate school between my two tours. I was not swept up into any politics at all. Of course I was still surrounded by military at Monterey in the postgraduate school. But that black hole, 1968, I was just struggling to get my Master’s thesis done and take these
highfalutin statistical courses that were going to get me my operations research degree
and studying 12, 15 hours a day. You’ve never had to do that, I know. (laughter) That
was joke. For the record, that was a joke. (laughing)

RV: I know. (laughing) I try not to talk about myself. We need to talk about you. I
have to ask, why not? I mean, you’re an intelligent person and you went to an excellent
undergraduate academy.

JA: You remember I told you I didn’t read the paper a lot or follow politics a lot
at Annapolis?

RV: Right.

JA: My rationale for that then and it is today is I was too busy trying to survive.
And the same applied to Monterey. And my wife, if she were sitting here, she would be
jumping up and down saying, ‘Yeah, that’s exactly right.’ Because if we ever came close
to splitting up, it was when she was caring for our two children. I was between Vietnam
tours. She knew where I’d been, she knew I was going back. I was just absolutely, I’m
not smart. I don’t read well. I had to concentrate, spend every minute of my time on the
academics and the courses I was taking were theoretical, very, very little application,
which was horrible. So no slack, no slack at all. That’s the reason. I would characterize it
as probably irresponsible at that stage of the game, not becoming more up to speed on the
politics of the situation, but politics or not, I was a Marine and I was going to go back
over there so I’m going to go back over there and I’m going to win my battles.

RV: Why did you choose helicopter pilot training?

JA: Because I thought it would get me to Vietnam faster. I also liked the idea that
I could see where I was going more than if I was up and high in a jet. I could have taken
jets. I qualified for them but I wasn’t interested in it. I was interested in helicopters.

RV: Was that a new interest for you?

JA: Your questions are magnificent. Yeah. It was. When I was at Annapolis, there
was a lot of talk about aviation. ‘Go aviation, go aviation. You get 100 dollars extra a
month plus its fun, more fun at the bar and all those other things.’ But I was scared of
heights. I’m still scared to death of heights. I really am. But when I went to guerilla
warfare school in Hawaii, I was a platoon commander for a couple of days. So that meant
I was the first one to do the rappelling. I was the first one to do the slide for life. All high
stuff, you start up high and you end up low as you know. I learned that okay, I may be
afraid of heights but I can cope with them. So maybe I should consider aviation at this
stage of the game. Plus I’m artillery. That’s not cool. And the 1st Brigade had an aviation
element and ground element and the officer’s club was shared by the two and the aviators
were always having more fun than the artillery was. So I figured there must be something
to that.

RV: Okay, we’ll take a break and this will end our interview with General John
Arick today. It’s January 22nd. We’ll pick up another time. Thank you, sir.