

Gray County Veterans Memorial & Archive

ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

John C. Kelly

January 11, 2015



INTERVIEW
YEAR

John Charles Kelly
2015

GRAY COUNTY ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

NAME: **John Charles Kelly**

DATE: **January 11, 2015**

PLACE: **Cimarron, Kansas**

INTERVIEWER: **Janet Meadows**

PROJECT SERIES: **Vietnam Era Oral History
Project for Gray County**

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION:

John C. Kelly was born in Sac City, Iowa on September 17, 1948. His father farmed for a while and then was a salesman in the Sac City area. His mother was a homemaker. They moved to Denison, Iowa in 1963. His father served in WW II during the European Theater. John was the oldest of four children. After serving in Vietnam, John moved back to Denison, Iowa, where he married and had three children.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: John’s service to his country in the Vietnam War.

SOUND RECORDINGS: Digital

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 75 minutes

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: None

TRANSCRIPT: 27 pages

ORAL HISTORY
John C. Kelly
Interview Date: January 11, 2015

Interviewer: Janet Meadows (JLM)

Interviewee: John C. Kelly (JCK)

JLM – My name is Janet Meadows and I am doing an Oral History on my friend, John, for the Vietnam War. Ok John, can you tell me your full name and your address?

JCK – John Charles Kelly, 300 E. Court Street, Cimarron, Kansas.

JLM – And where were you born at?

JCK – Sac City, Iowa.

JLM – Is that where you grew up and went to school?

JCK – I grew up around the Sac City area. I went to different schools up in the same area.

JLM – Where did you graduate from High School?

JCK – Denison, Iowa.

JLM – Then after high school, did you immediately go to the Army or?

JCK – No, I worked for the Farmers Hatchery and Feed, running a portable grinder mixer. And then, I went to work at IBP in Denison, Iowa, until I got drafted.

JLM – So you were drafted, you did not volunteer or? Sign up?

JCK – No, I was drafted in 1968, June of '68.

JLM – And what year did you graduate from high school?

JCK – '66.

JLM – So, it was two years after graduation? Ok, so when you were drafted, where did they send you?

JCK – I went to Omaha, I processed into the Army, in Omaha, Nebraska. And then, I went to Fort Lewis, Washington for basic training.

JLM – Fort Lewis, Washington? And what all did you do in basic training, or what did they train you for?

JCK – Did a lot of push-ups and exercises. *(Laughs)*

JLM – (Laughs)

JCK – No, just basically military courtesy and all that good stuff.

JLM – So, after basic training, what happened? Where did you go?

JCK – I went to Fort Sill, Oklahoma for my AIT.

JLM – Which was, I mean, what is AIT?

JCK – Advanced Infantry Training, or advanced training. And, I got done with infantry or AIT training at Fort Sill and I was selected to go to an artillery school down there. I think that was a 13 week course.

JLM – That was in Fort Sill, Oklahoma?

JCK – Yeah. And then after I graduated from that, I was promoted to sergeant. And then I spent another, I forget how long down there, I was on an artillery board and we were testing out new weaponries and new modifications on several different things: trucks, self-propelled howitzers, different types of howitzers. And then, once I got done with that, I went home on leave before I went to Vietnam.

JLM – So, how much leave time did you have?

JCK – About three weeks.

JLM – When you were drafted, did you get to choose your branch of service?

JCK – No.

JLM – It was Army, and that was what it was?

JCK – Army, yeah.

JLM – When you went to Vietnam, how did you go? I mean, did you fly or?

JCK – Flew.

JLM – They flew you out of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City?

JCK – No, huh-uh. When I was home on leave, I spent some time with my folks in Denison, Iowa. And then I went to California, and spent a week out there with my girlfriend, we had went together all through high school and afterwards. She was living

in California with her folks then, they'd moved back there after high school. I spent some time with her. I was supposed to report to Oakland, California on a Friday to get processed in there and do all the paperwork and stuff before I went to Vietnam. I said "Hell, I ain't going to Vietnam on a weekend". *(Laughs)* So, I went up there on a Monday. I thought "what are they going to do, send me to Vietnam if I don't show up on time?", because I was headed there anyhow. Yeah, I got processed in in Oakland, then we flew over to Hawaii and got on a different plane, and then went to Vietnam.

JLM – So once you arrived in Vietnam, what was your job, did you know what you were going to do when you got to Vietnam?

JCK – No, huh-uh. I never knew. I had to get processed in and had to wait for orders of what outfit I was going to, where and when. It was about 3-4 days later, I was looking on the bulletin board, each day they'd post a roster telling people where they were going and my outfit was the 101st Airborne. I thought "shit, I've never jumped out of a plane before". *(Laughs)* They said "Well, you don't have to be airborne to belong to the 101st". So, when I got my orders to go up to the northern part of South Vietnam, I landed in Camp Evans, that was our base camp for the 101st. I had to wait for orders there to see which outfit I was going to. Because they'd had, this was right after Hamburger Hill happened, the outfit that I was assigned to, artillery outfit that I was assigned to, they had had a ground attack a few nights before. They were busy, any helicopters going out there, they were full with ammunition and re-supply stuff. So, I had to wait 3-4 days, before I ended up getting out to that fire base Currahee in the floor of A Shau Valley. All the time I was home on leave, that's all you read about was the A Shau Valley. And, I thought, "Shit, I hope I never end up there". Well, sure enough, right in the floor of the valley is where I ended up.

JLM – When you say when you was home on leave, do you mean when you left boot camp. And your three weeks home, is that what you're talking about?

JCK – No, when I got done with base camp, I didn't get a leave. I went straight to Fort Sill, Oklahoma. Then, I had a leave when I got done down there.

JLM – Right, and that's when you were reading about the A Shau Valley?

JCK – Yeah.

JLM – When you first got to Vietnam, where did you fly into? Where were you, when you were waiting those 3 days before?

JCK – Ben Wah, the southern part of Vietnam, down around Siagon.

JLM – Was that a military camp where you were at?

JCK – Yeah.

JLM – Do you remember the name of that one?

JCK – Just Ben Wah.

JLM – Just Ben Wah, ok. So, they posted your name on the bulletin board and then you went up to?

JCK – Camp Evans.

JLM – And you waited there?

JCK – Until I could get a ride on a helicopter out to this fire base Currahee.

JLM – Do you remember how long you had to wait?

JCK – 3-4 days, because, like I say, this was just after Hamburger Hill was done with and then they had that ground attack and they were busy re-supplying everything.

JLM – What did you do for those 3 days that you were waiting?

JCK – Nothing. *(Laughs)* Just waited.

JLM – *(Laughs)* Ok, so then you got your transport and then what happened?

JCK – I went to this fire base, artillery unit. I think it was A Battery, 2nd of 319th Artillery. And I was Chief of Section on one of the howitzers, the 102 Howitzer. And, I was there for 3-4 weeks, and then I got sent out to the jungle as a forward observer.

JLM – To try and find the enemy?

JCK – Well, to go along with an infantry outfit. In case they got in trouble, I could call artillery and stuff in. Helicopter gunships, airstrikes, whatever you needed.

JLM – So, as an observer, were you involved in fighting?

JCK – Well, yeah, if it came to it. But most of the time, I was talking on the radio, coordinating artillery and helicopter gunships. If it came down to where I was actually using a gun to shoot back and stuff that was a rare situation. Like I say, I was on a radio more than.

JLM – So, you did see combat?

JCK – Oh, yeah. Too much of the shit.

JLM – But, you said you were out there for like 3 weeks, or did I?

JCK – No, I was out there. I was with the artillery for about 3 weeks, then I went out to the jungle with the infantry. And I was out with the infantry until about the last month while I was Vietnam. So, I was out there with the infantry about 9-10 months.

JLM – The whole time, you never came back to a camp?

JCK – Well, yeah, once in a while you'd get back to Camp Evans, our base camp. Usually, they'd try and get you back maybe once a month, to get clean clothes and a hot shower. Otherwise, you just lived out in the jungle.

JLM – Can you tell me about living in the jungle? How you ate? How you drank? What kind of food did you?

JCK – We had C rations. About once a week, they'd send a re-supply chopper out and bring you out C rations. You'd carry about a week's supply of C rations with you.

JLM – Did you sleep in tents?

JCK – No, huh-uh. Out on the bare ground.

JLM – Did you have sleeping bags?

JCK – No, we had air mattresses, but we didn't air them up. Because you get them full of air and start rolling around, the squeaking noise, you know. So basically we just laid on the ground.

JLM – Do you know how close the enemy was out in the jungle?

JCK – Too damn close a lot of time! No, you had no idea where the "little people" were.

JLM – The "little people" being the North Vietnamese?

JCK – Yeah, or the Vietcong, South Vietnamese, Vietcong.

JLM – What about drinking water?

JCK – Oh, you got your water out of streams. You had water purification tablets you had to put in your canteens. Because, you didn't know if there were dead bodies or animals or what was upstream, so you had to use them purification tablets.

JLM – So, what if you got sick, what would happen?



JCK – Well, you'd just have to go back to base camp, go to a hospital, or something. Because, you can't be out in the jungle, sick.

JLM – So, when the helicopters came and picked you up and dropped you off, there was no place for them to land because you were in the jungle?

JCK – Well, yeah, there was. You either had to have engineers come out and make a LZ for you, clear out trees and stuff, make a big enough area for helicopters to land. Or else there was plenty of places that had been bombed out already that they could land. You never knew where the closest LZ would be to get there.

JLM – Did you ever have to jump out of the helicopter?

JCK – Well, yeah, they flew us in different times, and we were over tall elephant grass. They'd just hover above the top of that, and you'd jump out maybe 5-6 feet. If you didn't jump, they'd put door gunners and push you out. Because they didn't want them helicopters sitting there any longer than they had to. Be like a sitting duck.

JLM – Was there any time that you were shot at while you were being picked up or dropped off?

JCK – A couple of times. When we flew into a, what they called a combat assault, a CA, they would, artillery and helicopter gunships would fire artillery rounds and our gunships would shoot rockets and stuff around the whole perimeter where we were going to be landing, in case there was any enemy there, to kind of scare them away or at least let them know that something was coming.

JLM – Tell me about your most memorable experience.

JCK – Probably a ground attack one night on fire base Berchtesgaden. The infantry outfit that I was with, we went up to that base camp, artillery fire base, to provide security for the artillery. Every night, at different times of the night, we would do what was called a "mad minute". Everybody around the perimeter would open up with machine guns, rifles, throw hand grenades, flares, just to see if any Vietnamese were in the wire. And, we did that every night, at different times during each night so there never was no set pattern. This one particular night, we decided to have a "mad minute" about 3 minutes after the previous one. That's when I heard gooks in the wire. That's when the shit started happening. That was about 3 o'clock in the morning when it started. By 6:30, 7 o'clock in the morning, it was pretty well over with. That's where I got shrapnel in me. That's where, I was on one side of the fire base, calling in artillery and then we started getting mortar rounds coming in on us. So, I went across the fire base to the other side and spotted where these mortar flashes were coming from. I called in artillery on them, and knocked that position out. One of them mortars landed in a fox hole and killed three of our guys. And, went on patrol the next morning after things



quieted down, the patrol went out there where that mortar crew was and three dead bodies and 80 some more mortar rounds they couldn't use because we knocked the position out. Which was a good deal, or that would have caused more casualties. After it was all over with, they sent patrols out around. There was a lot of blood trails where the Vietnamese had carried off their wounded or drug them off. I think there was like, 36 or 39 dead bodies, they found around where the attack started.

JLM – Of the enemy?

JCK – Of the enemy.

JLM – How many casualties did your company have?

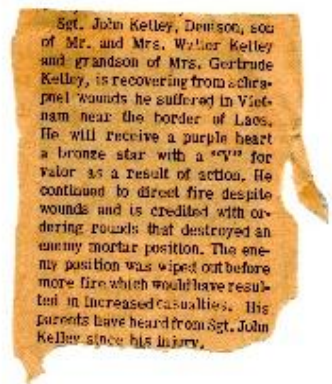
JCK – I know there was 3 dead, and I can't say how many wounded, but I know there was 3 dead.

JLM – And you were shot during this firefight?

JCK – I had shrapnel that got in me. My neck, throat, and hand.

JLM – So, when you say you have shrapnel, you're saying you didn't take a direct hit?

JCK – No, it was just fragments of a mortar round or satchel charge or something. I never knew what it felt like getting branded, but that hot metal, it was pretty hot. They wanted to send me in to base camp to get checked out. I said "oh hell, it's nothing. No big deal". Finally, after about a week, they insisted that I go. So, I went to base camp, Camp Evans, the hospital there, and they took x-rays. That doc said, that metal that I had in my throat, if it would have went any farther, apparently it hit one of these ridges on my windpipe and hit it. That's where it stuck, it never went through my windpipe, he said if it would have went through your windpipe it would have been down your lungs and you wouldn't be here. So I lucked out there.



JLM - Did they remove the shrapnel or do you still have it in your body?

JCK – No. It wasn't serious enough to send me out of country and it wasn't the most sanitary place in Vietnam. They said it'll work out. I don't know when it finally did work out or if it's still in me, I have no idea.

JLM – So over all, the 9 or 10 months that you spent in the jungle, were there many casualties in your unit?

JCK – Yeah, at different times. I can't remember how many. I know we lost a few guys and had several wounded from different confrontations. I can't remember exactly how many numbers or anything.

JLM – Were you always scouting or did you ever have relaxation time while you were in the jungle?

JCK – No, huh-uh. You were always on edge and just kind of walking around or patrolling the area. Going from one spot one day. Some days you'd go two, three clicks, and set up for the evening and stay there that night. The next morning, go back out again and see what kind of stuff we could run into.

JLM – Did you ever stay in the same place every night, or every night was it a new?

JCK – No, usually, every night was a different place because you didn't want to spend no more time in one place than you had to.

JLM – How did you stay in touch with people at home while you were in the jungle? Were you able to write letters or?

JCK – Yeah, you could write letters, whenever you had time. Whenever a re-supply helicopter came out to re-supply you, they'd take the mail back in and send it off to whoever you were writing to.

JLM – So you said you were drafted in June of?

JCK – '68.

JLM – Of 1968. You went to basic training in Washington and then you went to Oklahoma for your AIT training. So, when did you actually, when did you fly to Vietnam? Do you remember the dates?

JCK – I think it was in the first part of June. I think June 4th of '69.

JLM – So, you were in the states for a year before you went to Vietnam?

JCK – Yeah.

JLM – And then, you came home from Vietnam?

JCK – In, April 30th of '70.

JLM – So, you were there from June to April. Did you make good friends over there that you kept in touch with?



SGT. JOHN KELLY IN VIET NAM

Sgt. John C. Kelly, son of Mr. and Mrs. Walter Kelly, 106 Oakwood Drive, Denton, arrived in A. Shaw Valley, Vietnam in June 1969. He is assigned to the 101st Airborne Division serving as a Forward Observer and is chief of section on an artillery howitzer.

He entered the service June 1968, received his basic training at Ft. Lewis, Washington, and was transferred to Ft. Sill, Oklahoma, where he received advanced leadership training.

His address is:
Sgt. John C. Kelly
US 36346160
B Company
1/506th Infantry
101st Airborne Division
APO, San Francisco, Calif.
96383

This poem was written by Sgt. Kelly and was sent to his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Kelly:

To a swamp filled rice paddy
I ~~was~~ went and died.
A mother and sweetheart
Back home have cried.

So soon he travelled
To a cemetery hill
His body was cold
His life was still.
Then morning dove sang

There stood his pallbearers
Splendored in dress blue
Gently hounding a comrade
Whose service was through.

They sounded taps softly
And they gave a damn
Remembering in that box
There once was a man.

Though he died with great honor
He came back on his shield
Till forever to lay
On a blood stained field!

So praise our young warrior
Finally home to rest
But in so many small pieces
Who would have ever guessed?

Praise your young man
And praise all the rest
They died in the Nam
That rotten stinkin' mess!

Sgt. Kelly is the grandson
of Mrs. Gertrude Kelly of
Early.

JCK – Yeah, I did for a while after I got back out of the service. I went up to Minnesota and saw a friend that was in my unit. And, I kept in contact with some of the other ones. A good buddy of mine, Max West, he saved me. I got pinned down one day by a machine gun, behind a log. He got around to the flank and knocked out that machine gun. A couple of days later, we were going through the jungle and he hit a booby trap and got his leg blown off. They flew him back to Walter Reid Hospital. I kept in contact with him after I got out of the service, wrote letters to him and called him on the phone a couple of times. But over there, you know, I had a good buddy that carried my radio for me. We were pretty close. I don't know what happened to him, after I left. If he stayed out there with the forward observer that took my place, or whatever happened to him. Yeah, you make friends over there, but you don't want to get too close to them, because you never knew how long you were going to live. So, you didn't want to get too close to them, but in a way you had to, to cover each other's ass.

JLM – You had to have a sense of trust of some kind. What skills or lessons did you learn?

JCK – How to call in artillery and gunships and airstrikes.

JLM – How to use a radio. *(Laughs)*

JCK - And how to stay alive and try and keep everybody else alive.

JLM – So how many people were in your unit?

JCK – Oh, it varied. Back in the states, they considered a company 150-160 people. Over in Vietnam, if you had 50 people in a company, you were lucky.

JLM – So, in your unit, you were the observer, were you the only observer?

JCK – Um-huh. It was supposed to be an officer job. They sent out an officer one time, just fresh in from the States, and he thought he knew it all. He called artillery in one night, and I showed him on a map, I said “Well, you can't call it in that close”, because we were sitting up on top of a hill. He said “I know what I'm doing, I know what I'm doing”. Well, he called this artillery in that blew the perimeter wire out around our position. And that's the last we saw of him. That's when I kind of took over. They knew what I was doing. Apparently, they had enough faith in me to keep me out there. Once I got used to it, I kind of liked it out there. Well, I didn't like it, but I knew them guys kind of depended on me, you know. If we ran into trouble, I'd call artillery in, and gunships, and airstrikes, and what have you.

JLM – So, as the observer, were you out in front of them by yourself? Or, you were as a group?

JCK – We were as a group. But, there was a few times, when they were short of help, they wanted to send six man teams out, and I'd volunteer to take teams out, 4 or 5

different times. Maybe six times, I don't know. Six of us, me and five other guys, would go out for 2 or 3 days at a time. Go through the jungle and see what we could find or see if we could see any enemy.

JLM – So, why did you volunteer to do that?

JCK – Oh, something to do, I guess. *(Laughs)*

JLM – Did you ever become familiar with the jungle or did you move so much that every day was a new day so you never felt?

JCK – Basically, it was the same old stuff every day. Some places, the jungle was worse than others. A lot of places, they had this triple canopy, the vegetation was so thick that you had to cut your way through it. Hundred degree heat and hundred degree humidity in that stuff, it tested you pretty good.

JLM – So how heavy, I'm assuming you had packs, how heavy were they that you had to carry going through all this stuff?

JCK – Oh, at first, when we were getting C rations, they were cans, and we would have a week's supply of C rations in our pack, plus all your ammunition and a poncho liner and a poncho. So, it varied 60-70-80-90 maybe 100 pounds that you were carrying around all the time with you.

JLM – So how much did you weigh when you were over there? You had to have be very fit.

JCK – Oh, maybe a hundred and sixty.

JLM – To survive a hundred degree heat, a hundred percent humidity, plus carrying around a hundred pounds!

JCK – But, it wasn't always like that way. You'd have the monsoon season, where it rained every day.

JLM – Which wouldn't have been fun either!

JCK – No, it wasn't, because, sleep out in the rain, and walk through the rain, and fight through the rain.

JLM – How did you shelter yourself, as in sleeping? Did you try to stay under a tree, or under foliage?

JCK – Well, we'd put your ponchos on, try to keep dry the best you can. It didn't always work, because. And it was cold, you just had your fatigues, and, no jackets or nothing. Half the time you were shivering. And then, during the monsoon, you'd always have to

worry about the leeches. You'd have to check yourself every day or every morning or day for leeches crawling on you. I had a leech get on the corner of my eye one night, I didn't know it. It was while other people were on guard duty and I was able to get a couple hours of sleep. I woke up the next morning and I couldn't get my one eye open, because a leech had got his fill of blood. My eye kept bleeding and it went down the side of my face. It took a medic about a half hour to 45 minutes to sop up the dried blood, so I could open my eye.

JLM – Oh, my goodness!

JCK – And, then you had to worry about the snakes and the spiders and the booby traps and the Vietnamese, or North Vietnamese, Vietcong. So, you had all that to worry about.

JLM – So how much sleep, you were in the jungle for 10 months, so, how much sleep at a time, was normal? Back home, it's like 8 hours but.

JCK – A couple of hours maybe, two or three hours.

JLM – So, somebody was constantly?

JCK – Yeah. You take turns on guard duty. So, you'd end up getting a few hours sleep every night, maybe, if you could sleep. Half the time you couldn't sleep. When we were on fire bases, I'd stay up all night and call artillery in, and then, I'd sleep during the day. Out in the jungle, you slept when you could get a chance.

JLM – On the fire base, did they have barracks or?

JCK – No, huh-uh. Bunkers, underground bunkers, sand bag bunkers.

JLM – So, you slept on the ground?

JCK – No, you had cots. On a fire base, you had cots to lay on.

JLM – But, the cots were in a bunker. You didn't have a shelter over your head?

JCK – Well, you had a shelter of sand bags on top of you. You had a little walk way to go into your bunker.

JLM – So, who built the bunkers? Were they there or is that something you had to?

JCK – No, you had to do it. Or the people there before you, left them. If they knew there was somebody was coming back in, they'd leave them. I was on one fire base, fire base Rakkasan. When we left that, we completely tore the fire base apart, emptied all the sand bags and completely destroyed the bunkers and everything.

JLM – Now, when you did that, did you have to do that by hand? With shovels?

JCK – Uh-huh. You'd just untie the sand bags and dump the sand out.

JLM – Well, how deep were the bunkers?

JCK – Oh, they were, they might be that far above the ground and about, a little deeper than that underground.

JLM – So, approximately from your motions there, three feet underground and four or five feet?

JCK – Well, you could kind of stand up in them. Once you got down in there, you could stand up.

JLM – So that is how you spent all of your time in the jungle, fighting for your life. Then, when you left, how did they contact you, or how did you know your time was up?

JCK – Well, they called me on the radio and said “get your stuff together. You're going back to base camp”. And I said “Well, who's going to take care of these guys out here? I can't just up and leave them”. They said “well, you got a replacement coming to take your place”. That was kind of the hardest part about leaving out there. You'd been with them all this time and it's kind of hard to leave. And I said on the radio “Well, I don't know who this new replacement is, but I hope he knows what's he's doing”. So I got on the chopper and went back to base camp. About the last three weeks, month I was in Vietnam, I was called “the battalion recon sergeant”. I'd sit in an underground bunker, we had a big wall map on the wall. Me and this other guy, we'd take shifts, they were 12 hour shifts. He would work 12 hours during the day and then I would work 12 hours at night. You didn't have to do nothing, really, just sit there. If an infantry outfit called in for artillery, they'd give you the coordinates and you'd have to go look on this great big wall map to make sure there was no friendlies in that area where they wanted to call artillery in. Then, you had to get an officer's approval, make sure he agreed that it was ok to call that artillery in there. He'd give you his initials and you'd call back the artillery, cleared B.A.R., if that was the officer's initials. Then they'd go ahead and start shooting artillery, calling artillery in. So, that's basically all I did. Whenever an infantry outfit called in, wanted to call in artillery, you'd have to get it cleared before they could do it. Because if it was within, too close to friendlies, they wouldn't let you do it.

JLM – So, if it was too close to friendlies, they just, the infantry out there that called in, just had to fight off the enemy by themselves?

JCK – Either that or call our gunships in. You can call gunships in a lot closer than you can artillery. Artillery, they want you to start, the first rounds to be 1000 meters out from where your position was and then you could work it in as gradually. They didn't like to get it in any closer than 500 meters, unless it was necessary. I have called it in, within 200-300 meters, because you had to.

JLM – So what's the difference between a gunship and artillery?

JCK – Artillery is, they shoot high explosive rounds, white phosphorous, they'd just shoot artillery shells. And gunships, they have rocket pods mounted on their helicopters and mini guns and automatic grenade launchers, so they're more capable of getting within. Once you use helicopters, you mark your location by popping a smoke grenade, and then, the helicopter guys, they see that smoke, and then you give them directions from your smoke, or your position, to where you want them to shoot. It was a good thing for them, that's about the only way you could have got anything done over there. Without helicopters, you were just screwed. Because, either you walked or you flew in helicopters to get to where you were going.

JLM – So, when they brought you home or out of the jungle, not home, but out of the jungle, and you were a radio operator for 3 weeks in the underground bunker, did you ever get calls on your unit? So, did you feel like your replacement was?

JCK – Oh, yeah. It was for the whole battalion. Yeah, you'd get calls in from my outfit that I was with and different outfits in the same infantry.

JLM – Do you feel your replacement was worthy? Do you feel he took care of "your" guys?

JCK – I really couldn't say, I wasn't out there. I really couldn't say.

JLM – So, while you were in the jungle for 10 months, you obviously were looking for the enemy, so you had no contact other than letters to home? I mean, you weren't allowed a radio, I'm sure, because of the noise? You had nothing except for information delivered by people on the helicopter?

JCK – Well, no, you had radios, you carried radios to talk on, military radios. Not transistor radios, where you could listen to music and stuff.

JLM – Or, know what was going on in out in the world?

JCK – No, huh-uh.

JLM - You had no idea what was happening anywhere else other than your area?

JCK – Well, yeah. Whenever they got re-supplied, they had "Stars and Stripes" magazine, newspaper over there and they'd send you out copies of that. So, you'd have an idea what was going on in the rest of Vietnam and what's happening back in the world. So, you had some kind of contact with what was happening, other than just in the area you were at.

JLM – Now, I believe you told me earlier, that you went to Hamburger Hill, or had to go to Hamburger Hill, after the invasion. Is that correct?

JCK – Yeah. This was a month or two after it happened, we went up there just to look around.

JLM – Still searching for the enemy, or just because you were close?

JCK – Just because we were close there, right in that area. Yeah, it was quite the deal. Before it all happened, I had pictures of it. It looked just like a real nice tree-covered mountain. And then, after it was all over with, it was just a, nothing left, just a bare mountain. I think that fire base that I was at when I first went to the jungle, I think they fired like 10,000 rounds of artillery up there, just that one artillery unit. I'm kind of glad that I missed out on that.

JLM – Is there anything else that you want to tell me or that you can tell me about your time spent in the jungle? Anything that I might have forgot? Or how you lived and?

JCK – Well, I know where I spent my 21st birthday, is in the hospital in Camp Evans.

JLM – And why was that?

JCK – When they sent me in for shrapnel.

JLM – That was your 21st birthday, September?

JCK – September.

JLM – 17th?

JCK – Yeah, that's when we had that ground attack.

JLM - That wasn't a very nice birthday present.

JCK – No, not really. It was an eye awakening, kind of makes you appreciate everything back in the states.

JLM – So, because you were in the jungle for your duration in Vietnam, did you see, you know, bombed out buildings, damage from the war?

JCK – No, you never saw any buildings. You might see little hooch's that North Vietnamese had, where they had left, or abandoned. Yeah, you saw all kinds of shit that you'd never believe you'd see. Like I said, it was an eye-opening experience. Whenever you ran into, all the time you were thinking while you were out in the jungle, you're always worried and scared, and if you weren't scared, well, you're a liar. Then, if you ran into firefight or trouble, your adrenaline kind of kicks in, and you're thinking about

keeping everybody safe and yourself was safe and alive. Depending on how long it'd last, a firefight could last 5 minutes or it could last a half a day. Once everything slows down or it's over with, things quite down, that's when you have time to think, "Goddamn, how did we get out of this mess alive". That's when it starts working on your mind, it's not during the fight itself. Because your adrenalin's kicked in pretty good. But, it's when things are over with and you have time to think about it, that's when it starts playing with your mind.

JLM – So because you were calling in help, basically, was a half a day, I know that probably was an eternity, but was that usually the longest that your firefights lasted?

JCK – Yeah, I would say, most of them didn't last that long, maybe an hour. They might just last 5 minutes, you know.

JLM – Right.

JCK – One time, we were crossing a stream and right around the bend where we were crossing, there was two Vietnamese in the river, washing up, and we shot them. That lasted about 10 seconds. But then, other times you'd run into places where they were set up for an ambush, it might last quite a while. But, basically, about the longest any battle or anytime we ran into trouble, it was just a short duration. But, if you were at fire base, there it might last all night or half a day or half a night or what have you. Out in the jungle, you never knew what you were going to run into.

JLM – So, did you have medics with your unit? Obviously, people were getting hurt. How did they take care of somebody that was shot in your unit?

JCK – Well, they would patch them up the best they could until the helicopter got there to get them out.

JLM – But, was that just the soldiers or were they medics also in your unit?

JCK – Well, they were medic.

JLM – That went along with your unit?

JCK – Yeah. Well, they weren't a doctor or anything, they could patch you up. If you got wounded or shot, well, they could patch you up best they could until the helicopter got there.

JLM – And then they airlifted you out?

JCK – Airlifted out.

JLM – And, what did you do with the fallen soldiers?

JCK – Well, we got them out too.

JLM – You just kept them until the helicopter came?

JCK – Yeah.

JLM – So, did everybody make it out that was in your unit with you?

JCK – As far as I know, yeah. While I was out there, they did.

JLM – Did anybody get ever get captured and was a, where they put you in encampments, a prisoner, a prisoner-of-war?

JCK – No, not that I know of. Not while I was over there, not in my units I was with.

JLM – Everybody came home that you were aware of?

JCK – Um-huh. Dead or alive, one way or another.

JLM – So when you got your, it wasn't a discharge, but when they came and got you, was there anybody else? How did they figure out whose time it was to come out of the jungle and go back to?

JCK – Well, back then, they had this early-out, they called it an early-out program. That's how I got out a month early, instead of a full year over there, I got out a month early, because of this early-out program. Now, how they decided, I suppose since I had been out in the jungle all that time, they figured 'well, hell, he needs to go home'.

JLM – Was there anybody else in your unit that went at the same time you did, that was still there when you left, or had they already been?

JCK – Well, they'd come and go. Yeah, there was people that left before I did, because they had been there a little bit longer than I had.

JLM – They had already been there before you came out?

JCK – Um-huh. It seemed like about every time the re-supply, the helicopter came out to re-supply you, there would be a new guy or two to take somebody's place.

JLM – So, there was a constant change?

JCK – Pretty much, yeah.

JLM – So, how did you earn that trust factor if they flip-flopped the people so often? You just knew when they sent them to the jungle that they were qualified and capable?

JCK – Well, you never knew because they were just fresh in from the states. A lot of that stuff that you learned in the states, in basic training and stuff, you kind of forgot about that, because if you went by the stuff you learned in the states, well, it wouldn't have worked too good.

JLM – So, what was your ranking while you were in the jungle?

JCK – Sergeant.

JLM – So, you were a sergeant the whole time.

JCK – Yeah.

JLM – Did you ever get promoted?

JCK – Yeah, I got promoted the last month that I was over there. I went before a board, and I passed all of the qualifications and was supposed to get my sergeant E6 stripes, Staff Sergeant. About the same time was when I got my orders to go home. The commercial airlines were on strike at that time. Some days you might get two airlines in to take people back to the states, sometimes you wouldn't get any, some days one. And, I was walking by a PX one day, and this new second lieutenant, just fresh in from the states, came walking by me and I never saluted him. Out in the jungle, you never did salute nobody anyhow because that was just a dead giveaway who the officers were. And, I walked by him and he turned around and he got in my face. I told him "to go ** himself". *(Laughs)* Well, there went my staff sergeant stripes, but I didn't care. As soon as I got a plane in there to take me home, I was done. All I had to do was go to Fort Lewis, Washington and process out of the Army and I was done. So, I really didn't care about that extra stripe for the week maybe that I was over there in Vietnam.

JLM – So, a sergeant is an E5?

JCK – Um-huh.

JLM – Did you receive any medals or special service awards?

JCK – Yeah, some.

JLM – You received a Purple Heart, I know. And, what was that for?

JCK – Getting shrapnel in me.

JLM – The fire fight?

JCK – On the fire fight, on the fire base.



JLM - Where you were wounded?

JCK – Yeah.

JLM – Ok, and you received the Bronze Star medal. Now, that's a very high up one, is it not?

JCK – Well, I don't know how they rank them. There's the Bronze Star, Silver Star, the Congressional Medal of Honor. I think Army Commendation is below a Bronze Star.

JLM – So, why did you receive the Bronze Star?

JCK – I don't know. I suppose some battle or some fight we got in and I did something.

JLM – Ok, and you received the Purple Heart and that was for the shrapnel during the fire fight. You received an Air Medal with two bronze oak leaf clusters?

JCK – Yeah, when you fly into a combat zone on a helicopter, if you land in a hot LZ, landing zone, and you get fired on, you get an Air Medal. I forget how many combat assaults you got to go on to get an Air Medal. I think it's like 20. You take 20 helicopter rides to different landing zones, you get an Air Medal. And then, the oak leaf clusters are for landing in the hot LZ. Instead of giving you another medal, they'd just give you an oak leaf cluster.

JLM – And, then you also received an Army Commendation medal with letter "V" device?

JCK – Yeah. Army Commendation with "V" for valor. I suppose that was another skirmish we got into.

JLM – National Defense Service Medal?

JCK – Everybody got them.

JLM – Vietnam Service Medal?

JCK – Yeah.

JLM – Everybody that served received that one?

JCK – Um-huh.

JLM – Republic of Vietnam Campaign Ribbon with device?

JCK – Yeah. Everybody got one of them that was over there.

JCK – When I was in Vietnam or when I was in the states?

JLM – Well, I would guess Vietnam?

JCK – Yeah, it was a unit, the 101st Airborne Unit.

JLM – And then, you also have a map. These places that you have, is that basically where you were? The 101st Airborne Division in Hu?

JCK – Hue (*Whey*).

JLM – Hue (*Whey*). It is spelled h-u-e. But, is that pretty much where you spent your 10 months, in that area?

JCK – Camp Evans. (Pointing to map) Well, there was Hamburger Hill and fire base Currahee, was just south of that about 3 kilometers, and then the rest of the time was over near the Laotian border out in the jungle, up near the Laotian border, up through here.

JLM – What's Eagle Beach? You have Eagle Beach written on there.

JCK – That's just a, kind of like an in-country R&R place.

JLM – Did you ever get to have any R&R when you were in the jungle?

JCK – Yeah, we got up there one time, to give us a break. We were only there for, I think, a couple of days. We got called back because a bunch of outfits got in bad trouble. We had to go help them out.

JLM – So, was that the only R&R time that you ever had while you were over there, was those couple days at Eagle Beach?

JCK – Yeah. Once in a while, maybe once a month or month and a half, you'd get to go back to a base camp, and get clean clothes, and have a hot meal. Maybe be back there two or three days, then back out in the jungle again.

JLM – So, you basically never had a vacation, if you will, got to go to see any sights? Any R&R time like that?

JCK – You could have taken R&R, went to Bangkok, Australia, Hawaii, if you were married. But I thought, shit, I only had about a month left, I thought why take a R&R and blow all that money. I always said if I ever got out of that country, I'd never come back.



JLM – When you left, you left.

JCK – I left, I left.

JLM – Do you recall the day you left the service?

JCK – Yeah, I couldn't wait for that jet to get off the ground. *(Laughs)*

JLM – *(Laughs)* Do you know where you were when the war ended?

JCK – Back in the states.

JLM – What did you do in the days and the weeks after your service? You mentioned you spent some time with you girlfriend before flying home.

JCK – I spent quite a bit of time, once I got back to Iowa, with relatives and then I went back to work at the packing plant.

JLM – How did the Vietnam War impact you on your return to the States?

JCK – Oh, everybody had different ideas, some people thought, you know, protesters and everything, calling you “baby killers” and all this shit. I figured, hell, you lazy bastards weren't over there, you can't really say nothing.

JLM – Was it hard to adjust, after living in the jungle for 10 months, to normal routine?

JCK – Oh, yeah. Probably the hardest part was watch your language, how you talked. Because it was pretty frank over there. Even when you were on the radios, if you were in a bunch of shit, if you wanted to cuss and swear, you said it right over the radio and nobody ever said nothing. I know there were a lot of times that you'd call artillery in and the rounds never did come for quite a while and I'd get on the radio and say “where the hell are them goddamn rounds at”. I figured, to hell with it, if they didn't like it, they could put me somewhere else.

JLM – Did you have trouble sleeping, because of your sleep schedule, you know, you were always alert, aware, sleeping two hours here, two hours there.

JCK – Oh, yeah. It took a while to get used to that once you got back.

JLM – Did you have nightmares? From things you seen or were involved in?

JCK – Oh, once in a while you think about it, have dreams about it, but you kind of outgrow that.

JLM – Because that is what you did in war.

JCK – Um-huh.

JLM – Did you marry before you left or after, obviously after, since you seen your girlfriend. So, after you came back, you went to work at the packing plant. And that would have been, you were discharged in April of 1970?

JCK – I supposed I went back to work at the packing house. I had to get a couple of months of partying and raising hell in before I went back to work. *(Laughs)* I can't remember when I started.

JLM – And, that was in Denison, Iowa, the packing plant?

JCK – Yeah.

JLM - So you went to work there and then, when did you marry your wife?

JCK – March of '72.

JLM – So you were home a couple of years?

JCK – Yeah. This girl that I went with all through high school and during the service, I forget what year she died. She had some kind of disease, Lupus, it affected her nerve system or something. She died, that kind of set me back. And then I ended up getting hooked up with this gal I did marry.

JLM – And you and her had three children. Did the Vietnam War affect your family or marriage or anything that you're aware of?

JCK – No, I don't think so, not that I'm aware of. That was all behind me. They never knew what was going on. They never asked and I never told.

JLM – So, how long then, you went to work at the packing plant in 1970, how long did you work there?

JCK – I started there in '67, right after high school. I worked there until I got drafted. And then, when I came back, got out of the service, when I started working back there again. I worked until probably '80, and then, I quit and went to work for my brother-in-law and his dad on a farm. I still worked part-time at the packing house during the winter and when I couldn't do anything on the farm. Rainy days or something, I would go back to work at the packing house. And, I think it was finally in '83 when I finally said "to heck with that, there's got to be something better to do than a packing house". So, I was there basically, two years out for the service, I was there from '67 to '83, probably 14 years or so.

JLM – So, what did you do after you left the packing house? And the farming?

JCK – I went on custom harvest.

JLM – With your brother-in-law?

JCK – No, a guy out of Oklahoma. I'd always read about going on a custom harvest. I thought, well that would be kind of fun, seeing different country and meet different people.

JLM – Were you still married at this time?

JCK – No.

JLM – You were divorced?

JCK – Well, I never was divorced, separated. So I got hooked up with him down in Oklahoma and went with him for two or three years on harvest. And, we always did a lot of work around Cimarron area during the summer and fall. And, I got to meet a lot of people, and I always thought, well, Cimarron's a pretty friendly place to live, if I ever found work around here, I wouldn't mind living here. Then, after I quit the harvest, I went to work for a guy out in Colorado, a custom haying outfit, swathing and baling. All I did was run a swather, other guys did the baling. I worked for him for a couple of years and then I got hooked up with Glenn Oyler on his custom haying deal and helped him ever since. I came here in '90, summer of '90, I came here and started working for him. I helped him ever since, except for 8 years when I was at the feed yard, Warner Feed Yard.

JLM – How did your experience in Vietnam contribute to your thinking about war and military service?

JCK – It gives you a different frame of mind. Before you were ever were in the service, you lived different, acted different, but once you got in the service, they kind of gave you an attitude adjustment, (*Laughs*) which didn't hurt nothing.

JLM – Are you a member of any veterans, or other organizations related to your service?

JCK – Yeah, life member of VFW.

JLM – Did you join when you got out of the service or?

JCK – Yeah, when I was still up in Iowa, I belonged to Disabled Veterans, Legion, VFW. Then, when I moved, I kind of got away from the Legion and just stuck with the VFW. I was a member of the VFW in Oklahoma, just a year-by-year, yearly membership. When I came to Kansas, that's when I signed up, a life member of VFW.

JLM – Did any of your family, your father or your brother, did anybody else serve?

JCK – Yeah, my dad was in World War II.

JLM – How about your grandpa? Did he serve in any war?

JCK – I don't think so. No, because my grandpa died at a young age, while my dad was in the service. My other Grandfather, no, he never served, I don't think.

JLM – Did your brother ever serve?

JCK – No.

JLM – He wasn't drafted?

JCK – No, they did away with the draft about the time that I got into the service. Instead of the draft, they had some kind of lottery system, they'd draw numbers or something, if your number came up, well then you had to go into the service. They did away with the draft, I forget what year.

JLM – Is there anything about your service years that I have forgot, that is important to you or shaped you in any way?

JCK – No, not that I can think of.

JLM – How old were you when you went in? Twenty, almost?

JCK – I went in in '68, and I was born in '48. I was born in September of '48. I was just nineteen. I turned twenty, if I remember, my 20th birthday and 21st birthday, I spent them in hospitals, one in the States and one in Vietnam.

JLM – So, your 20th birthday, we know your 21st birthday was because of shrapnel. Why were you in the hospital?

JCK – I don't know, like pneumonia or on that area. It wasn't really a hospital, it was an infirmary. I got to spend a few days in there and got better. Then I went back to taking schools and whatever I was doing then, down in Oklahoma.

JLM – Is there anything that you want your children to remember about your time in the service?

JCK – Oh, well just so they don't ever have to go. But, they're too old now to go unless they volunteer. I doubt if that is going to happen.

JLM – Ok, well I think, that I have probably taken enough of your time. I appreciate you talking to me.

JCK – Ok. Well, I appreciate the interview.