

This interview is being conducted on Friday, August 23, 2024 at the home of James E. Johnson. My name is Fran Prokop and I'm speaking with Jim, who served in the United States Marine Corps and is a veteran of both the Viet Nam War and the Desert Storm Conflict. Jim learned of the Veterans' History Project through me, and he has kindly consented to participate in the National Archives Veterans' History Project. Here is his story:

Jim, when and where were you born?

I was born in Chicago at St. Bernard Hospital on February 18, 1949.

What were your parents' occupations?

My mom, she was just a homemaker; she stayed home with the three kids. My dad was a warehouse foreman.

How many sisters and brothers did you have?

I had two brothers, one younger, and I had an older brother who passed away when he was 12 years old from cancer.

Oh, sorry to hear that. Did you have any other family members serving in the military?

Yes. My Dad was in the Coast Guard during WWII. My Uncle Joe, who was my Dad's brother was in the Army Air Corps during WWII and actually became a Japanese POW.

Oh, okay, wow, but he survived?

Yeah, he survived it. My Godfather was in the Army, fought in Europe. And I know – think couple of my other uncles were in the military but not sure exactly what branches and that. My Dad had six other brothers.

So what did you do before entering the service?

I was actually in college, and I did two years at Lewis University over here in Romeoville, and then basically got tired of going to classes – extracurricular activities were more important at the time. I was on the wrestling team, the soccer team, and the Viet Nam War was the big thing going on in the world at the time. So I decided I was going to see what it was all about – so I enlisted in the Marine Corps.

So you enlisted, you were not drafted?

Right.

When did you enlist?

It was October of '68.

Why did you choose that specific branch of service?

Everybody always said that the Marine Corps was the best in everything, and I just figured that being with the Marine Corps I'd have a better chance of making it back.

And where did you go? Where did they send you?

So I went to boot camp at San Diego in California?

How did you get there?

We flew from, I believe it was Midway Airport – I'm not sure.

What was the camp? Which one was it?

The Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego. That was the boot camp.

How long was your boot camp?

Boot camp at that time was 13 weeks.

Was this your first time away from home?

Uh, no, 'cuz I lived on campus for two years at college.

How was your departure for training and your early days of training? How was boot camp?

It wasn't as bad as people make it out to be, at least the physical part. I was in really good shape at the time. Most of it was psychological – the other thing about being tired of going to school, 50% of boot camp is classes.

Ha, ha.

So you're learning everything about the Marine Corps, so you're in a classroom quite a bit.

And then you would actually do classes before you did anything out in the field, so it was a lot of classroom and a lot of yelling and screaming by the drill instructors.

How did you adapt to military life, like boot camp, how was the physical regimen, the barracks, the food, the social life?

The food was actually really good, I mean, I think I ate better there than anywhere else. In fact I gained weight while I was in boot camp. But to me it wasn't that hard to do. Living in the barracks was fine, you know, again I lived in the dorm and everybody left their doors open all the time, so there were always people coming and going. And living in a barracks you're with everybody, so everybody's in the same boat; everybody's doing the same thing' so you just go with the flow.

So you adapted to it pretty well – it didn't bother you at all.

Yeah, to me it wasn't a big deal.

And how was like a typical day – what time did you have to get up in the morning?

Oh, it was probably 4:30 -- 5 o'clock. First thing you did is you went outside and you PT'd for a little while. Then you marched over to the mess hall, you ate breakfast. After breakfast you marched back to the barracks area and then you just started whatever they were doing for that day – classroom or marching or whatever.

How about gunnery training or things like that? Bivouacs or things --

That came after boot camp. So the only thing related to combat basically in boot camp was, uh, the rifle range and learning about your weapon. And again, you had classes on that before you ever touched it. But once we were issued a weapon, we carried it with us every place we went; we never put it down. We also learned combat first aid.

And was that a rifle?

It was the M14 rifle.

You had to learn how to dismantle it, put it back together and all that stuff?

Oh, yeah, right.

So where did you serve? After boot camp –

After boot camp then we did one month of what was called ITR – Infantry Training Regiment – and I was a rifleman in the Infantry. And after ITR we did another month of what was called BITS – Basic Infantry Training – which was geared towards whatever your MOS was. I was a rifleman; other guys were machine gunners, mortar men, whatever.

So was that considered specialized training?

Not really. It was the same training all Marines go through.

Did you ever have any other specialized training?

Right. So after BITS training, then we went through what's called Staging Battalion, which is your last step before you go to your deployment. Staging Battalion was basically the same thing as BITS, but it was all geared toward Viet Nam. So we went through the Viet Nam village and they put us in a POW compound and most of it was all at night rather than during the day. Then after that we were supposed to go to Viet Nam; instead I got orders to go to Monterrey, California to an Army base where I spent three months learning to speak Vietnamese.

Did that come easy to you? Were you able –

Not really – but the way they teach it, it's 8 hours a day 5 days a week and I mean, they just –

Wow -- ram it down your throat.

Yeah, they did, basically ram it down your throat. And all the teachers were female Vietnamese women, so they were all wives of military people --

Oh, very proficient –

\And they brought them over to the States –

And they taught you?

Oh, yeah, so they knew exactly what we needed to know.

So that was specialized training.

Yeah.

Interesting. So that was three more months you spent there. So what happened after that?

After that then we flew to Japan for one day; from Japan we flew to Okinawa. We stayed in Okinawa for about a week and then from Okinawa we flew into Viet Nam.

Where in Viet Nam, do you remember?

So I landed – we went into Da Nang, which is in the northern part of the country in I Corps (phonetic). We sat on some bleachers outside, because we arrived at about 2 o'clock in the morning. We just sat out there all night and then in the morning they came and they called your name and they said 1st Division or 3rd Division – and I was with 3rd Division. Couple of hours later a truck came and everybody that was assigned to 3rd Division got on that truck and we went up to – Dong Ha (phonetic).

Was that your base?

That was, uh, the main rear area for the 3rd Marine Division. And then from Dong Ha we got trucked to Quang Tri – which is a little further north. Each time getting a little closer to the DMZ. And then we stayed at Quang Tri for about a week, getting acclimatized, carrying more and more weight and everything; issued all our combat gear.

Were they trying to make you speak Vietnamese?

No.

What dialect is that?

It's just Vietnamese. It's totally different than any other language. One thing that made it easier to learn the language was – they use the same alphabet we use. They don't use those weird Asian characters like China and Japan.

Right, yeah.

Because Viet Nam was settled by the French; the French – Vietnamese people had a language but they didn't have a written language. So the French missionaries developed the written language for them.

Oh, really?

And there's actually a lot of French terms and words in their language.

So you were there for a week in Quang Tri, you said.

Right. Then one day they put us on a helicopter and they choppered us out into the field – to the unit we were going to be with.

And what was that?

So I was with Bravo Company, First Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment. They flew us right into the middle of an ongoing combat operation.

And can you describe it, as best you can? What was your role?

It was basically toward the end of the operation and we weren't up in the mountains. It was kind of hilly territory. First time I was in the jungle. So, at first it was like, you know, this isn't too bad, you know. We're sitting out here; we're going camping every night; getting paid for it. But then the mosquitos started and humidity and the heat, and just the weight of everything we were carrying – and after a while it was just miserable.

And were you in combat? Were you getting shot at?

Eventually, yeah. So after – after that operation ended. We went to an area where we were doing security for a bridge – Ke Gia – Ke Gia (phonetic) Bridge, which was across the Cam Lo River. There were some CBs (Sea Bees) there and they were actually paving part of the highway. And there was just a – one-lane highway basically, and it was going all up into the mountains, but it was one of the main arteries of that part of the country. And so we did security at the bridge. We did patrols every night and during the day.

What did those patrols consist of? How long were they? How long did they last?

Patrols, during the day, were anywhere from 2 to 3 hours. We would go out and set up ambushes; at night the same things. We'd walk down the middle of the road at night, you know, hoping to catch the NVA troops. But we never really had any problems. And then, couple weeks later, they started Operation Idaho Canyon – and then that one was pretty bad.

What happened during that one?

So we left the bridge. We left humpin' – we walked up into the mountains, kept going further north, and higher and higher – further north towards – we operated just below the DMZ, you know, around 1,000 meters – and the first battle that was really bad, I believe, was on Hill 400,

in an area called Mutter's Ridge, and we got attacked at about 3 o'clock in the morning and it didn't end until it got light out, around 6. And that's when we were able to bring jets in and use close air support. We ended up – three Marines being killed, 40 wounded, and one of the killed was our Company Commander.

Oh, wow – company Commander.

And then after that, you know, every day you humped to another hill, set up your defenses, and then they hit us almost every other night or every two nights, for about two weeks straight.

That was all this Operation Idaho?

Yes, Idaho Canyon – and it was getting to the point where we couldn't get resupplied, because it was too dangerous to bring helicopters in – uh –

How many men were there in this operation?

We – our company had about 120 Marines; so none of the Marine companies that we knew of had the total number of Marines that you're supposed to have. So everybody operated short-handed – and that was just typical at the time. But, you know, we weren't getting a lot of sleep; were only eating two times a day. At one point we went three days with no food or water.

Wow! And you were on the move all that time?

The whole time. You moved every day to another location and you just kept dealing with it.

So you're on foot – moving?

Yes.

And you said you were a rifleman – were you in the front?

No, not – sometimes – once in a while I would walk point. But everybody took turns and –

So did you encounter any ambushes on your part, that you were in?

Well, during those couple of weeks, yeah, we walked into an ambush – which was unusual. It was during the daytime; most of the fighting we did was always at night. They would attack us at night because during the day we could bring in air strikes and artillery strikes, where at night it was much more difficult to do that, 'cuz it was hard to get a really good location to where you were at in the jungle, 'cuz there was really nothing to see except jungle.

Right. So you could never use tanks or anything like that –

No. The terrain there was no way you could use tanks up in that area. But the ambush we walked into – we had gotten up in the morning and were getting ready to move out, and they - hit us with mortars, and luckily no one got killed or injured – but where the enemy mortar

position was actually spotted by OV-10 reconnaissance plane that was flying in the area. So they radioed to us the location and they sent our platoon to go and get rid of them – to destroy that location. On the way there, was no problem; we got there, we found the location, but they were gone. They took off, which is typically what they would do most of the time. They would hit and run, except for that night on 400 where they just stayed all night long. But then on the way back – we were going back to where the rest of the company was, where we got mortared, and then they ambushed us on the way back. We ended up with only two Marines being wounded, and we ended up killing 12 NVA soldiers.

How did you feel about that – both our guys getting wounded and you killing other people? What were your emotions? Can you describe them?

Yeah, I mean, so – we know we're going to fight a war, and that's what happens. People get killed.

Right.

And so, for us killing them, it was not a big deal. It was either them or us, you know, and it was payback for Hill 400.

Of course.

As far as yourself or your friends getting killed, you don't really worry about it because you never think it's going to happen to you, you know, I t's gonna be somebody else. Somebody in another platoon or this or that –

Yeah, but your Company Commander –

-and when it does happen to somebody you know, it's rough.

Like your company Commander – everybody knew him.

Right, but you can't really have time to mourn or do anything because you have to finish the battle and then as soon as the battle's over, you're picking everything up and you're moving somewhere else, and you really don't have time to even think about it until you have some real downtime and that's when it hits you.

So when you were doing this was it -- were you going into any villages or was it just strictly mountainous territory – nobody lived there –

Later on we went into some villages.

But right now you were describing killing troops.

Right, right. So once that operation was over, then they choppered us – got on helicopters and they flew us back to Quang Tri, and then the unit I was with – 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines – they actually were ordered to leave Viet Nam. And so, I had been there with them for about four, maybe five months, and the guys that didn't have enough time to go home, they transferred us to another unit. So I was

transferred to a 1st Marine Division with 1st Marine Regiment at a place called Hill 55 – and that was a – basically a semi-rear area for the 1st Marine Regiment. And I was a squad leader with a security platoon.

What was your rank at this time?

I was a Lance Corporal when I got to Viet Nam and I got promoted twice while I was there, so I left as a Sergeant after one year.

You got battlefield promotions?

No, they're not necessarily battlefield promotions, but they're just – every so many months if you have the right qualifications and all that, you'll get promoted.

So how long were you there – 4 or 5 months in Viet Nam when you were transferred –

With the 3rd Marines —

Right, and then you went to the 1st.

Then I went to the 1st Marines.

That's when you went to Hill 55.

Right.

Okay, so what happened –

So Hill 55 – we just basically did security of the hill itself, uh, which we built bunkers, we maintained them. I think we had, say, 24 bunkers on the perimeter – it was a pretty big area. It was actually an ARVIN – South Vietnamese Army – they had an artillery unit – 105 mm artillery. The Marine Corps had 155mm artillery and 175mm artillery. And then there was a POW compound, a small one, and the number of villages that were all around the hill. And we would go out and patrol the villages. We would go out at night and set up the listening posts and just spend the night outside the perimeter.

Were civilians getting killed in this too?

Oh, yeah. Not by us. We never encountered any civilians –

No, as a collateral –

Oh, yeah, right. And so the – the local villages – the fact that I was able to speak Vietnamese helped a lot.

Oh, yeah.

So I worked with the S-5 office which was Civilian Affairs – so we would go to the villages –

You were an interpreter.

Exactly – talk with the people and that. We also had a Vietnamese interpreter who went with us all the time. And we just see how the people were doing and see what they needed. All at the same time, you know, checking things out to make sure there were no enemy hiding in the villages.

Were you injured ever, at all?

I – on Hill 400 – that first big battle, I got hit in the leg with shrapnel. I didn't even realize it, to tell the truth. When I got hit I thought I got a cramp in my leg and it wasn't until the next morning when I was sitting in the dirt cross-legged and I noticed that my pants were ripped and it was full of blood –

Oh, my God!

And I was like, you gotta be kidding me – ha, ha

Where were you hit – in the leg?

In the thigh.

Did you have a medic out there – or what happened?

Oh, no, it was – I mean, that was it. It was perfectly fine, so it must have been a very small piece of shrapnel --

So you think you just got grazed?

-That probably ricocheted off of something else or went through something else before it hit me.

Was it in you or did you get grazed?

No, it just hit me, cut me and then fell out, you know, so it was not a big deal.

Did you report this?

Yeah, everybody knew about it. And those things happen to everyone. Everybody had cuts all over; everybody had bruises. If you got a cut just from elephant grass or some kind of thorns or whatever, within a day it would be infected and you would get what was called jungle rot. Everybody had that.

Really! I heard of that, so that's what that actually is.

Yeah. In fact when I came home from Viet Nam I still had some jungle rot on the back of my head and neck.

Really.

And there was really no way to do anything about it, you know, other than try to keep it moist,, which wasn't hard to do because when the monsoons came, we were soaking wet constantly – all the time.

Wow! Sounds pretty miserable.

It was miserable, ha, ha, and the food was nothing to brag about, because we ate the old C-rations, which in a way were better than the MREs they have now because it was real food that was in cans, and it tasted just like real food. You'd learn how to put together different concoctions and cook it up and that, you now.

Could you heat that up?

You could; you heat it up in the can. We actually had what were called heat tabs. It was a compressed chemical and you would light it with a match and it would burn with a really hot flame. The flame was actually so you couldn't tell that it was burning; but that's what you used to heat up your food. Of course, you couldn't do that at night. You could only have a fire or cooking anything during the daytime, if you had time to do it. Most of the time we ate our food cold, so, but – again, you got used to it because it's the only thing you had.

So if you were fighting at night were you sleeping in the daytime?

No. During the daytime we were humpin', so

So you only could sleep – catch as catch can.

You tried to sleep – tried to get as much sleep as you could at night and when you were on watch we would have four Marines in a fighting position; three would be sleeping and one would be on watch and you would just rotate all night long.

Hmm – and what was the watch like, two hours?

About that, yeah.

So how long did you continue doing this? Like after Hill 55?

For the first 4 or 5 months we did that every night. It was every night non-stop. Once we got to Hill 55 then it was a lot easier because we had enough guys on the perimeter where you could actually get a good night's sleep – unless you had to go out.

What did you have to go out for?

Again, just do night patrols in the area, right along the perimeter and for the listening posts – LPs.

And this was all in 1968 – '69.

'69 and '70.

Most of what you're describing took place in 1969 and '70?

Right. Right. And then after Hill 55 we actually moved to another area that was northeast of there. It was a ridge line where they had 4 OPs on top of the mountain tops. And we were manning those OPs – Observation Point or Post – and the whole purpose of that was it's like the outer defense of Da Nang so we were actually watching for rockets being fired from the NVA into the Da Nang area.

Could those rockets be intercepted like they do today?

No, no.

At that time there was nothing –

At the time there was no intercepting rockets.

So what could you do if you did see a rocket?

You could just report it and try to get an azimuth as to where it was fired from in relation to where we were at and then they would try to figure – depending on what kind of rocket it was – how far it was from us and they would try to figure out where they were coming from.

So did you witness a lot of destruction of the villages and things like that?

No villages, no. We never destroyed any villages. I heard of – so we had an incident where we were told that a unit was gonna be coming onto Hill 55 and we were not to talk with them or have any interaction with them at all.

Why?

They were gonna be there for a couple of nights –

An American unit?

No, no. So there were about 12 or 13 of them and they were all Asian; some of them were Vietnamese, I believe there were some Koreans, Philippines, but they were all Asian men; they had weapons that the Viet Cong and the NVA carried. They had no uniforms; some of them wore them black pajamas like the 'enemy' some wore different types of camouflage and it was just a mix of all different uniforms – and the first night they were gonna go out and do a reconnaissance patrol. And again, because I spoke Vietnamese, they grabbed me and some other Marines and we were gonna go down to the perimeter with a radio and just monitor their radio traffic to see what was going on. So after it got dark this unit went out and – uh, didn't come back until the next morning, but from the radio traffic that we monitored, they were approaching a village, from what they told us as they were approached the village the dogs started barking and all of a sudden they were just fired on from all over and they never fired back; they kept quiet. One of their guys was wounded in the arm and then they just slowly broke contact and made their way back to the Hill – to Hill 55 – and they were about half a mile

into the Hill – half a mile away – and they couldn't carry this guy any more. He was bleeding really bad, so they had us go out and help them come back in. We brought him to the Aid Station; they got him Medivac'd out – and I asked the Sergeant who was in charge of that squad, I said, "Well, now what happens-- What are you gonna do?" And he said, "We're gonna go back in a couple of weeks with my whole platoon and we're gonna destroy that village."

Oh –

So that was all – that had nothing to do with the United States.

Wow!

From what I had read years later, I started researching who these guys were, and they basically worked for the CIA.

No kidding.

They were a covert unit that because of –

Of different nationalities –

-they couldn't be linked to the U.S., you know., Then about a month later, that Sergeant – Sergeant Troung and the other guy that had been wounded, they came back and were at the S-5 Office and they called me up there and they just wanted to thank me for helping them out. Which I thought was pretty cool, you know.

Wow!

But the one thing that got to me, you know – when you're fighting a war people are gonna get killed. The thing that bothered me was how many guys got killed just by accidents, which had nothing to do with combat.

Accidents of their own making?

No – uh

Accidents of machinery breaking or –

Yeah, yeah, I mean, we had one incident where they were supplying the Ops with a helicopter and it crashed and six Marines got killed.

Accidental –

Right, right. There was another incident when we were on Hill 55 where we were going out to our bunker for the night and one of the Marines had an accidental discharge with an M-79 grenade launcher and hit another Marine in the forehead and killed him. So – I mean in a way that could sort of be combat-related, but not from the enemy.

Right, friendly fire.

Friendly fire, exactly.

How about friendships formed and camaraderie of service – did you meet any guys that you are still in contact with after you came back home?

There was one who lived in Lowell – Michigan, which is right outside of Grand Rapids. We had gotten together. I went up to his farm and stayed with him for a week, then he came back to Chicago and lived with me for about a month. Actually got a job where I was working for a little bit. But he was like the only one. We were from all over the place, and the thing is, you didn't go over with a bunch of guys, you know, and stay with them the whole time.

Right. You move around, and they moved around too.

Right.

And you were integrated.

Everybody left at different times; they didn't leave at the same time. The only thing that was really cool was the guys that I was in language school with – we all went over together and then we basically all came back at the same time and so when we left Viet Nam we flew to Okinawa which is where all our equipment and everything was at – all our Marine Corps gear – and they all showed up in Okinawa. So everyone of those guys made it back.

How many of those guys were there?

There were, I think, 30 of us.

They all learned to speak Vietnamese.

Yeah, we all ended up in Okinawa together and it was like Wow – you're okay, yeah. So that was pretty cool.

Interesting. How were communications from home at this time? How did you stay in touch with family and friends?

Just writing letters.

Just letters – no phone calls or anything?

No, no phone calls.

How long do you think it took a letter to get to Viet Nam from the States?

At least a couple of weeks, for sure.

And vice versa too – going the other way?

Right, yeah. Every now and then you'd get a CARE package from somebody, you know, chocolate chip cookies or whatever.

Yeah, I'm sure they were important at that time.

Right.

Being that you were in actual combat, you had no time for recreational or off-duty pursuits.

No, not until we got to Hill 55. Hill 55 – then we had some, you know, some down time – between building bunkers and that?

What would you do?

We would play football –

Oh, you did –

Using a canteen for a football, ha, ha –

Nothing organized, just something that sprang up.

Right, right. And they actually had a small club, enlisted men's club where you could go and, you know, get a beer at night or some pop, and every now and then they would show a movie.

Current movie? Or oldies?

I couldn't even tell you. I don't remember.

Okay. So how long did you stay in Viet Nam, the first time you were there –

\It was 12 months. In fact, I landed in Viet Nam on July 4th, 1969.

1969 – but you were in the service from '68.

Yeah, yeah.

How long were you there till?

Till July like 5th, 1970 – that was exactly a year.

So exactly one year – and you were there doing these different hills and all the stuff you described.

Right. Normally, for some reason, all the services that went to Viet Nam were there for 12 months. It was a 12-month stay. The Marine Corps actually stayed for 13 months – and there was a big to-do about that. So while I was there they actually changed it from 13 to 12 months – so I was only there for 12 months.

I think 12 months is long enough when you're going through stuff like this.

Oh, it's definitely long enough, right. The last thing they do before you're getting ready to leave is – you have to see your recruiter, and it's like Do you want to reenlist? -- ha ha – like NO.

Are you kidding? After all that, ha ha

'Cuz my original enlistment was for two years – two years active duty and then four years Reserves.

So you had two years in now, didn't you?

Yeah, so I had my two years – actually it was just under two years by the time I got back to Camp Pendleton, back to the States, and , uh, there's really nothing else – no assignments they can do or anything like that, so you're basically they just left you out.

So they let you out?

Yeah, it was just under two years –

So they let you go –

They let us out, you know, and you were assigned to the Inactive Reserve. So you didn't go to any meetings; you didn't do anything; you were just a number. And then after four years, you receive your DD-214 and your discharge papers in the mail.

Ooh, that's how that works, huh?

Yeah.

After four years of inactive?

Right.

So you received it in the mail. Wait a minute – how did you get home from Camp Pendleton?

We flew – yeah, we flew home.

And you were discharged; you came home and you were home.

Right.

What did you do – you did go back in, I know you said –

Yeah, that was not till 12 years later though. So right after that I just got a job, like everybody else, in fact, my Dad got me a job in the warehouse that he managed.

Wait, did you ever use the GI Bill or anything?

No. No.

Never?

I think the first house we bought I used it – but not for schooling.

Not for education.

Because at that time the colleges hated Viet Nam veterans.

Yeah, coming back home was not always welcome for the Viet Nam veterans. How did you feel coming back home? Did you have any problems?

No, not really; not really.

Some people said – some of the guys I spoke to said that if you had your uniform on at the airport people were spitting at you or calling names – things like that --

Right. No, we never – didn't have a problem – and you know, once you're home you took the uniform off and you were just another guy on the street.

Right, yeah. Okay, so you didn't use the GI Bill at first. Just continue with your story – you got married then and then used the GI Bill?

Right, got married, and like I said, I used the GI Bill for – to buy a house, which basically if you really think about it, is not a big deal. There's nothing great about it because the whole thing is you could buy a house without a down payment. But if you do that, your payment for your mortgage is actually higher.

Right. So what does the GI Bill do? Is that your down payment, if you use it?

No, there is no down payment; so you just start paying your mortgage but you don't have to make a down payment.

Oh, okay. That's the GI Bill?

Right. That's part of it. The other part is the education, for school.

So how was your reception by family and friends when you got home?

Uh, it was good; it was good. I think the first thing my Mom asked me is what do you want to eat? And I said let's go to McDonald's. She said, no, no, no, we're gonna take you home and I'm gonna cook you something.

So, have you been in contact with any fellow veterans over the years other than the guy I Wisconsin, I mean Michigan, that you spoke of?

Well, not from back then. But after I went in the second time –

Okay, let's go into that. Did you stay working at this warehouse until you went back into the service?

Basically, yeah. I worked there and I worked at a couple other places. And then in 1982, I decided I was going to go back into the Marine Corps and I think a lot of it had to do with – there was a lot of controversy about the war, everybody knew that, and at one point I had read or heard something where, you know, you shouldn't be proud of what you did, and all that

stuff. So I put away all my stuff and forgot about it. And then a couple of years later, it was no, you should be proud of it, so I took all my stuff back out again and displayed it – and I said, you know what, I’m gonna go back in the Marine Corps. I think part of it had to do with – I was watching some documentaries on TV about the current military – and how bad some of it was. And I was like – these guys don’t know what the hell they’re doing. I said I could probably teach them something. And so I decided to join the Marine Corps Reserve and that was in, I believe, again in October of ’82.

So you just were prompted on your own to reenlist in the military?

Right, yeah, yeah. And I said, you know, think about it – I said I could go do one weekend a month; we can go camping and shooting and all this stuff that Marines do and get paid for it, you know, and not be in a war. So that’s a great deal.

So what did you do?

So that’s what I did. I enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve - 2nd Battalion, 24th Marines up on the north side of Chicago.

Where did you have to report? Is there an armory there?

Yeah, yes, used to be on Foster Avenue. It’s not there any more. So we went there – I went there one weekend a month and then for two weeks every year we had what was called “annual training” – and we would either go – Fort McCoy, Wisconsin. Sometimes we’d go all the way out to Camp Pendleton, California – Camp Lejeune, North Carolina – we went all over. In fact we went to Norway –

Really!!

For one of the exercises –

Which one was that – do you remember?

Oh, I –

\And how long were you in Norway?

For two weeks.

Oh, so the two weeks you would have spent here you spent in Norway.

Right, we went to Norway – we were 150 miles north of the Arctic Circle and 300 miles from Russia. (turn tape)

Repeat of what Jim did in Norway for those two weeks.

What we did was – the Norwegians and the Marine Corps were basically responsible for keeping the Russian Arctic Fleet from getting out into the Atlantic. Because they had the

capabilities and the weapons along their coast to make that happen. So we were there training with the Norwegians, seeing how all that worked.

So you were on their ships, more or less?

We were in – actually in Norway on the ground.

Oh, you were on the ground.

Along the fjords and all that. And it was cold; it was in February – February just north of the Arctic Circle and we basically lived outside.

Wow! And what was your job here in this country? What were you doing while you were in the Reserves?

So, I was a squad leader and later a Platoon Sergeant for, I don't know if they still have these units; they were called Surveillance and Target Acquisition; that job was basically Battalion reconnaissance. So we would go out forward of our battalion and try to find the enemy and if we did our job was to get as close as we could and then call in what kind of weapons they had, how many of them there were – what were they doing and then the battalion would decide whether they want to hit them with an air strike or artillery or whatever. So that's what that job was all about. And it was probably one of the best jobs I had in the Marine Corps – because we got to do a lot of things that regular Marines didn't get to do.

Did you have other two-week forays like this?

Oh, yeah, like I said – we went all over – all over the country –

And on those other two-week outings did you do basically the same type of thing?

Right, yeah.

So that was your job – the whole time – that you would go off – and that was like once a year

Yeah, once a year – and sometimes – sometimes you could volunteer – if there was something going on that you were interested in – some type of exercise – you could volunteer to do another two weeks, which I did a few times.

Was it always in the winter that you took off, these two weeks?

No. Most of the time it was in the summer.

Oh, it just happened to be when you were in Norway –

Right. Like when we would go to 29 Palms, California in the Mohave Desert – they would always send us there in the summertime when it was so hot that the regular Marines didn't want to train – so we would go when they weren't there.

Wow!!

And unlike Viet Nam, it was hot and dry; it was like an oven. But at one time I got the opportunity where I was selected as one of ten Marines to go on an Exchange Program with the British Royal Marines.

Hmmm!

So I went, flew to England, from England they flew us – I joined up with a Scottish Rifle Company that were part of the British Royal Marines. And from England we went to Denmark where we trained for a week on a Danish Army Base and then after training there, we got on a British Ship, assault ship – we went out into the Atlantic and we did an amphibious landing in Germany. And we did a NATO exercise in Germany for a week and then flew back to England and back to the States.

Wow! But this was all the while you had a regular job here?

Yes, yes.

What was your job here?

Again, I worked in warehouses.

So you worked in warehouses but you were able to take off these two weeks – they have to give it to you.

Right, I would use my vacation time. They had to give it to you, but they didn't have to pay you for it.

Just like jury duty.

So I would take my vacation time and go do Marine Corps stuff.

How did your wife feel about that?

She didn't mind at all. We had three kids; my Mom lived upstairs so we had a built-in babysitter. Lot of our family lived in the neighborhood, so I mean, you know, it was--

It worked out.

Yeah, it all worked out.

You certainly got to see the world.

Oh, yeah.

You saw many countries –

Yep – I believe I was in 12 different countries I got to go to while I was in the Marine Corps.

And we're coming up to some of those other countries.

Okay, so keep going – how long were you in the Reserves?

So I retired in 2001 – so it was a total of 21 ½ years – not in the Reserves but Reserves and active duty.

Right. And what did you retire as – what rank?

I was a Sergeant Major when I retired. So I went from the lowest private to the highest enlisted rank there was.

Wow! Sergeant Major –

And then came 1990 –

So what happened in 1990?

Well, this guy named Saddam Hussein decided to invade Kuwait.

Right. And you were in the Reserves.

Right. So, we wanted to go. We were, you know, every month it was like – when are we going – when are we going – and they said well, you guys probably aren't going to go. So sitting at home one day and my company commander called me up and he said, "Jimmy, Saddam Hussein is throwing a party and we're invited." Ha, ha.

Ha, ha, Wow!

And I said, when are we going? So he gave me the date and it was – we were home for thanksgiving, and I think it was two weeks after that; we reported at Foster Avenue and they flew us to Camp Lejeune where we started training.

That was in December of 1990?

Yes, 1990.

So you flew to Camp Lejeune.

We were at Camp Lejeune – we trained there for, not very long –

Well, you were already trained but they had to give you some additional training –

Yeah, well, this is now -- gearing up to fight Iraq. Everything about how they fought, how many troops they had, what kind of weapons they used, what their vehicles looked like and all this.

So you had a lot of classroom training?

Right. Again, it was a lot of classroom training. The only other field training we did was basically on the rifle ranges – shooting.

Were you a sharp shooter?

I shot expert a couple times. So, when we left Camp Lejeune it was New Year's Eve and we were actually over the Mediterranean Ocean when it turned from 1990 to 1991.

You were flying --

Yes, it was a 13-hour flight when we landed in Saudi Arabia.

Continue --

And then, again, just more training -- getting ready. Every couple of weeks we would move further north, further north, towards Kuwait, towards the border --

What did you do for those couple of weeks?

Again, it was training -- classes --

Oh, just more training --

Radio classes and all that kind of stuff. And then President Bush gave Saddam Hussein the ultimatum, you know, either out by this date and if not, you know, we're going to invade.

Was that Operation Desert Storm?

That -- when we arrived there it was Desert Shield; that was basically defending Saudi Arabia. The deadline came and went; we never did anything. So Saddam figured, Aah, they were bluffing. The next night they bombed the living crap out of them non-stop. And once they started, I mean, it was almost a month -- non-stop bombing, day and night.

They bombed Iraq --

No, they bombed Kuwait --

Oh, because he was taking over Kuwait -- he invaded Kuwait.

They were -- the Iraqis basically destroyed Kuwait before we got there.

Oh.

And so they bombed them day and night, non-stop. And then about a month later, Bush gave Saddam another ultimatum. If you don't start pulling out by this date, there's going to be a ground invasion. And that time we actually invaded a day before the ultimatum -- day before the deadline we actually crossed the border. So we went -- my platoon went -- they gave us a heavy weapons section from weapons company and then a radio section from our company and we actually crossed the border into Kuwait and captured El Jabir Airfield without ever firing a shot.

Oh, Wow!

It was after being bombed for 30 days – they had no desire to fight. Soon as they seen us coming they dropped their weapons, put their hands up – they did not want to fight us.

They surrendered – so you got the airfield.

Right.

So who went to look for Saddam?

Oh, that – he wasn't captured till years later.

Oh, years later? When was he captured?

He was captured years later because once the ground invasion started, that's when they started to leave.

Yeah.

And that's when they burned all the oil wells; set all the oil wells on fire.

Saddam did.

Yeah, yeah. Iraqi troops set all the oil wells – they figured if we can't have the oil, no one's gonna have it. So they set it all on fire. I got pictures of that; all the burning oil wells.

What did – when they surrendered at the airfield, you just captured the airfield and –

Well, that then gave our aircraft, especially helicopters, someplace to land further north, inside Kuwait. And they could go further north from there. The main part of the battle was way to the west with the Army, with their tanks.

How long did that last?

It only lasted a couple days; they surrendered in no time – 'cuz they were trying to leave – it was called – there was only one highway – in the eastern part of Kuwait that went straight up north into Iraq, and that was the highway they were on, trying to get out of there, and our airplanes bombed them non-stop until Bush said, that's it; it's over. We can't bomb them anymore.

But he wasn't captured then.

No, no, he wasn't captured until the next war.

Yeah.

The second Iraq war.

Okay, that was the first Iraq war. So how long were you there in Kuwait?

In Kuwait only, I think we were there for three days only, and then we went back into Saudi Arabia and waiting for a flight home.

Oh, so you were done with it then?

Yeah, so we were only gone for six months.

So this whole time –

Yeah, Desert Shield, Desert Storm – we were only gone for six months.

And how was the temperature there? How did you cope? What were the conditions?

Believe it or not, so we were in the middle of the desert, I actually kept track on my calendar, it rained just as many days as it was dry.

Really!!

And at night it got cold enough for water to freeze –

No kidding!!

And in the day time it was unbelievably hot. Which is what makes a desert a desert: its extreme temperatures.

That's true. But was that like almost winter weather there?

Not really winter weather, but it got cold enough for your water to freeze in your canteen. You know, then as soon as the sun came up, everything was back – hot again.

Now did you lose any men there?

No, none.

So no Americans –

Well, there were some Americans killed, but none from our unit.

Your whole troops came back.

I think – the worst injuries we had were sprained ankles and broken fingers from playing baseball – after it was all over we were waiting for a flight home –

Did they have any organized sports or this just came up suddenly --

No, this was just – actually we had a softball that someone has brought with him and we used an axe handle for a bat, ha, ha.

Ha, ha, ingenuity, you now. So you came back home. You just stepped into your job. It's not like you were –

Yeah, and that home coming was really nice.

Oh, how was it?

It was great.

Now what year was that?

That was 1991.

Do you remember what month? Is it on your DD-214?

Jim has one of his DD-214s – he has two of them.

Okay, from November '90 until May of '91 – five months.

More like six months. How about your – why don't you read me your medals and honors and awards received?

Oh, well, --

That's for this -- I don't know what you had for your other ones.

I could actually show you the medals.

I want it on tape – so

Oh, God, I'd have to get the list and read it.

You've got it there – just say the ones from there. You can give e the other ones later.

All right. National Defense Service Medal, Second Award; Southwest Asia Service Medal; Sea Service Deployment Ribbon, and two medals from Saudi Arabia that we were given.

If you have others that you can get – he has a list – Jim will list the other medals and awards that he received.

So the highest medal I got was a Bronze Star Medal with Combat V; I've got the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal; I have two of those. Selected Marine Corps Reserve Medal, five of those. National Defense Medal, with one star, which means I went twice. Viet Nam Service Medal with two stars, Southwest Asia Service Medal with one star; Armed Forces Reserved Medal with the Hourglass and an M, Viet Nam Campaign Medal, Republic of Viet Nam Gallantry Cross with Frame and Palm; Saudi Arabia Liberation of Kuwait Medal; Kuwait Liberation Medal; Navy and Marine Corps Combat Action Ribbon; Navy unit Commendation Ribbon, Navy Meritorious Unit Commendation Ribbon with one Star and the Navy Sea Service Deployment Ribbon.

Good; I'm glad you got that all on tape.

Yeah, so when I received my Bronze Star Medal, it was about two or three months after I was home from Viet Nam and I got a phone call from the AFEES station from downtown Chicago; they wanted me to come down there and they said wear your uniform. So I said okay, whatever. So I went down there; I

had relatively long hair, ha, ha, ha, and they had me stand at attention and some guys came into the room and they started reading the citation for the Bronze Star, and I'm thinking, when the hell did I do that? They were like all thrilled about it and I said, I didn't do anything different than anybody else; we were all doing the same thing. But for some reason somebody wrote me up for it and –

That's nice; you were recognized for it. I'm sure that the other guys who were there – hopefully they got theirs too.

I'm sure they – hope they got their share of the awards. I'm sure they did. The one medal that I don't have and that I never wanted was a Purple Heart.

Yeah, well, you did get wounded, but you didn't really report it.

Well, in our unit, actually, if your wound wasn't bad enough to get medivac'd and brought to the hospital, you didn't get a Purple Heart. Nowadays they give guys a Purple Heart for a scratch.

Yeah, but you were wounded by shrapnel, so it's not like you weren't.

Well, I'll tell you, some of the cuts and jungle rot were worse than that.

So how long did that jungle rot stay with you, now that you mention it again, when you got home?

Uh, a few weeks; few weeks. Once you were someplace where you could stay clean, you know, and put something on it, then it would go away.

Put something on it, salve or something –

Right, 'cuz you really couldn't stay clean in the jungle; it was impossible.

Okay, we've gotten through quite a bit – now, did you use the GI Bill after you came out of Reserves?

No, no, I just used it that one time to buy the house.

And did you ever – are you using VA Services today?

I have gone to the VA for x-rays and treatments and stuff. I've got really bad arthritis in all my joints, lower back bothers me all the time. My doctor tells me you're perfectly healthy, there's nothing wrong with you. And I say to her well, why doesn't everything hurt? Ha, ha

Right, because of your age, that's why, ha, ha. Are you a member of any Veterans organizations today?

No, I don't.

Do you still today have contact with fellow veterans?

Yes, Jack Persin.

Oh Jack, were you in the service with him?

No, but he's a veteran.

Oh, I understand, but I mean men that you served with.

Oh, yeah, there is a bunch of us that still get together now and then.

Do you have reunions?

Not reunions – but they'll do golf outings and we'll go to the shooting range – things like that.

Okay -- so there are guys.

There are guys.

How do you think that your military experience affected your life?

Basically I learned that I could do almost anything. In fact when I got back from Viet Nam I thought that I was infallible; I went sky diving; I did everything. I figured if they couldn't kill me there, they couldn't kill me period.

Right, right. So any life lessons learned from military service?

That people can endure a lot more than they think they can and that it's not all physical – it's usually mental when I person gives up. Yeah, you can endure a whole lot more than you think you can. And I think just my work ethic. I mean, right now I've been working part time at Home Depot in the Lumber Department. I've been there for 3 and a half years; never missed a day of work and was never late.

You just work part time?

Yeah, right.

It's good to keep active; it truly is.

Well, and that's one of the reasons why I did it. So when I retired from the last job, after six months I literally got bored. I did everything I wanted to do, and I said I gotta do something to stay active. I gotta stay in shape, so I said I'm gonna get a part-time job, you know.

Does your wife work or anything?

No, no.

Well, you could play golf too, but not every day, that's for sure.

Yeah, right.

Well, I think that's it, unless there's anything else that you wish to say – you've said plenty, a lot of things. Anything else you might want to include let me know, because I have to print

This up. I will send you a copy via email so you can check it for accuracy. Anyway if there's nothing else you want to add to the story, I want to thank you for this interview and thank you for your service to our country.

You're welcome.

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