RV: This is Richard Verrone and I’m continuing my oral history interview with General John Arick. It is February 19, 2003 and about 9:45 am and we are in the Special Collections Library interview room. And sir, we left off last time in 1964 with you going to Pensacola for your helicopter pilot training. Why don’t we start there and tell me a little bit about that. What was that like?

JA: That was a fascinating experience because, and I may have mentioned this earlier, I’m afraid of heights. I’d been afraid of heights all my life. So this was kind of an exciting undertaking of mine. I had decided that I could handle heights because of some experiences I had had in guerrilla warfare school. But I still didn’t know whether I could handle flying because I had never flown before, one commercial flight but I thought it’d be something that I ought to try. So I did. All naval aviators started out then, going through a fixed wing syllabus, a basic trainer T-34 and then an advanced trainer T-28, both single engine tandem cockpit dual pilot aircraft. But my motivation as I think I mentioned previously in going toward helicopters was to get to Vietnam as quickly as I could. So in the various stages of the program, I volunteered for extra flights every day and I managed to get into, get through advanced fixed wing, which was carrier quals in a relatively short period of time roughly a year after my arrival at Pensacola. I finished up with fixed wing and then moved to Ellison Field and I believe they may be back at Ellison today - but Ellison Field for helicopter training.
RV: This is after the year.

JA: This was after a full year there going through basic training, advanced training and the single engine fixed wing, which involved basic and radio instruments. It involved formation flying, acrobatics and things like that. But I arrived at Ellison, I believe it would have been in July of '65. That syllabus took me to October of '65 when I completed it and received my Navy wings and went off to my first duty assignment.

RV: Tell me about your first experience flying. What was that like?

JA: It was wonderful because I was extremely fortunate, not as young as the other pilots, but young pilot. I had a great instructor. His name was Don Babbitz. He didn’t take himself seriously and he made jokes and he was relaxed and when I messed something up, he wouldn’t throw something at me from the back seat which some of the instructor pilots had a tendency to do, literally. He would make a joke and we’d go back around and do it again. So I started out with a guy that made me feel relaxed, made me understand what was going on and I respected tremendously. We crossed paths periodically during the rest of our careers. It was interesting because I wasn’t a natural aviator. I had never wanted to fly in my life, but when I found myself upside down at 5,000 feet for the first time and he was demonstrating, I of course had to ask myself what was I doing there and did I really want to be here and oh, my. But things turned out.

RV: What kind of flyer were you? Were you a good pilot?

JA: Yes. Well, after 30 years of surviving, there are old pilots and there are good pilots but they’re whatever. I don’t remember the saying, but at any rate, yes, I was a good pilot.

RV: Did it come naturally to you?

JA: It did as a matter of fact. It doesn’t come naturally to me anymore. I could still be a great pilot today as an older person but I’d have to work a lot harder at it today. And as my career progressed, I did find myself having to work a lot harder and concentrate a little more. It didn’t come quite as naturally but early on it did. I had high to moderately high grades in flight training. I never got a ‘down’. I never had to redo a flight, which contributed to my progression through there. But it did. It came naturally to me and it surprised me that it came naturally to me. It became fun. It was hard work being a student pilot trying to impress your instructors, but it did come relatively easy.
RV: How much classroom time did you spend there?

JA: Quite a bit. Before we went into each aircraft, we spent a considerable amount of – well, there was a pre-flight period at the very beginning of our tenure there at Naval Air Training Command that was I believe four or five weeks. And that involved the basics of what is aviation, what are aerodynamics, what makes airplanes go up and come down, basic engines, even some physical training at that stage of the game and the survival course.

RV: What kind of physical training?

JA: Obstacle course running, a period of time during each of several days during the week. I believe we had to run an obstacle course to pass it, not particularly tough rate because I passed it. I wasn’t ever very good at obstacle courses but here I am.

RV: Right.

JA: But that was pre-flight training and then when we got to Sofley Field which was our basic training in the T-34, we had some classroom on what acrobatics was, what does the landing pattern look like at Sofley, what are the procedures to get in and out of it. What does a T-34 look like and feel like. And the same applied to each of the next several stages - lots of ground school on the T-28. Lots being a couple of weeks on the T-28 when we went out to Whiting Field to take the advanced (I guess I’ll call it advanced, that’s probably not the right word) more advanced stage of the flight training. We had ground school, a lot of ground school to begin the helicopter phase because helicopters are different obviously. The controls are considerably different. How much ground school, probably a quarter of the entire time I spent there was in ground school.

RV: How would you rate the instruction? Was it good?

JA: Exquisite. Exceptional. There were certain personalities who were easier to work with than others as life would have it, but the pilots knew exactly what they needed to do, were good teachers, most of them had experience. There were some, what they call plowbacks, that completed the training, got their wings and then went straight back to become instructors. There were benefits to that also because they were nice and current with procedures. They knew what it was like to be a student Naval Aviator and they hadn’t forgotten the stress and the strains and the challenges of those students.

RV: Was it stressful?
JA: Oh yes. I said it came naturally, but stressful yes. Interesting. During one of
the most stressful phases of my stay there, the flight instrument school there, I quit
smoking. I have no idea to this day why or how I did it. It was during basic instruments.
It was the very first introduction to flying blind in an airplane. And to do that, we were in
the back seat of a T-28 with a hood over our heads, obviously nobody can see what I’m
doing right now but it was like being in a very cramped trainer and not being able to see
out but you were flying and you would be put into unusual attitudes and have to get out
using instruments. You’d have to make certain maneuvers, complete certain maneuvers.

RV: The instructor’s in the front seat?

JA: The instructor’s in the front seat fully VFR, visual flight rules, but you’re in
the back seat in this hood and as far as I was concerned, it was cruel and unusual
punishment because, again, it’s the first introduction to flying using only instruments and
that in and of itself was a traumatic experience. But for some reason, one morning I got
up and decided I wouldn’t have a cigarette right away and then we had to drive about an
hour from Pensacola where I was living to Whiting Field where the T-28s were based at
the time. I said, ‘I’ll just wait and have my next cigarette.’ Today I’m still waiting to have
my next cigarette.

RV: That was it.

JA: That was it. There was no incentive. This was 1965, March of 1965 so people
were still smoking reasonably regularly and it was part of the culture but I still don’t have
any idea why but I am really happy that I did.

RV: That’s interesting.

JA: You're very kind. I’m not sure that’s interesting.

RV: No. That is interesting because you know how difficult it is for some people.
And you did it right and you were young and you did it in this very stressful time period
in your life.

JA: It wasn’t easy but it was kind of a neat experiment that I was doing. And
again, I never put any pressure on myself because I decided, I did carry a pack of
cigarettes with me. I’m going to have a cigarette when I want one. I just, let’s see what I
can do with this between cigarettes thing. And after it got to be a day and then a week,
wow! What’s going on.
RV: Tell me what your reaction was, you said this was in March ’65 about. What was your reaction to the United States deploying troops, starting to really become involved in Vietnam at this point? I know you want to get over there but it’s really ramping up now.

JA: I’m going to probably air some dirty laundry here because as far as the political side, I didn’t know. I think I mentioned this before. I wasn’t thinking politics. I wasn’t thinking the enormity of what was happening. Of course, news coverage back then was nothing like it is today.

RV: I’m not sure anyone was thinking of the enormity at that time. They couldn’t see how big this was going to get.

JA: Well, and I was hustling because I thought it was going to be over the day after tomorrow. I guess what I thought when I learned that my old unit had deployed, I said, well first of all, ‘Rats!’ and a few other things probably but I didn’t dwell on it. But then I probably thought that, ‘Gee, they're going to get over there. They're going to clean the place out and it’s going to be over really quick now.’ I didn’t have many profound thoughts. I was 25 years old. That’s not an excuse obviously. Our 18, 19, 20 year old kids were thinking well beyond any level of thought that I put into the ramifications, the implications of the war.

RV: Okay. So, you did well. How about in your class? How did you place in your class there, your initial training?

JA: I placed well enough to get offered jets. I can't remember. I don’t think that there was a class standing. There may well have been but I was totally oblivious to that. I really didn’t care what my grade was other than the fact that I had not gotten any downs and I had done well enough and I was relatively comfortable with my performance. But well enough to get offered jets and I’d wanted helicopters. That was my goal and I had had a chance to fly, well I hadn’t flown jets at that point in time. I’d had a chance to fly fixed wing but I wanted helicopters.

RV: Why helicopters?

JA: They go slower. You can see where you’re going. The mission to me at that point in time although I really had no clue, was a much more interesting mission. I wanted to stay close to the ground troops, support the ground troops. The Marine Corps
was much more, at that stage in my Marine Corps career, helicopters were much more familiar to me than fixed wing because of the nature of my ground tours. And I thought that there would be helicopters in Vietnam. There were helicopters in Vietnam at the time, Marine helicopters and there weren't any Marine fixed wing at the time that I was aware of.

RV: It’s interesting to hear someone say, ‘I turned down jets for helicopters,’ because usually jets was the prime thing that pilots wanted. But that sounds interesting that you wanted to really ground support and actually stay close to the ground. Before we go there, were there any incidents that happened during you basic flight training that you remember?

JA: I looked at that question on the sheet and I thought and thought and not really. It was virtually uneventful. I hate to even mention it. There may have been one student lost or one crash when I was there, but I can't remember anything about it.

RV: Okay. Let’s talk about helicopter training.

JA: Sure. I can do that.

RV: What was that like? Yes, I know you can.

JA: Well, helicopter training was interesting because I got to where my goal had been at that point in time. I wanted to fly helicopters and I was flying helicopters. We started out in the H-13, which was a little bubble helicopter, and again, my first instructor was a good guy. I mean, a laid back, not out to impress me or anyone else. He was just there to teach me how to fly the helicopter. Of course there are different controls in helicopters than there are in fixed wing. You have an extra control, the collective. Yeah. The collective.

RV: Could you describe exactly how the helicopter fly? I think that would be interesting.

JA: Sure. Let me talk about how the airplane flies and then I’ll move on to that. The airplane has three sets of controls. It has a stick or a yoke but a stick which most people are familiar with. It points the nose down and up, left and right. That’s not right. You can point the nose down and up with it, you can bank left and right. The next set of controls are the rudder pedals. You can point the nose in a single plane left and right with rudder pedals and you’ve got your throttle that you can make the airplane go faster or
slower or gain altitude or lose altitude with the increase or decrease in power. So you
have power, you have directional control and then you have roll control, banking, and
you have pitch control. Nose up, nose back. The stick does the roll and the pitch. The
throttle makes you go up or down, power on or power off and then the rudders, left and
right. The helicopter on the other hand has the stick roll and bank, the rudder pedals left
and right, nose left and right, and then it has the collective which is the power, but this
will make you go up and down and it will also cause you to stay in a hover. I’m having a
mental block right now. Whereas power in an airplane will allow you to gain and lose
altitude, the more power you have, the more altitude you can gain. You actually have an
up and down control in a helicopter. You don’t have an up and down control in an
airplane. At one point in my life, believe it or not, I was able to explain this in a lot more
articulate fashion.

RV: This makes sense.

JA: At any rate, there was that one extra dimension of control, which isn’t really a
dimension, but it was the up and down aspect of the collective which is where the throttle
is but it was on the side. Let me give you one other step that you really don’t need, but a
throttle in an airplane generally is on the left hand console and you push it forward and
pull it back. To add power, push forward, reduce power, pull it back. In the helicopter,
the difference is, the power addition and reduction is pulling up on a stick to your left and
pushing down on that stick. Then there is the throttle on the collective that I never talked
about that it’s all coming back to me now.

RV: Let me get this straight now. You’re flying with both feet and both hands in
the helicopter.

JA: Yes. And you're doing the same thing in an airplane, too. The throttle in the
helicopter is the collective. The collective you pull up to go up, you push down to go
down, straight down. I left something out. I wish I could wipe out something here but I
don’t want to bore anybody.

RV: It doesn’t matter.

JA: At any rate, on the throttle or on the collective, which is a stick, there is a
throttle. It’s twisted. And this is a reciprocating engine helicopter now. To add power you
twist right on the stick in your left hand, to reduce power you twist left with the stick with
the throttle on the stick with your left hand. If you want to go up in a hover for example, 
straight up, you pull up, push down on it, you come down out of a hover. Now that was a 
reciprocating engine. You have a throttle that you twist that you have to adjust the 
throttle. You have to adjust all the time, while you’re flying, virtually all the time. As the 
turbine engine was introduced, that throttle became less of a factor in the controls 
because the turbine engine was capable of keeping up with where you put the collective. 
When you wanted more power, when you needed more power, you would pull up on the 
collective. With the reciprocating engine throttle that was a twist grip, you had to twist on 
more power as you pulled up to compensate. Push down, twist off power. With the 
turbine engine, the engine controls would allow you set the throttle at one spot and when 
you pulled up, it would automatically increase power to the engine from the engine, I 
guess and pushing down decreased power. So you caught me.

RV: I didn’t mean to put you the spot. That’s a good explanation.

JA: Well, it’s probably an adequate explanation for right now but we can go into 
the next room and I’ll draw you pictures. I wouldn’t do that to you and I’m not qualified 
to do it. But anyway, the helicopter does have an extra dimension of controls and that 
extra dimension is the throttle that I skipped over the first time.

RV: Did you find that harder to fly or easier to fly than a jet?

JA: I hadn’t flown jets yet.

RV: Than the airplane.

JA: I found it easier because that’s what I wanted to do and I was where I wanted 
to be. I’ll say it. It’s like riding a bicycle. Once you get the hang of it, you can do it.

There was really no comparison. I liked being able to land a helicopter nice and slow and 
at my speed. In an airplane, if you got nice and slow and at my speed, you’d stall and 
crash and burn. So things were happening a lot faster in an airplane when you’re landing 
than they are in a helicopter. You’ve got a little bit more to do. Now, when I got to 
Vietnam, it got a little different. Lots of things were happening when I was landing a 
helicopter. That’s another story for another day.

RV: Yes. So you spent three months doing helicopter training?

JA: Yes. It would have been July, August, September. Yes. That is correct.
RV: And you had classroom, I would assume at the beginning and then you actually went out and started flying.
JA: Yes, that is correct.
RV: These instructors, these two instructors you had, Mr. Babbitz or Bobbet?
JA: Babbitz.
RV: Babbitz and this other gentleman seemed to really have a great influence on you kind of easing into this.
JA: Yes. It did. There was a lot of apprehension on my part because I’d never done this before. And of course 95% of my peers had never done it before either, particularly in the helicopters. I saw some of my peers struggling much more than I was and much of their complaint was because they had a screamer who the instructor would like to complain and throw things. Now, when you got into the helicopters he didn’t throw things because you were side by side. Generally it was harder to launch it. You could get a backhand, actually. And indeed I heard stories of that, some of the instructors doing that. My instructors were relatively laidback and that was a good thing as far as I was concerned.
RV: So tell me what you did after October ’65. Where did you go?
JA: I got my wings and my orders for myself, my wife and our daughter of about a year and a half at that point in time, to New River, Marine Corps Air Station, New River, North Carolina. I tried desperately to get assigned to HMM 265, ‘Bonny Sue’ was the first H-46 squadron. And it was deploying almost within a month or two of my arrival at New River.
RV: What helicopter did you finish flying when you left?
JA: Oh, I’m sorry. The H-34 was the advanced helicopter there. Yes, the workhorse for Vietnam until the Huey came along and Huey forces came along.
RV: So you wanted the H-46 when you went to New River.
JA: No. The H-46, there were squadrons of H-46s at New River. No, I did not want that. The H-34 was at New River. The H-46 is what I wanted when I got there. I finished up with the H-34 at Pensacola. Now have I totally confused the issue? 34 was the advanced helicopter trainer at Pensacola. When I got to New River I saw ‘Bonny Sue,’ HMM 265 fixing to mount out to go to Vietnam, the first 46 squadron to go to
Vietnam, 46s. There were also 34s and actually there were H-37s at New River at that point in time. Then there were also Hueys but I’d never heard of a Huey. I literally had never heard of a Huey when I got to New River. I probably had heard of it but didn’t have a clue. I talked to the personnel officer at MAG 26. I can't even remember what the number was that point in time. But whatever the air group was who was in charge of assigning new pilots to squadrons. I went in there and I pleaded and I said, ‘Look, I’m about ready to make Captain. I need to get to Vietnam,’ which in retrospect, never mind. ‘How about putting me in 265.’ He said, ‘No, they're sealed off. They're fixing to go. But we can put you in VMO-1. VMO-1 has O-1s which are single engine little scout planes fixed wing and they have the new Huey that’s armed.’ I said, ‘Oh?’ ‘Yeah. They have the 7.62 and the rockets. They go out to Brown’s Island and they shoot them all the time.’ I said, ‘Oh, whoa. What did I miss? Okay, I will go to VMO-1 and I learned how to fly the Huey.’ The O-1s were phased out very quickly after I got to VMO-1 if they hadn’t been phased out just before I got there. So that’s where I got my basic fleet readiness training. That’s a Navy term. It’s not a Marine Corps term. I learned how to fly the Huey.

RV: How difficult was that?

JA: Very easy because but it…it was never really easy but it was a relatively simple transition from the H-34 which had the twist grip throttle and the reciprocating engine extra dimension of control to the Huey that had the new turbine engine and you could set the throttle and you didn’t have to move it after you had set it. Now, in the early stages of the turbine engine, you had to stay on your toes and watch you gauges because on occasion you would have to go into manual control and you would revert back to the twist grip throttle. But the Huey was, as was the H-46, the first turbine engine helicopters that the Marine Corps got.

RV: So tell me about the training that you did there at New River.

JA: Well, we did just about everything. We did training in takeoffs and landings. Of course that has to be done. Slide on landings. It was a skid helicopter of course. Everybody knows that. So sliding on was a kind of a fixed wing sort of a landing on the grass on the side of the runway. It was an exciting experience. Autorotations, engine off approaches and landings although the Marine Corps did not do full autorotative landings
which means, when you’re practicing an autorotation, do I need to say what an autorotation is?

RV: Sure.

JA: You think so? Ok. An autorotation is the ability of the helicopter’s rotors to continue turning after the engine has ceased being capable of powering them. That particular capability comes from the fact that when the engine quits, the helicopter’s going to come down. The resulting air stream going up through the rotor blades keeps the blades turning and since the rotor is the source of all ultimate power in landing, cushioning the landing, and in control, roll, pitch, not yaw positioning, that was the rudder pedals and that was the tail rotor. We won’t talk about that for now. At any rate, autorotating, the helicopter has an autorotative capability. So we practiced autorotations. In flight training we did full autorotations which meant you did not, when you got close to the ground, get your power back and then use a powered landing. A full autorotation means you leave the power off all the way to the ground and you only have one chance to cushion your landing and by cushioning your landing, I mean pulling up on your collective to increase the pitch uniformly on the rotor system so that there is an additional lift created which in fact cushions, slows the impact with the ground, cushions the landing. I’m not sure I ever want to listen to this tape and me trying to explain this (chuckles). But at any rate, we practiced autorotations, which is a coordination maneuver. In the Marine Corps, because of the safety aspect of it, because we didn’t want to spread the skids and have to a lot of maintenance, hard landing because of a failure to time the cushioning of the landing properly. We were required to get power back and cushion the landing with power on which gave us a better chance not to screw it up, okay.

RV: Right.

JA: We practiced external lifts. At that point in time the Huey was doing external lifts meaning that there’s a hook underneath the belly of the helicopter and we’d go and pick up blocks and move them from point A to point B. We practiced, ultimately, shooting the machine guns, the 7.62 machine guns that were mounted externally on the sides of the aircraft. We practiced shooting the 2.75-inch rockets, which were two pod. One pod was mounted on each side of the Huey. It didn’t have much of a lift capability and I don’t even remember the number of rounds of 7.62 we carried, but we could
normally only carry about 2 seven shot rocket pods, 2.75-inch rockets I believe was what
the title was.

RV: How did you do with the targeting and shooting.

JA: Oh, I did good. (laughs)

RV: Were you really?

JA: Interesting point. Well with the machine guns, it’s like you’ve got tracers that
you can walk along to the target and as long as you kept the airplane flying or helicopter
and you didn’t fly into the ground, it was relatively easy to target machine guns. But with
the rockets, the rockets we had in 1965 and ’66 and indeed in ’66-’67 when I ultimately
got to Vietnam, were unscarfed rockets. And that’s I guess a technical term which means,
a scarfed rocket will, when its fired out of the tube, will start spinning. And that spin will
give it additional stability and it will go relatively straight where it was aimed, relatively
straight. The rockets we were using initially were unscarfed which meant that if there was
just a little bit of thrust differential in the rocket motor, there would be nothing to
stabilize it or correct it or keep it going in the direction you aimed it, it could go off as
much as 90 degrees to the right ultimately or left or up or down. Or it could spiral, make
a great big spiral to the target. So although in 75% of the cases the rockets generally hit
the area that you were aiming at, depending on range and airspeed and wind and a whole
bunch of other things, there were a certain number of rockets that went awry. That caused
no minor concern to the pilots and the folks on the ground too, so you had to be real
careful.

RV: But you picked up on this quite well.

JA: Yes. As well as I could. Yes. I had no incidents. It was kind of funny. It was
particularly funny in training when a rocket would decide to go off, it would go straight
up and straight down in front of you - no danger to the pilots or the aircraft.

RV: Where was your practice being held?

JA: It was at Brown’s Island. There was a long cigar shaped island just off the
coast, I guess just off the coast of North Carolina there, not very far, just 10, 15 minutes
from New River Air Station and we’d shoot on that.

RV: How long were you there doing this?

JA: I got there, I guess in October and left in May of ’66.
RV: Okay. Is that when you were deployed?

JA: Yes. At that point in time, we were not deploying units. We were deploying individuals to join units when they got to Vietnam, which was unfortunate because it would have been a lot nicer. That’s when I wanted 265 46 Squadron that I lusted for was so good because the whole squadron went as a squadron. They trained together, they were deployed together. They left their families relatively close together. When I left, I left my wife and our 3-year-old daughter, three or four years old, and my wife 81/2 months pregnant with our second child.

RV: That’s when you left when she was pregnant.

JA: Yes.

RV: Did the Marine Corps not want to give you any slack or did you just say, ‘Okay, this is when I have to go and I’m going.’

JA: This was a youthful indiscretion on my part. My wife was extremely understanding and that’s why we’ve been married for 40 years. Obviously she had to be the epitome of understanding and patience. At that point in time, at 25, 26 years old, I just said, ‘I’ve got to get to Vietnam. I’ve got a chance to fill this billet that’s going. What do you think?’ I don’t remember what the dialogue was but we were still in love when I left and when I get back we were and I can still hear her explaining to me how we weren't in love for a period of a day or three or whatever it was when she was giving birth to our second born who was way overdue, about a month overdue. But at any rate, I digress. That’s a very important part of my life and one at that stage, if I had anything to do over again in my life that would be at the absolute top of the list. Obviously it turned out there was no reason for me to get…to leave that quickly, but I did.

RV: So you would have stayed and gone with the next.

JA: Yeah, in six months or a little longer probably.

RV: Well, that was, I’m sure a big part of going to Vietnam and going over is leaving at this time. How did it affect your mentality?

JA: Well, I was excited about being able to get to Vietnam. I was not excited about leaving my wife 8 1/2 months pregnant although she claims I was doing back flips. Not really. She doesn’t claim that either. How was my mentality? In what respect?
RV: Well, I’m leading to, how did you feel about going into a war zone with your wife 8 ½ months pregnant with a child and I know you wanted to get to Vietnam, but what was you mentality, going, ‘Now I’m going into a war.’

JA: Probably denial more than anything else. I never was concerned about going to war. There is some stuff going on over here. I’ve been well trained. I know what I’m doing. And I’ll say this, it was not arrogance. I was just confident. It could have been arrogance. I don’t know. I’m probably not the best judge of that but if it had been arrogance, I’d probably be dead. But I was confident of what I could do, the machinery I was going to be using I was confident in. There was never, honest to goodness, I never considered that. ‘Hot diggity dog I get to go out there. And by the way, I’m not so sure there’s any bad guys down there anyway.’ Denial.

RV: Did you understand what the United States was trying to do in Vietnam when you went over?

JA: Did the United States understand what the United States was trying to do in Vietnam when I went over? The answer to that question is not only no, but hell no. They didn’t understand what they were trying to do. I don’t believe. You did ask a question. I will answer your question because it’s a very good one.

RV: But that’s another question that needs to be answered.

JA: And you, Dr. Verrone, are the person that can answer that much better than I although my opinion is today the United States, when I went over, did not know what its ultimate mission was. As far as I was concerned, I knew exactly what my mission was, was to go over there and when I was given a mission, go out and accomplish the mission whether it was an external lift, whether it was a helicopter escort mission, whether it was a recon extract, whatever it was. My perception of what the United States was trying to do was stop the spread of communism. Domino effect was a prevalent term that was used and I used. If we don’t stop communism in Vietnam, there’s no telling what’s going to happen after that, another Korea and more. So that’s it. Stop spread of communism.

RV: What was your impression of Lyndon Johnson at this time?

JA: I had no impression of him whatsoever. Isn’t that sad? He was President of the United States and I was a Marine and he was Commander in Chief and end of story. When I say that, and I’ve said that in other forums also publicly, I’m a little embarrassed
because of the narrowness of my vision at that point in time but I live with it because I pass it off to youthful indiscretion..

RV: You had a job to do.

JA: That is the way I looked at it.

RV: You were a Marine, and I’ve heard this from other Marines. You didn’t really think about that. You went forward and did what you needed to do.

JA: That’s interesting. I wrote an article for the Amarillo paper in the Op/Ed section, guest editorial one day about three or four years ago about just that subject, what does a Marine think of his Commander in Chief. It was considerably in the news when our former president was doing his things and the military was at his beck and call. There was a cartoon on the editorial page that showed the president, President Clinton, a caricature of course, getting off a helicopter – Marine One, walking away, kind of toward you, the reader and in the background, of course, there’s always a Marine there in blues but the Marine was thumbing his nose at the President. And that infuriated me because, number one, it was the Marine Corps that was being depicted as being disrespectful of the Commander in Chief. So I – end of story for now – I wrote an article that first of all complained about the picture or the cartoon but then went on to explain that whether or not we respect or disrespect or anything else the person that is in the office of President, it is not an issue with the Marine Corps and indeed not the military. The President of the United States, therefore, end of story. That may be a little too black and white, but it’s the way it’s got to be and it’s the way it is. You don’t even think about it. If President Clinton said, ‘Go to war,’ we’re off and running. So the military doesn’t think about it, but now the civilian world of course can and will and should question things but no Marine is ever going to thumb his nose at the President of the United States. I don’t care whether it was Bill Clinton or Dwight Eisenhower.

RV: So tell me about your deployment and what unit you went with and how you got over?

JA: I didn’t go with a unit. I went individually. Actually three of us went from VMO-1. We got orders at the same time. We drove across country in a one-way drive away car. I guess people need to get a car from coast to coast, I’m not going to digress on that one. At any rate, three of us decided we were going to drive across country. It would
be cheaper. Of course we could have flown and it would have been paid for. But at any rate, we got across country then went to Travis Air Force Base, got onto an Air Force plane, went to Okinawa, stayed there for about a week, got shots, got cleared, got onto a C-130 after a week and on May something, near the end of May 1966, I arrived at Da Nang.

RV: What was your first impression of the country?
JA: Hot, depressing, rustic, primitive, loud.
RV: Why’s that?
JA: Because the transient barracks, which amounted to a bare cot in a tent were right at the end of the runway and the A-6s were doing night flights. And the A-6s, as far as I’m concerned, are the most annoying sounding jet airplane there is. At any rate, they’d take off every 15 or 20 minutes. But anyway, it was noisy.
RV: So you were billeted there for the time being.
JA: Yes, temporarily. We were screened for a while, for a day and then we got our assignments. I got ‘You’re going down to Chu Lai, Ky Ha, the helicopter base at Chu Lai to be with VMO-6.’ That’s where I ultimately ended up. They sent a helicopter to pick me up a day or two after I got to Da Nang and we went down and two of the three of us went to VMO-6. The third guy that came over from VMO-1 with me went to VMO-2 that was right there at Marble Mountain in Da Nang. So we went down to Ky Ha, ended up getting there at seven or eight at night, actually had to sleep outside on the hillside for the evening as I recall. Then the next day the squadron said, ‘Welcome, we’re glad to have you. Here’s where you’re going to stay.’ We stayed. Mag 16 which was composed of I believe all H-34 squadrons at the time, I don’t think there were any H-46s assigned to MAG 16 down at Ky Ha at the time, and Hueys. I’d say four squadrons of 34s one squadron of Hueys were all on the side of a hill in Southeast Asia huts, the wooden and tin huts. I got shown where I was going to bunk and to my pleasant surprise, it turns out that we were in a hut with about six, 12, probably 10 to 12 captains, lieutenants. But there were beds there with mattresses and sheets and pillows!
RV: Were you picturing something different?
JA: I was picturing pure austerity. I went to Vietnam, joined the Marine Corps with the same level of naïveté that I went to Annapolis with and again the same level of
naiveté followed me appropriately into flying and then ultimately into Vietnam. Because I figured we’d be in a tent on a dirt floor with a cot, a canvas cot, and was certainly prepared to do that. But, wow! Plus there was an officer’s club right up over the hill. It was another little bit bigger hut but there was a bar there and they showed movies there and it was, as far as I was concerned, nirvana, civilization. And the next day they gave us our orientation and I can't remember very many of the details here but ultimately within two or three days I made my first flight.

RV: How would you rate the morale of the troops?

JA: Extremely high. Everybody was happy to be there, happy. It’s like they are today. We can actually listen to them today talk about it. Everybody that was there had a mission, knew what they were there for, enjoyed what they were doing. Now, that’s not to say that there wasn’t some griping that went on. Griping, as you are well aware, is a requirement in the military at any point and time. But don’t let somebody outside of your military circle gripe about your military circle because everybody would turn on you. I think I mentioned that earlier.

RV: So the morale was pretty good.

JA: It was. Morale was high. It’s a cliché but that was true. Everybody was doing what they needed to do.

RV: How welcoming were they to you personally?

JA: Very. Most of the folks that were in the squadron when I got there had come over as a squadron from Camp Pendleton. So they had all transplaced as a unit, but their folks were being rotated out, beginning to be rotated out. They’d come over I believe in October or something, August or September and they were beginning to be phased out and we were the replacements for them. So we were welcomed.

RV: Let me take just a moment’s break. Okay, why don’t we continue. You get down to Chu Lai and you get through orientation and tell me about your first flight. Now you said this is about three days after you’d arrived?

JA: Yes, it was about three days. It was a daytime, as I recall, reconnaissance mission to go out into the valleys west of Ky Ha and Chu Lai to take a look around. To be perfectly frank with you, I can't remember what the official mission was or what the
specific mission was. At any rate, I was copilot of course with a very experienced pilot sitting in the right seat. I just kind of sat on my hands and watched what was going on.

RA: Was it just one helicopter?

JA: Two of us. There were two of us. In virtually every case it was always two helicopters, a minimum of two helicopters that fly for support reasons. At any rate, my pilot was the lead pilot and we just flew out, looked around and it was kind of interesting. Wow! Pretty hills, pretty valleys, I don’t see anything down there and the next thing I know he says, ‘We’re taking fire.’ ‘Really, we are. I don’t hear anything. I don’t see. How do you know we’re taking fire?’ ‘Well I can hear it over here.’ Then the wingman says something about taking fire. I said, ‘Oh, my goodness. That’s exciting. Are you sure?’ We took a closer look, didn’t return fire, turned around and came on back.

RA: Could you hear anything?

JA: No. I had the unbelievable—there was some kind of imaginary shield around me that caused me to miss some of the fighting that went on that I was engaged in. I’ll give you an example that took place later on in my stay in the same tour, same year I was there. I was a wingman at that stage of the game and moved up in the pecking order and I was pilot in command. I was a wingman of our operations officer as I recall. At any rate, we saw a bunch of guys running around in a rice paddy in black pajamas carrying weapons, so we shot. At that point in time it was okay for us to make the decision to shoot. We didn’t have to go through all the red tape that took place the second tour I was there. At any rate, the lead shot into the rice paddy and I caught a glimpse of a guy running and he said, ‘There’s our target. Let’s get it.’ And he rolled off and I came on and fired rockets and machine-guns and pulled off and I hear on my radio, ‘You got him John, you got him.’ I said, ‘Really.’ ‘Yeah, he’s face down in a rice paddy.’ ‘Really? I don’t see anything down there. I didn’t even see anybody when I was shooting. I was shooting at where he used to be.’ At any rate, I never did see the guy. I got a glimpse of the two or the three, now there may have been more than that, too, but for some reason, I wasn’t quick enough or I wasn’t discerning enough but I missed a lot.

RA: You missed?

JA: I missed seeing a lot of the things that were described to me that was apparently going on. I guess that’s probably all I need to say about that right now. And it
happened to me on other occasions. I’d have wingmen claim they were being fired at and  
I didn’t see anything. ‘Yeah, you can see the tracers coming up out of the jungle.’ ‘No, I  
don’t see anything.’ So, I don’t know why that was or what the reason was. I can blame it  
on new guy-itis for my very first flight because I didn’t know what I was listening for.  
And I got to be pretty good at what I was doing, too, ultimately. And I saw people and I  
saw things and I saw a lot of stuff. But there were things that I missed that other people  
would from time to time tell me, ‘Yeah, there was a lot of stuff going on down there.’  
‘Well, gee whiz, I didn’t see it.’ I’ve got my opinions too. I think some people like to  
hype it up a little bit more than it really was. But tell that to the guys that didn’t come  
back.

RV: Right. Was your first flight, would you call that your first experience in  
combat?

JA: Oh, yes. Absolutely.

RV: Because you were taking fire.

JA: I believed. I didn’t experience anything other than ‘Oh, really?’

RV: What was your primary mission? What were you there for as you understood  
it?

JA: Personally within the squadron?

RV: Yes

JA: Okay. My job in the squadron was to be the logistics officer for the squadron,  
supply officer. I’ll leave it at that. I can go into it. It’s not very exciting but it was  
logistics officer. I’d gone to supply school so I had a little bit of logistics background. So  
I fit in there. But beyond that, my job was to fly the VMO-6 mission which was  
observation, helicopter escort, close air support. Of course we didn’t call it close air  
support back then because that was a no-no. Fixed wing were flying close air support and  
if helicopters were going to take the mission from them, fixed wing were, as we talked  
earlier, in jeopardy, the Marine Corps was in jeopardy of losing fixed wing aircraft  
because there was no need for them anymore because helicopters were doing close air  
support. So we called it close-in fire support. CIFS. Close-in fire support. Obviously, we  
know now that helicopters and fixed wing compliment each other. They have two  
separate types of missions and both of them close air support oriented and very, very
useful and necessary. But back then we were a little paranoid, not me, but the fixed wing community was a little paranoid about admitting that the helicopters could actually do close air support. So we had a helicopter escort, close air support, close in fire support, resupply, Medevac escort, one Huey with one H-34, one H-46. We did recon inserts and extracts on all of these missions day and night. We also did a utility mission and a VIP mission, which was the dreaded mission of all. We of course, we had slicks without arms, without the machine gun and helicopters [rockets], three or four in the squadron. And they were to support the generals and the non-generals, the unit commanders, to fly them around on recon missions and to take them places. And every fourth or fifth day, every pilot in the squadron would draw a mission like that and it would be, ‘Uuhh!’

RV: Why?

JA: Well, because it wasn’t shooting. It wasn’t exciting. It wasn’t the real thing. It was being a taxi cab driver and that wasn’t macho. And we hadn’t invented the word macho back in ’66, but nevertheless, that’s the best word I can use. It just wasn’t what I was there for. It wasn’t what any of us were there for. We weren't there to be taxi drivers. We can let the 46s and the 34s be the taxi drivers. That’s what they were made for. And by the way, if I had to describe which mission was the most dangerous, was it the VMOs or the transport squadrons, it was the transport squadrons by far, by far. We shot back, so the bad guys, when they heard the whop, whop, whop, knew there was the capability that they could be blown away assuming our rockets didn’t go every which way like I described or whatever. So when I say taxi driver, I mean that with every bit of respect when it comes to the transport helicopter squadron’s mission. But we kind of liked to think that we were there to shoot. We weren't there to be a taxi driver.

RV: Was there any sense in your unit or just among helicopter pilots in general to prove the role of a helicopter?

JA: No, I don’t think so. This may again be naïve and perhaps a bit shallow, but it was self-explanatory, if you will. We’re there. The ground troops need us to insert them into the places they need to be inserted. We need to be there to take them out on an emergency basis if they get into trouble. We need to resupply them. Of course ultimately the Medevac was the most critical and I think the most visible mission that demonstrated
the helicopter’s utility during the Vietnam War. But, no. That never crossed my mind. It
was kind of a no-brainer.

RV: Okay. What had you guys been told about what happened in the fall of 1965
at the Ia Drang Valley and the success or however it was categorized at the time?
JA: I never heard of it until I read, We Were Soldiers.
RV: Really?
JA: No. That’s not true. That’s not true. I had heard about it but not during that
period of time. Not then. I had no concept of the conventional level of war that was being
fought from time to time in various places until Khe Sanh, we started working out at Khe
Sanh and up in the DMZ and we began seeing these little North Vietnamese guys with
the pith helmets running around that were in uniform. And the one time I got shot down
was by a North Vietnamese conventional force that was in the southern part of I Corps,
the Duc Pho area. There was an entire North Vietnamese regiment there that we
uncovered and tried to use a battalion to fight and it didn’t work. The Army had to bring
in the Air Cav and the Air Cav - I believe it was Air Cav. It may have been another unit.
Is Air Cav, that’s a generic term right? That’s not a unit.
RV: Yes.
JA: It was Air Cav but at any rate, they brought in a brigade to take care of the
regiment that we’d been trying to take care of with a battalion. But I digress. No. Ia
Drang Valley was not, I’d never heard of it at that stage.
RV: I ask only because of how it kind of proved the utilization of the helicopter
on the ground and ferrying troops around and dropping them in on targets and taking
them out.
JA: Right. Well, I’m embarrassed, not embarrassed, but I’m hesitant to admit that
I had not heard of it because it was such a profound event that impacted. Maybe my peers
were talking about it. Maybe they were and I was just not thinking about it. But I knew
that the Au Shau Valley was a hotbed and some of our units had gone in there,
conventional forces. But the Ia Drang, in ’65, I had not specifically heard of that.
RV: Would you like to talk about how you performed these various missions,
what you said, the various duties you had?
JA: Sure I can talk about anything if I can recall it.
RV: Just kind of how you went about performing each of these different duties.

JA: Okay. There was a generic process that we followed to conduct a mission. What went on in the actual nucleus of the execution of the mission was different from mission to mission. But to prepare and to come back and then finish the mission, they were all the same. We could be here for three more years. Let’s talk about a Medevac mission. We would come to the ready room, excuse me, my copilot and I. We would get the maps of the areas that we needed for the areas that we were going to be in. We would check the weather. We would brief for the flight. And actually, I’m not sure in the first tour of duty, in the second tour of duty, the pick up aircraft, the transport helicopter and the escort would brief together. So let’s talk about that scenario. We would talk about where the transport helicopter would like us to be and what he would like us to do. We would tell the transport helicopter driver, look, when we come to the zone, we’d like to make a low pass over the zone just to let them know that they’ve got some armed escort. Then we’ll come up around. We’ll tell you whether we get shot at. You keep talking to the folks on the ground. We briefed that process and whether he came in low or high depended upon whether it was a hot zone or a cold zone. Anyway, we talked about how we were going to conduct, what we were going to talk to each other about and how we were going to actually conduct the pick up. When I was there on the first tour in VMO-6, the attack helicopter actually did all the talking to the guys on the ground because the guys on the ground, the fastest way for them to start directing fire if they took fire was for them to talk directly to us. So rather than get the transport helicopter in there, he would listen obviously to everything and if he had a complaint or a need or needed to do something or whatever, he would weigh in. But we would talk to the ground. We’d call them about five miles out, say, ‘We’re inbound. What’s the status of the zone?’ The guy on the ground would say, ‘We took fire in the last hour.’ That would turn it into a hot zone or sometimes they’d like to tell us, ‘We haven’t seen any bad guys for three days,’ and we’d come into the zone and get clobbered. Not their fault. We make jokes of that nowadays. ‘Yeah. Hey, no sweat. Nobody’s around. Come on in. We’ve got to get these guys out of here.’ And it’d be a hotbed of activity and bullets and grenades and RPGs and everything.

RV: So you never really knew?
JA: Yes you did. They told the truth. No. You’re absolutely right. The guy on the ground may not have been able to tell because the bad guys could have bellied up to the edge of the place and said, ‘Ah hah. We nailed one of their guys and they’re going to have to come for Medevac. Let’s wait around here and we can get ourselves a couple of helicopters’, and indeed that’s how the war went. But yes, you never really knew, but you did have a sense of whether it was a hot zone or a cold zone. And the layout of the ground and the location. Where are the tree lines? Are there tree lines? Is it on a rice paddy dike where there’s a large open area or is it in a constricted jungle area where you’ve got concealment right up almost to where the helicopter’s going to have to sit down. You just kind of played it by ear. You had to play it by ear. There were some instincts that kicked in. When you started taking fire, you pulled up, came back around and made sure your door gunner knew where it was coming from so you could shoot back.

RV: Did you have standard procedures for when you took fire, ‘We’re going to take this attack pattern or here’s how I’m going to fly.’ Or did you say, ‘Okay, if it’s coming from the left hand side….’

JA: First tour we didn’t, second tour we did. It’s interesting. I wrote the first tactical manual for attack helicopters patterned after the Army’s tactical manuals. The first tour of duty we just talked through it and we just did it. But then when I came back and ended up as an operations officer in a peacetime Cobra squadron, we wrote an attack helicopter SOP and before that, I could digress a hundred different ways right now. The first time we winged it. The first year I was there in ’66, ’67, we winged it. We winged it to the extent that we’d talk about what we were going to do. We knew what we were going to do and of course the aircrews would, the Huey crew, each person would have his own responsibilities. I’ll tell you when to shoot. I want the copilot to arm us when its time to arm us, flip the switches to arm the weapons. The door gunners don’t shoot until I tell you to shoot and I’ll try to describe where. You tell me if you think you need to shoot or if we’re taking fire and I’ll tell you whether to shoot back.

RV: So they had to get permission from the pilot to shoot.

JA: Yes, with exceptions. If they were actually taking fire and it only happened to me three or four times, but if they were actually, as we were going by and they saw
somebody shooting at them, then they were cleared to shoot. There were so many
different permutations and combinations of things that could happen.

RV: Is that why you wrote the manual? Is that why you needed to come up with
the SOP?

JA: Yeah, you needed a starting point. That’s exactly right. You needed a starting
point. It wasn’t my idea to write the manual. It just so happened that the guy who was a
major in my squadron in 1970, the Cobra squadron, and I jump ahead here, turned out to
be my commanding officer in the peacetime squadron. He had seen, in the Cobra
squadron, a need to have a more standardized approach. I didn’t agree with him at the
time simply because we had been so successful on my first tour without being strapped,
being able to freelance it out there and do what needed to be done instead of saying, you
need to be three rotor widths at the 6:00 or at the 5:00 of your lead when you're coming
into the zone area and then you break off, one left, one right. You come back around, the
lead goes in first, yadda, yadda, yadda. No. Just do it, like the ad says. But that wasn’t
really the way to do it. There needed to be some more structure and that’s why the
tactical manual was written. The major that was in my squadron in Vietnam in ’70-’71,
who was flying missions and gave some structure to our squadron there, when I ended up
as his operations officer, he said, ‘Arick, you're going to write our tactical manual for the
Marine Corps attack helicopters.’ And indeed we ended up doing that. I’d applied to test
pilot school. Ultimately he said he wasn’t going to let me go to test pilot school until I
finished the manual. And I finished it. I was motivated, highly motivated. Excuse me, I
digress.

RV: Which way worked better?

JA: If I sound like I’m hesitating, I’m not. The way it worked better for me was
the first way forever. But I will tell you that when I came back into Vietnam, that was
when the 7th Air Force was controlling all shooting and all missions. The Cobras, you
very seldom as the attack helicopter lead did the talking to anybody unless it was an
emergency recon extract or unless you were doing a hunter/killer mission. The transport
helicopter pilot always did the talking to the ground folks, always took care of what was
going on. Whereas the Huey had the tactical air controller airborne, the guy in charge of
all of the assets, air assets and talking to the ground on my first tour, there was a third
entity in the sky and that was the Huey with the tactical air controller airborne. And as far
as I was concerned, the sky was crowded, too crowded. And the people who should be
controlling weren't controlling. The attack helicopter was more maneuverable, it was
more flexible, it was less vulnerable. It could get down there, shoot back and it ought to
be the one that is running the show. Instead, this very vulnerable Huey at 2,000 feet was
up there talking to the transports, the folks on the ground, and the attack helicopters.

RV: Were they hovering?

JA: No. There was structure added and the structure that was added was good
because with the tactical manual because it provided something for the training squadrons
to base their training on, something more substantive and standard. But once we got into
the combat area and in actual combat, if you tried to retain that structure, it became very
frustrating, certainly for me. I had been there on one tour and had been able to run the
show and as far as I was concerned we were winning the war when I was there doing that
and we’re losing the war now because we’re having to….That’s not true, that’s not why
we were losing even if we were losing, it wouldn’t have been why.

RV: So this is your Medevac basically.

JA: Yes. I digress. We’d go in, the transport helicopter would ultimately after we
had made a pass over the zone and said, ‘Nobody’s shooting down here.’ Generally
speaking he would not go in if there was shooting that was going on. He’d wait until it
got cleared out until the shooting stopped.

RV: How would it be cleared out?

JA: It would be cleared out because we cleared it out. We would shoot. On
occasion the ground unit depending on its size and its lethality would be able to clear it
out also. But at any rate, we’d clear out any fire. They’d come in and ultimately they
would expect it, we would expect some residual resistance and sometimes even stronger
than the first resistance after we had thought we’d cleared it up. At any rate, they’d come
in. The folks would load on the Medevac or Medevacs and the transport would take off,
we’d come in, make another pass over the zone, ask the ground units if they needed any
more support. ‘No, we’re good.’ We’d go off and fly back to base and they’d deposit the
Medevac. Resupply was exactly the same way except the transport helicopter, probably
two helicopters, there’d probably be two attack helicopters, two transports. They’d drop
off supplies and take off. And generally speaking, there was less of an inclination to have
a hot zone with a resupply unless it was an emergency resupply. Troop insert, a company,
again much the same scenario. Four or five transport helicopters would be carrying a
company of Marines and two or four Marine Hueys would be escorting. When we’d get
over the zone, the Huey flight lead would talk to the ground if there was anybody on the
ground already and say, ‘We’ve got your company coming in,’ and we’d put them on the
ground. More likely, we would be putting this company in where nobody else had been
or nobody else had been recently. So, the lead section of Hueys would make a pass over,
identify the zone, do the navigating. That was another thing that was an interesting
challenge for us was to get from point A to point B without getting lost or shot down. But
the lead section of Hueys would go over the zone, fly around, see if there was anything,
good, bad. Occasionally, but not normally, we would just expend some ammo, a few
rockets, a few guns just to let the bad guys know that we were there, that we were ready
to shoot and we softened up the zone. So the lead section would fly across the zone, low.
The transports would come in and land. We’d come back around. The second section
would come in if there were two sections. If there was one section, it would just be the
one section. We’d come in while they were on the ground, fly over, look for bad guys. If
they started taking fire, the second section would return the fire with their door gunners
probably because they were down low. We’d be up high the first section or which ever
section was in the rotation, would be up high and in a position once the target was
identified to roll in with the external munitions, rockets and guns and shoot at the bad
guys. Then as the transports were ready to come out, they’d call, ‘Coming out,’ and
whatever section was in the rotation would come down on either side of them and just let
the bad guys know you were there and they’d be lifting out. One section would be there.
The next section would come in and (motions with hands) we need video here.

RV: Yes, we should say that you are with your hands showing exactly how the
flying was.

JA: Shooting my watch off. Crazy…

RV: No, not at all.

JA: But at any rate, a picture’s worth a thousand words. At any rate, then we’d fly
back to base and live happily ever after. What else have we got? Emergency recon extract
would usually be made up on the first tour of two Hueys. It could be more armed Hueys and depending on the size of the recon team, probably two transport helicopters. But we would also, we would meet up in the vicinity of the ultimate zone with a fixed wing aircraft, a section or two of fixed wing aircraft for close air support and perhaps if it was at night, a flare ship, a C-130 that would drop flares to illuminate the area. The transports the Hueys would brief the mission. ‘These guys are there, they’ve made contact, they're under fire. They're in this zone. We'll navigate out there ourselves, we’ll find the zone, we’ll identify it; you guys will orbit out here while we go down and scope it out and make contact and decide when the right time is for you to come in. We’ll do suppressive fire if necessary or as necessary and I’ll call you in when the time comes. And when the time comes, we do much the same as we do on a Medevac or anything else. Transports would come in, land, perhaps one at a time because recon pickups, zones were much more constricted. Pick up part of the team, that was kind of a vulnerable time when part of our team was out of the zone and part of it’s still in. We’d be making, the attack helicopters would be making runs on the zone to make sure heads were down and that there were no bad guys shooting or to shoot back at the bad guys that were shooting. And the second aircraft would come in, the second transport would come in, pick up the second load and take off. We’d sweep over the zone. In about 50% of the cases, we would usually shoot into the areas that the bad guys were that were causing the emergency extract to take place as we left even though we didn’t see anybody or hadn’t taken any fire recently, we would still shoot a couple of rounds into there for good measure and practice and because we wanted to. VIP missions, they were just, pick them up over here, drop them over here, wait, take and wait. We’d fly up to the third Marine Amphibious Force headquarters pick up in ’66 General Walt, fly him out to a battalion in a field, land him. Generally we would not have an attack helicopter escort with those missions. What other missions am I missing?

RV: How did the officers treat you or the generals and the VIPs, how did they treat you when they came on board?

JA: They didn’t that I can recall.

RV: Not much interaction?
JA: No, not at all. Not with me. Now, actually, General Walt had his own personal pilot and helicopter that was assigned to him and that pilot came from VMO-2 that was up in Marble Mountain because that’s where III MAF headquarters was or close proximity. I always wondered why anybody would want to be assigned permanent pilot for General Walt or for anybody and I guess there were probably more than just General Walt had permanent pilots assigned to them. But I’m sure he talked to his permanent pilot on occasion but when we were called in to do that type of mission, not any interaction that I was ever aware of. I didn’t have any personally and I never heard of any. By the way, I flew with his son ultimately in another squadron. He was a great guy. The guy was a great general and a great leader and I don’t know where he got the nickname, but that was the phrase *du jour* and the nickname that he had been given, that I heard that he had been given when I got in there. I didn’t have anything to do with that name, obviously.

RV: What other types of missions?

JA: Extracts, inserts, Medevacs, troop inserts. Reconnaissance flights, just going out and taking a look and seeing if we can find out, if we can see what somebody thinks they saw or heard was going on. Those would, generally speaking, be the most boring of all the flights other than the VIP flights simply because you usually didn’t see and it wasn’t just me not seeing, it was others just not seeing. When the whop, whop, whop came overhead, the guys went into their spider holes or whatever they were, were underground or whatever and we never saw them. There was another mission and that was a Special Operations Group, SOG missions. That was where we would go out to the Special Operations camps and support them in inserts and extracts of their units. Much like a recon insert and extract except the location was farther into enemy territory, bad guy land. We would go out there with a flight of two Hueys to a Special Forces Camp, land, brief with the Special Forces Unit. We probably had transport and 90% of the time we’d have a couple of transport helicopters too. They were going to put their recon units out. Of course, Special Operations was primarily a reconnaissance type of mission. At least it was from my perspective. That’s what I perceived and that’s what I associated it with. Obviously they did a lot of other things. But the ones we were associated with were reconnaissance mission. So we’d go out to Special Forces Camps, maybe stay there for
two or three or four days and support them in a particular operation they were conducting
that involved lots of small teams being placed in various locations out in the jungles and
in the mountains.

RV: How was it staying out there at Special Forces camps?

JA: Loved it. They ate well, had good beer and it was comfortable. I took my
pillow with me and we slept on cots. Matter of fact, the only time I really ran into any
females was at a Special Forces camp one day. For some reason, we were out there and
we’d briefed and we were waiting for the mission to take place and in comes an Army,
obviously an Army helicopter, probably a Chinook, maybe it was a Huey, but two Red
Cross ladies on it. I have no idea what their mission was out there. I really, really don’t to
this day. Having said that, they were brave and they had a reason, maybe they were out
there just to put in an appearance. I don’t know, which would have been fine with me.
But I’m sure there was much more to the mission than just that. But at any rate, wow,
females. Weird. And that was basically the way I responded to it. Actually I got one of
them to come over and get a picture in my helicopter in the gunner’s position in my
helicopter and I saved that picture.

RV: You should donate it to the archive.

JA: You want it?

RV: Sure, Sure. We’ll put it on the website.

JA: Wonderful, wonderful.

RV: So these SOG missions, how comfortable were you out there at the camp?

Was there an increased sense of danger?

JA: Yeah. As a matter of fact, there was. But they were on secure mountain tops,
lots of trenches, lots of barbed wire, good fields of fire, good vision, and indeed on all of
the missions that I flew both tours with Special Operations folks, Special Forces folks, we
never took incoming at the Special Forces camps that I was working out of. Obviously
they did take it quite regularly, but not while I was there. As far as the missions
themselves were concerned, that was probably the most puckered I would get at any point
in time because and although it didn’t cross my mind very often, it did cross my mind.
We had one engine in this helicopter and we’re over jungle, triple canopy jungle and who
knows what’s going on underneath that canopy and if I have to go down, it’s going to be
a long trip after the rotors stop turning to get to the ground. And when I get there, there
are going to be a lot of people there to greet me one way or another, mostly in the bad
way. Yeah, we were working and I guess I can talk about it now can't I?

RV: Totally declassified. Well, you went into Laos.

JA: We went into Laos and that was kind of a pretty neat thing. ‘Oh, boy, we’re
going into Laos. Gee whiz. And if we talk about it we’re going to be court-martialed.’

RV: Were you told that before the mission?

JA: We knew because we had the maps and all. Oh, about talking about it?

RV: Yes.

JA: Well, we were told that it was top secret that anything that took place outside
of Vietnam was super secret and you don’t even think about it much less talk about it.

RV: How did you feel about that, the United States operating in these other
countries?

JA: I thought it was great. As a captain responsible for saving lives and winning a
war, if that’s where the Ho Chi Minh trail was and that’s where the enemy concentrations
that were coming across the border to fight, I was tickled to be able to go in there and
disrupt that any way we could.

RV: How many missions would you say you flew into Laos? Estimation.

JA: If I tell you I’ll have to kill you (laughter). You’ve heard that I’m sure a
thousand times. I don’t remember.

RV: Right, right.

JA: I’m trying to think…

RV: Are you talking about 100 or are you talking about 15?

JA: Oh, 100. But then I flew on two tours, 1,540 missions so the percentage was
low but. No, I’m sorry. 1,540 hours in combat on my two tours. The number of missions
were 1,800 and something. Somewhere between 1,800 and 1,900 missions. And the way
we counted missions on the second tour absolutely was ridiculous for helicopters.

RV: How did you do it on each tour? Tell me the difference.

JA: On the first tour, if you briefed for a particular mission, that was a mission.

You went out, if it was a resupply mission to escort these helicopters, there was one
mission. The helicopters could have landed here, here, here and here, five different places
and it was one mission. The second tour, somehow, the folks that wanted their buttons
pushed or their tickets punched or whatever, decided that every time a helicopter landed
on a mission, it was a mission. If you resupplied here and here and here, three places,
three missions. So they accumulated. I flew 1,000 and some odd hours on my first tour
and probably got 500 missions. I flew 500 hours my second tour, 1,000 missions. Now,
that’s not exactly the way it worked but that’s the nature of the process. I didn’t like it. I
didn’t like it at all but I wasn’t voting and really I didn’t think much about it.

RV: Was there any noticeable difference between Vietnam and Laos that you
could tell geographically or just anything?

JA: Well, Laos was farther from home and safe harbor. The jungle canopy, the
areas that we worked which were father up north, I don’t know whether I ever got to the
A Shau Valley or not. More mountainous, thicker jungle canopy and that’s about it.
Higher mountains.

RV: Of the missions that you described, which would you say was the most
dangerous to undertake?

JA: Certainly the Special Operations.

RV: Special Ops. Besides those.

JA: The emergency recon inserts and extracts. Of course if it was an emergency
insert, you usually don’t put those guys into areas that were hot. But the emergency
extracts because they took place day and night and whenever they were necessary. Of
course an emergency Medevac also was generally dangerous because it became an
emergency for a reason. Sometime the emergencies were because a guy fell off a cliff or
something and needed immediate medical attention, but mostly it was because of enemy
contact.

RV: How did you gauge success on your missions? What made them successful
to you?

JA: Well, my mission was to go out and get this recon team safely out without
any injuries. If I did that, it was a success. If I did it with minor injuries, it was a success.
Medevac, if we got them out, it was a success. That’s a wonderful question, it really is
because it’s really making me think. But hey, what do you mean, what was success? We
went out to do it, if we did it, it was a success. If it wasn’t, it wasn’t and I don’t mean to be that…

RV: That’s your answer. That’s fine.

JA: Well, it’s not a good answer, but it’s a great question. What was successful? If I got the recon team out, if I got the Medevac out without a loss of life or equipment, it was a success. And you’ll notice I’m not saying if I killed 25 bad guys.

RV: I know. That’s why I asked.

JA: That wasn’t part of it. Killing wasn’t. Boy, that’s interesting. I just thought of that. That wasn’t an issue. The issue was to get our company in so they could do the killing on the ground if there had to be killing, safely, or as safely as possible with as little loss of life or injury as possible. It was to…whatever it took to do that but it never had anything to do as far as I was concerned, it never had anything to do with body count. And on the first tour over there, there really wasn’t a mission to achieve body count by the attack helicopter unit. The second time, there was. And that was a mission where we teamed up, this would have been ’70-’71, this was when we teamed up with the Army’s LOH, light helicopter, little bubble, kind of a bubble, I guess. And they would go out and fly low and slow over various places where there might be bad guys and then there’d be two Cobras up behind them. And if they drew fire, the Cobras would go in and shoot. But there was nothing like that mission the first time around. To be perfectly frank with you, that was a boring mission too because mostly it was a rocket belt mission that we had around Da Nang second tour…or was it Marble Mountain the second tour? But we would go out with two Cobras and the Army’s LOH and we’d go out to wherever the rockets would be located that were shooting at Da Nang from time to time and we’d just look for bad guys and that was boring. We very, very, seldom…I never, but we very, very seldom made any contact at all.

RV: Do you think they kind of figured out the pattern? ‘If we hear the copters come, let’s just hide or let’s just not shoot at the slow one with the bubble because…’

JA: Absolutely.

RV: Let’s pause for a second. Let me change this disc. We’re almost out of time here. Okay, let’s continue. This is disc two. What constituted a failed mission?
JA: I’ll be a little egocentric and say, I don’t know. I never experienced a failed mission, which is not necessarily true. First of all, I said that kind of lightly there, but I never believed I ever experienced a failed mission. Some were more successful than others. Wow. If that isn’t rationalization I don’t know what is. But seriously, if my Medevac transport helicopter got shot up in the zone and I wasn’t able to suppress the fire, that would not have been a failed mission, it would have been a mission that…well, maybe it would have been a failed mission. I guess it would have been although we brought the Medevac out, the guy, the transport helicopter pilot was a hero as always in my eyes and we lived happily ever after. It would have been a better mission if I could have suppressed the fire, gotten the bad guys to be dead or something so they wouldn’t have shot at us. But a failed mission, I’m just trying to reconstruct the missions that I’ve flown that have a feeling of failure. Now, in some areas, at some points in time, we would go out to put a company or even a battalion in somewhere, it’d be too hot, we weren’t able to, we’d say, ‘Never mind. Wave off that first wave. Let’s take them out and then come back.’

RV: Who would make that call?

JA: That would be the ground commander’s call. Well, it could be anybody’s call but…I as the flight lead for the Hueys could say, ‘You guys are taking too much fire down there. You’ve got to come out of there and don’t let your troops get off because they’ll get stranded there and there’s a possibility they won’t come out.’ It’s interesting. Let’s talk that one through and I’ll try to describe a failed or a not fully successful mission.

RV: I’m not trying to imply that you had failed missions.

JA: No, no, no. And indeed, I’m sure I did. I’m just - I’m sure the definition is there.

RV: Maybe a different way to put it is, when you came back and you said, ‘Gosh, that just did not go well and I don’t feel good about that or XYZ happened.’

JA: But see, not going well was standard because when you got shot at, you’re in combat, the fog of war.

RV: Right. Sure.
JA: So if you start believing, ‘Holy crap! I failed,’ you're probably not going to be as anxious to go back out again although it may be the other way around, ‘I’ll go back out there and do it until I get it right.’ That’s probably not a good approach either in combat. Let me describe a mission to you very quickly where we put in, we were going out there to put a battalion in. We put the lead company into a relatively large zone, we’re putting them in, they took heavy, heavy fire, but only after a platoon was on the ground. So we weren't able to get everybody on the ground. We sent everybody but the rest of the company back because of fuel situations. The rest of the company that was airborne stayed in the area to go in and protect them if they could. The fact of the matter is that mission took two days to complete. It started out really rough. We had a pinned down platoon on the ground and we needed to bring attack helicopters in on a regular basis to fly cover for them because we were the only perimeter support they had. They were outnumbered. We called in air strikes, fixed wing air strikes. We were there all night long with them. After an hour of the mission, we had failed, but the mission went on until we prevailed. So we really couldn’t allow ourselves to have a mission that failed. Now, if my Medevac was blown up in the zone, that’s just a failure. Free and clear. That never happened to me, not because of anything particularly good I did, it’s just that the dice didn’t get rolled that way. For that I will be eternally grateful, but it didn’t roll that way for some people. We did have a Medevac on my first tour, where we actually were the Medevac pickup for a while. When the 46s got grounded because of their mechanical problems in early ’67 I believe was the time frame, they had severe mechanical problems. We needed to use Slick Hueys as pick up helicopter. The Slick Hueys were not nearly so good as the 46s or the 34s for that matter because they weren't as maneuverable down low as those two helicopters were nor could they carry as much. At any rate, I’d been the Slick pilot for Medevac pickup and we’d have our own attack version flying with us. Same mission, different helicopter pick up. At any rate, I had been on all day - have I told you this story yet?

RV: I don’t think so.

JA: Anyway, I’d been on all day, picked up a few Medevacs, some of them exciting, some of them not so exciting, relatively uneventful. The end of my day, twenty-four hours was up about 6:00 in the evening. The replacement crew came down, said,
‘What’s going on?’ I told them. They said, ‘Okay.’ I had about 15 minutes left, before we
were going to go off:

RV: Twenty-four hours you said. Was that your limit?
JA: Actually, no. I’m trying to remember. Twenty-four hours is not right. I’m
going to say twelve hours. You’d have the day Medevac or you’d have the night
Medevac. So we were about ready to switch off at about 6:00 in the evening. He was
going to have the Medevac for the evening. He and his copilot and his door gunner and
his corpsman would fly in the pickup helicopter. So, I had been on that day from 6:00 to
6:00 if that’s the hours that we used. I’m pretty sure it was. But thank you for having me
clarify that. At any rate, they came down a little early. The horn went off for Medevac.
Emergency Medevac at these coordinates. I said, ‘Okay, we’ll take this and you can take
over when we get back.’ He said, ‘No. Let my crew do it. We’re here. We’re coming on.
You’re going off. We’ll do it.’ I said, ‘Okay.’ Well, they never came back. What
happened was they went in to pick up a Medevac down south of Chu Lai or wherever it
was. I don’t recall where it was. There was a command detonated mine, 500 pound bomb
in the zone that blew up the pickup helicopter and the pilot, copilot, corpsman, and door
gunner were lost as a result. You can believe me, that’s one of the stories that I do
remember and that gave me great, great cause for reflection in Vietnam while I was there,
when it happened and for years after. But at any rate, that would be a failed mission. The
folks in the zone who died hadn’t failed. I would have failed because of my inability to
keep them protected and of course we did bring the Medevac out and that’s a failed
mission, easily defined.

RV: Were you blaming yourself?
JA: No. I don’t blame myself. If I didn’t believe in God before that, which I did, I
would afterwards, and not because he was after them and not after me. Who knows? Who
knows? But, no, I don’t blame myself.

RV: How did you deal with that when you found that news?
JA: I went back to my hooch and took out a bottle of whiskey and the Bible and
spent the evening with both.

RV: By yourself?
JA: Yes. Well, you’re never by yourself in a barracks, but yeah, sitting in my…
RV: You didn’t have three or four guys all hanging out together. It was just you.
JA: Yeah. It was just me. I remember it didn’t last long.
RV: And the next day?
JA: The next day I went back to business as usual. Well, we had memorial services. We mourned, grieved and went on with business. That happened on a number of occasions.
RV: Did it really?
JA: Not that same scenario, but if it had happened twice, I’d probably not be here today. At any rate, we lost folks, not on a regular basis, but too regular. As a matter of fact, right after my initial flight in country…how much time do you have left today? When do you have to bail out?
RV: We’re good.
JA: Okay. My initial flight in country, which was….
RV: Feel free to drink your Diet Coke. Please.
JA: That’s alright. I’m on a roll. Don’t stop me. Just kidding. Within days after my initial flight in Vietnam on my first tour, we had a night emergency recon extract of Jimmy Howard and his team on Hill 488, I believe was the number. At any rate, I wasn’t involved in the nighttime portion of the mission. That mission was an extremely, was very much an eye-opening event for me because our squadron commander went out with a flight and was shot down and killed on that flight. He was over flying the zone and the bad guys shot up into the airplane and he bled to death before we could get him back out of the zone. But anyway, our squadron commander was killed within two weeks of my arrival in Vietnam. If I had ever doubted there was some real shooting going on over there, that doubt was gone. I actually had doubted it. If I had ever wondered about the intensity of the battle or the severity or the sincerity or the finality of what was going on, obviously that was…that ended it there.
RV: Did you have any of those feelings before that incident?
JA: No. No. I didn’t have them. I don’t know whether they affected me or not, but I don’t think they did. The way I conducted myself later on or for the rest of my tour, I don’t think that it affected me. It was just an eye-opener. Yeah. There are bad guys out there so whenever I go out, instead of thinking ‘I don’t see anything down there or if I
can't see them I’m not worried about them.’ If that was going to happen to me
subsequently in my tour, it wasn’t going to anymore.

RV: How much did you think about that when you would go out on a mission?
JA: About dying?
RV: Yeah.
JA: None. Absolutely none. I thought more about having a bullet come up and hit
me in the crotch.
RV: Really. Did you have any armored plating under your seat?
JA: Yes, but not enough. It was kind of free gratis pity armor. Yes, you were
sitting on a plate of lead and the seats on the first tour were not scientifically developed to
where they were going to cover you very much. We used to, actually it was more a kind
of a habit, I guess. We’d carry .38s in holsters with belts. We’d move the .38 around and
put them between our legs when we were sitting in the seats there flying. And in reality,
if a bullet had come up, all that would have done would have been to make shrapnel out
of that and probably make the situation worse.
RV: Did you try to barter for flak jackets and put them in there, sit on them or
anything like that?
JA: We didn’t barter for them. We had them and I guess now that you mention it,
we probably sat on flak vest. And actually on the second tour, I don’t remember right
now. Well, yes I do remember. We did wear the new Kevlar, heavy, heavy,
uncomfortable vests on a regular basis.
RV: Let me ask you the same question in a different way. When you were flying
these many, many missions, you never once said, ‘Wow. This could be the last one. This
could be the last day or wow, an RPG could come right out of that jungle area right over
there and take me out.’?
JA: I don’t remember thinking that. I don’t remember thinking that. You know,
rational people sitting here years later would say, ‘How do you not think of that?’
Because there are other things to think about, just like life in general when things get
really bad, whatever the definition of bad is at the time you have other things to distract
you and to detract from your concern for the bad thing that you have no power over.
Now, the RPG you had some power over because you would not fly over that area if you
thought it was a bad place or you could zigzag or you could fly low on the tree tops or
you could do a number of things and indeed we did that from time to time and that was
because we were avoiding enemy fire. But thinking through to the endpoint of that enemy
fire, I honestly don’t recall ever thinking that. I do know that there were several people in
our squadron that did think that through and they were totally useless.

RV: Really? How did you know that they thought it through?

JA: I can only think of one person, Combat Clyde. As a matter of fact, it turned
out he was one of my instructors in helicopter flight, basic helicopter flight training.

RV: Really?

JA: Yeah. But anyway, he was more senior to me and he would come back and he
would talk about how scared he was, which, in retrospect was probably healthy for him
and it certainly probably saved his life because he quit flying. The squadron commander
had him stand down and he went somewhere to do a desk job there.

RV: Because of that reputation or because he’d talk about it so much?

JA: Yes. At any rate, you're in a squadron full of macho 25-year-olds doing good
for mankind and loving every minute of it and in comes this guy – it’s kind of like
coming out of the closet, I guess it is anyway. Here is somebody who’s doing something
that is not politically correct or has a feeling or a lifestyle that’s not politically correct but
he’s not afraid to talk about it or he chooses to talk about it. There were other degrees of
that type of thing that went on and most of the time, the people that would see it were in
responsible positions and the ones that weren't that would see it would report it and say
this guys is a danger to himself and to others because he’s beginning to think too hard.

That’s an easy way to describe it.

RV: When you did experience any fear, were you able to talk about it with
anybody or did you not experience it?

JA: Oh yes, certainly. I don’t know if we talked about fear or just talked about the
event and described it to ourselves and let each of us who were talking about it
experience vicariously what was going on and make the decision that yeah, there was
danger there. Maybe I’m too far removed to be able to describe accurately my real
feelings at the time, but I just don’t recall being concerned with fear or certainly not
consumed by it at any point in time. I’ll give you an example of how naïve I was. The
good Lord has young people go to war because old people think too hard about the situation. I’ve said that before, probably not on this. One night we, it was really cruddy weather at Ky Ha. I mean, it was dark and there was about a quarter of a mile visibility and the ceiling was down to 50 feet. I mean, it was just that bad. Unfortunately, there were lots of nights like that but this particular one I was on Medevac escort and I’m trying to think. I’ll make a long story slightly shorter. At any rate, the transport helicopter was a 34. I was in the Huey of course. We took of IFR individually, got radar vectors to a position on top. Did you say you were a pilot?

RV: No.

JA: Anyway, we got radar vectors to a spot on top of the bad weather, which at that point in time was probably five or 6,000 feet. We joined up. We popped up over here and we held over here, he popped up over there. We were two lights blinking. We joined up and we took a radar vector toward our pickup zone. The pickup zone was farther inland. It was on a higher piece of ground and it was in the clear. We made the pickup. This was out in the mountains. We made the pickup. There was no enemy. We did what I talked about before. We looked at the zone as best we could. We identified it with a strobe light. They identified themselves with a strobe light, described a zone, transport went in, used its light, picked up the Medevac, came back up and there we were on top flying back. Of course we’d used up half our gas probably and each of us had one engine apiece and we were in bad guy country. It never even crossed my mind until I think about it today. Anyway, we got back, picked up the radar again, got vectored back into our home field location. Actually we were going back into Marble Mountain, not Ky Ha because it was a longer runway, a better place to go, better radar service. The transport helicopter pilot lost his radio. We had an FM radio and a UHF radio. UHF talked to the aviation world. FM…we could talk to each other on UHF and FM but FM we talked to the ground on. The 34 had no UHF so he couldn’t do a ground control radar approach, GCA radar approach because he couldn’t talk to the controller. ‘Well, I got a great idea, Ron. I’ll tell you what, I will take the commands on my UHF from the ground control and I will relay them to you on FM and you just do whatever I tell you to do and you’ll be just like talking to them and I’ll orbit up here while you’re doing that and I’ll come on down after you’re under the bad weather. Of course there’s still all this crummy weather
down below, about 5,000 feet. At any rate, it worked. Lo and behold! I told the controller that the UHF on the whatever his call sign was out, that I would be relaying using my fox mike and watch him carefully, more carefully if you could do that than you ever did. And it worked. I’d hear the command, I’d keep both of my radios, I think I did at the time, FM and UHF so I would read back the command to the ground at the same time I was transmitting it so they could tell me if it was wrong or they could confirm that it’s right. But anyway, it worked. And then I took my approach and came in and my skids were almost on the ground before I could see anything. That’s how bad the weather was. It never even crossed my mind that the engine was going to quit, that we were going to take fire out in badlands, that my fox mike would go down and he’d be stranded or that my UHF would go down and we’d both be stranded. None of that, ever crossed my mind. Fearless? No, not a chance. I’ve never been described as fearless and I never describe myself as fearless but without a prevailing sense of fear.

RV: Certainly. Was there psychological help on base if you needed it?
JA: I don’t think so. Well, that’s not true. We had a chaplain and our flight surgeon was always a source of sanity and levity and aspirin and other things. And I don’t mean and other things, other things. But the flight surgeon and the chaplain were there.

RV: I was going to ask if you ever lost any helicopters on your missions.
JA: On my missions?
RV: On your missions personally.
JA: Losing them, no because they were all recovered eventually. If we’d have a helicopter shot down in a zone, we would generally go back, get a company of Marines or anybody that we could find, bring them out, put them down around the helicopter, send in a maintenance crew, let them rig the helicopter for external. They’d take off the rotors, they’d do a few things to it. In some cases they’d take the rotors off. In others they’d leave them on, depending on what the type was. Then they’d external the helicopter out and bring it back and then we’d go in and get the company and bring it out, bring the company out. But losing a helicopter, as a matter of fact, when I got shot down, they had to external my helicopter out, but when I got shot down, I got shot up by the bad guys but within about 500 meters of the friendly front lines so when I ran out of oil and had to
autorotate to get down quickly, I was able to get in behind friendly lines so they
externaled me out so I didn’t lose that helicopter. I wasn’t able to fly it out but it wasn’t
lost. Even when we were working in the DMZ, even when we were working in Laos, I
don’t recall any helicopters that were lost.

RV: How about friends, guys you knew?

JA: Oh, yes. Most assuredly. I talked about the Medevac pickup helicopter that
was lost. The former pilot, General Walt’s former pilot, was lost flying a Medevac escort.
He got shot up, crashed in the zone and he and the corpsman and the crew chief were all
killed. The copilot who happened to be the group commander, Colonel Riser at the time,
got out with some bad burns. But, yes, we did lose that crew. We lost our commanding
officer. I described that. I can't think of any others right off hand.

RV: When you would go on a mission, did you guys have a routine or any kind of
“We’ve got to tie our shoelaces this way. Don’t say these words this morning before.’ Do
you know what I’m talking about?

JA: I know exactly what you're talking about.

RV: Just a locker room preparation before a game.

JA: This is going to disappoint you but no. I didn’t.

RV: I’m not disappointed.

JA: We had nothing really sexy that I can think of. We just did it. The only
special routine we had was brief. You had to brief and talk to each other about what you
plan on doing to the most minute possible detail that you can come up with. No, I didn’t
bang the sign as I was coming out of the chute.

RV: Anything in the copter itself, any good luck charms you guys would carry
with you?

JA: There were. Some guys did. I didn’t. Not even a picture of the family
although we were told not to do that because if we got captured, that would be more
fodder for them. And we didn’t have pictures of…No. I can't recall anything.

RV: How would you rate the intelligence that you received before going out on
missions?

JA: Non-existent.

RV: Really?
JA: Yeah. When they told us the bad guys were going to be there, they weren't. When they told us they weren't going to be there, they were there. Remember I was there in '66 and '67 and '70-'71. Intelligence involves not just enemy but it involves maps, it involves historical facts and things like this, weather also. So that was good. I mean we had good maps. We had fairly good weather reports, fairly accurate weather reports, but as far as the size and the nature of the enemy force that you're going to encounter, I hope I'm not hurting any intelligence officer’s or enlisted’s feelings but the time that I was there, I don’t recall getting any intelligence information on the enemy that was particularly significant to the way we conducted or in the outcome of the mission.

RV: Do you think that was because of the nature of your missions or because it was simply bad intelligence?

JA: I don’t think it was bad intelligence. I think it was the nature of our missions but it was extremely difficult. I’ll assume, it had to be extremely difficult to be able to foretell the location of an enemy that had the run of the territory that could at will go and come anywhere they wanted to whenever they wanted to. So, the intelligence folks weren't playing with a full deck as far as I was concerned. We were in a country that didn’t like us, didn’t necessarily want us to be there, even South Vietnamese were questioning from time to time. I’m not going to go there. Even the South Vietnamese questioned the utility of our presence there, at least from my perspective. I’ve got to be careful not to make any assumptions here because you guys have researched this quite accurately.

RV: Yeah, but this is your opinion and it could be credible and valid.

JA: As an opinion, yes, certainly. Accurate, we’ll…

RV: This is why we ask the questions. We want your perception and what you say we take, that’s it, fine.

JA: In that case, no. I think the nature of the war made intelligence gathering and dissemination extremely challenging at best. How can you predict from day to day where the enemy was going to be because they weren't being channeled. They weren't being channeled, focused, required to be anywhere. We’d go into a place, we would stay there for a brief period of time, we’d come out and the enemy could come back or they didn’t have to. No. I don’t ever remember a piece of intelligence information that concerned the
enemy being particularly useful or influencing in a particularly profound way the
outcome of any particular mission I flew. Having said that, I’m assuming your question
was focused on the intelligence community providing the information. Recon teams are
intelligence-gathering entities and recon teams that are in contact have some very
profound information on the enemy and when we were going out to bail them out, not
bail them out, to gather them up and take them out, we did have some very, very accurate
information on the nature of the threat and what was going on. Recon teams were and
indeed probably this is a trivial statement, were the best source of information that we
had. When we were supporting them, we were in good hands when it came to enemy
information. So if I made a general statement up front, I will stand by the general nature
of it, but in retrospect, we did get good enemy information from recon teams, particularly
those in contact that we were dealing directly with.

RV: How would you describe the enemy in general terms?
JA: Well…it might take a while.
RV: It doesn’t matter. Take your time. It does not matter.
JA: Effective. Determined. Persevering. And there are better words but they’re not
coming to mind, better words to describe persevering. It’s not coming to mind right now.
Relentless. Poorly equipped but extremely effective for the equipment that they had and
that’s because they had the run of the countryside. They had the support of the
population. Most of the time, it was voluntary and it had to be voluntary otherwise the
population would get killed. Sometimes they coerced the native population. How would I
describe the enemy? Relentless.

RV: Strengths and weaknesses. You just mentioned a few.
JA: The strength was it was their ball, their court, with their rules. Weakness,
equipment in a nutshell.

RV: What did you think of the indigenous forces, the South Vietnamese Air
Force, Army? What contact did you have with them?
JA: Well the South Vietnamese Air Force, I’m glad you mentioned that because I
wouldn’t have thought about that but they flew the A-1s. And they flew those in support
of the operations in Laos a lot. I just thought they were fantastic, the missions they flew
and what they did. Actually they flew armed T-28s also, which was our advanced trainer
back in Pensacola. But they were good. Their helicopter pilots were good. Cowboys, but
good. Their helicopters were rattle traps and I probably if I was ever going to fear for my
life, I would have feared for it if I’d have had to fly one of their helicopters. I never did.

RV: They were American helicopters weren’t they?
JA: Yes. They were American but they were maintained by the South Vietnamese
units for the most part. The ground forces, I’m not sure that they were as well motivated
as they needed to be. I don’t know if I had been one of them if I could have ever been
motivated doing what they were doing. Of course they were fighting for their homeland.
But I often wonder whether that particular fact was foremost in their minds. Sometimes it
was not apparent. They were brave. They worked hard at what they were doing, but for
whatever reason, sometimes they weren’t as effective and relentless as I guess I thought
they ought to have been. They were our allies and they supported us and we supported
them in combat against the adversaries but in many cases not as effectively as I would
have liked them to have been.

RV: Did you have a lot of personal contact with them?
JA: Not at all.
RV: Was that the attitude of the rest of the guys in your squad?
JA: I really shouldn’t speak for them but nobody that I came in contact with gave
me cause to have a feeling other than the ones I just described to you. How’s that for a
bureaucratic answer?

RV: That sounds good.
JA: Will it get me out of this part of the conversation? [laughter] Just kidding.
RV: Did you work with troops from other allied troops, Australians, New
Zealanders, Koreans?
JA: We worked on one or two occasions with the Aussies. They were mean
mothers and kind of fun to work with because I liked listening to them and they liked to
drink a lot of beer. The Koreans were good. They were good when I was there. Later on
after I had come out, I didn’t work with the Koreans my second tour. I worked with them
quite regularly on my first tour. As a matter of fact, my first run-in with Kim Ji was in the
commanding general, the Korean Commanding General’s mess when I was flying him
around on a mission one day. At any rate, they were much more effective, fought a lot
harder, I though than the South Vietnamese.

RV: Their reputation was that they were pretty ruthless when they were fighting.
JA: Yes. And that’s a good thing. One evening during my tour, I was required to
fly a mission to support the Koreans whose position south of us was being overrun by bad
guys. I don’t know if they were North Vietnamese or Viet Cong, but it was the Marine
Corps Ball, no, Marine Corps Birthday night. November 10, 1966. I had been out flying
all day. Did I tell this story? Okay. I’ll tell it quickly. I’d been out flying all day, 10 hours
roughly, pretty much 8 hours is the maximum you’re supposed to fly in a 24-hour period.
So I got back. This was the Marine Corps birthday. The celebration was at the Officer’s
Club and other places. I got back around 4:00, debriefed, did everything I needed to do
for whatever I needed to do, was finished for the day, absolutely finished, can't fly
anymore. I went to the Officer’s Club at about 5:00 or 5:30, started celebrating. About
7:30, 8:00 that evening, still in the Officer’s Club about ready to eat. We were going to
cook steaks up there and I think they had been cooking them and eating them, I just
hadn’t gotten around to it and I was about to. My commanding officer came up to me and
said, ‘John, I need you to fly.’ I said, ‘I can't. I flew 8 hours.’ Obviously…well, not
obviously. Actually I never said, ‘I can’t,’ I don’t believe. I said, ‘I shouldn’t. I flew 8
hours and I’ve been drinking since 5:00.’ He said, ‘You’ve got to do it. You pick your
crews, you pick your wingmen, you pick your copilots, but you’ve got to go down there
because they Koreans are getting overrun.’ I said, ‘I can't do it.’ I guess I’m sure I
couldn’t do it. He said, ‘You’ve got to do it.’ I said, ‘No.’ He said, ‘Yes.’ And this is
somebody who later in life we became very close and we actually were relatively close
while I was there. He was a lieutenant colonel; I was a captain. As close as you can get in
that status. At any rate, I said, ‘Okay.’ At that stage of the game I was inebriated.

RV: He had to order you basically.
JA: Yeah. It may have ended up, ‘Would you please do it, John? I need you to do
this.’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ I can't recall. But the nature of it wasn’t really important to me at
the time and right now I don’t think it really is important. The fact of the matter was, he
wanted me to do this and he didn’t give me any alternatives and I didn’t give him any
alternatives either other than, how about…. He said, ‘No one else is available. We’re the
only ones who can do it and you're the best guy I got.' That’s a little self-serving but that also.

RV: But that’s what he said.

JA: Yeah. That’s why I was doing it. At any rate, how’s that for being self-serving? [chuckles] At any rate, ‘Okay, I want this guy, this guy, and this guy.’ I can remember the names but I won’t say them right now. Dave Ballentine, Barney Ross and I can't recall who the second copilot was. Of course, every squadron has a Barney Ross in it. It’s a famous aviation name, or so I’m told. At any rate, I walk out of the officer’s club, walk down the hill, sign the helicopter out, get briefed on where is it, what’s going on. The weather was terrible as always at that time of the year.

RV: What do you mean? What was going on? Was it raining?

JA: It was cloudy. I don’t know if it was cloudy or not. It might as well have been. I couldn’t see past my nose at the time. There’s a happy ending to the story obviously. At any rate, I signed the aircraft out, briefed, all four of us talked about what we were going to do, where we were going, what was going to happen, walked out to flight line, pre-flighted the helicopter, jumped into the right seat, co-pilot jumped in, crew chief and gunner jumped in, turned on the helicopter, made it go fast and bang. I was stone cold sober. Whether I really was or not is a physiological, perhaps a theological issue that we’ll never know but my senses were such that I knew what I was doing. I wasn’t shaky. I was positive. I will tell you this, it was not a false sense of security or euphoria because I was very alert to the dangers ahead. I said alert purposely. At any rate, talking on the radio regularly whereas in the officer’s club I was, you have a couple of extra drinks and you don’t talk regular. I talked on the radio well, did everything that I needed to do, end of story. I took off, went down there, shot it up with the bad guys, won the battle, turned around, came back, landed safely, soundly and lived happily ever after.

The commanding officer was there with a steak sandwich there for me when I got back. But that was one of my experiences with the Koreans that obviously wasn’t a real intimate experience with them face to face, but that’s one story that involves the Koreans that I do remember. As I say, whether or not I actually sobered up immediately, whether I had an adrenaline rush that did something physiologically to me, whether there was something beyond that magic or theological, I have no idea but I don’t remember pre-
flighting. Of course I don’t remember pre-flighting today anyway. But then I didn’t
remember pre-flighting although I knew I had because my copilot and I walked around
and talked to the crew chief about the helicopter and everything. But everything after I
had turned on the helicopter I can remember vividly, thankfully, because it gets a little
critical at the point in time. But that was just a very interesting experience.

RV: Did you fly one helicopter was it just whatever was available?
JA: Whatever was available.

RV: Could you tell differences between the helicopters?
JA: Yes, in some manner, in some ways. Primarily, some helicopters had
vibrations that were different from other helicopters. Some had more, some had fewer,
some were smooth ride, some were very rough ride, some were in between. Some had a
high frequency vibration, some had a lower frequency vibrations, but generally speaking,
the differences in the helicopters were unnoticeable.

RV: Okay. Why don’t we take a break?
JA: Sure.