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Joh H. Kilham
(Signature - Interviewee)

1854 MAPLE AVE.

(Address) Huntington

DANE

DATE 10/13/84

J. Kunkleman
(Signature - Witness)

WEST VIRGINIA VIETNAM VETERANS

AN INTERVIEW WITH: John Williams

CONDUCTED BY: John Hennen

October 13, 1984

Transcribed & Typed by: Sally Keaton

Tape 18

38 pages

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JH: This is October 13, 1984. I'm John Hennen working on the Oral History of Appalachia Vietnam Veterans Project. I'm with John Williams, a veteran who lives, you're a Marshall student is that correct, a Marshall student and veteran who lives at 1064 Maple Avenue, here in Huntington. So we'll start out with a few background questions and then we'll get into the body of the interview, okay? First of all, John, I guess we might as well find out where you were born and where you grew up and, ah, a little bit about the size of your family, and that type of thing.

JW: Well, I was born in Ronceverte, West Virginia and I grew up in Lewisburg, they're just about 3 miles apart. There was 3 of us in the family. I have 2 older brothers, one of them also is a Vietnam veteran. [pause]

JH: How about your schooling? You go to school down there?

JW: Well, I went to Lewisburg High School and graduated from there in 67 and, ah, I came to Marshall that fall, stayed a semester and a half and dropped out and joined the service.

JH: So you stayed at Marshall right after high school and then you joined the service. So that would mean, you were born in when, 49? (Forty-nine.) Okay. I'll be taking a few notes here. I have a bad memory and, ah, a lot of times if you say something I want to follow up on so I take notes. Okay. So you graduated from, what kind of work did your family do or involved in?

JW: Well my mother was a school teacher, she retired a couple of years ago, she taught for 30 years and my dad worked a few different jobs. While I was in college I remember he ran a coal tipple for several years and when that business shut down he went to work for the State Road Commission. He retired from there about 3 years ago. He died last, a year ago last Memorial Day.

JH: Now your brother that's in the service is this an older brother or a younger brother?

JW: He's, ah, 4 years older than I am, I believe.

JH: Okay, is he, did he serve in Vietnam also?

JW: Yeah, He served in a place called Bearcat down in the southern part of South Vietnam. Down below, an, Saigon.

JH: Okay, Now you started at Marshall in 67 and then did you stay a semester or so and then decide to join up or

JW: A semester and a half. Well, first of all I didn't want to come to school, I really wasn't ready for it and I, I let myself be talked into it. And by the time second semester came around, my grades were real bad and I started in with a new attitude I was going to do better. Well I sprained an ankle and had to have a cast and all put on and used that as an excuse not to go to classes and sat down one night, I probably shouldn't tell this on myself, with a fifth of whiskey and a butcher-knife and cut the cast off. Decided then to join the army. So I passed the physical on the day

the cast was supposed to come off my leg (Oh yeah.) and went home for 2 weeks and went in the service.

JH: Now was, (1) or excuse me.

JW: I figured I'd be drafted in a couple of months anyway so I just went ahead and enlisted.

JH: Had you given a lot of thought to this beforehand? I mean is this something, (well) it seems like at that age that's something a lot of guys are thinking about anyway, so.

JW: Well, especially then because the draft as we had it was very active at the time. And, I wanted to make a bid to get into the Air Force when I graduated from high school and got talked out of that. And the only branch you could get in on a short notice of time was, was the Army or the Marines and I chose the Army and, ah,

JH: How did your family respond to you signing up?

JW: Well, they weren't too happy about it. I remember when I called home my mother said, "Well come home, we'll talk about." And I told my mother, "There's nothing to talk about. I've already signed up."

JH: You were already in.

JW: That was basically their reaction. I'm sure they weren't too happy because my brother had just gotten out about 6 months before them or something like that _____.

JH: Did he go back home after service?

JW: Yeah. He went back and, ah, got a job at Hercules in Covington for a while.

JH: Is that a steel outfit?

JW: No. I believe they made fabric and things like that at the time. And of course Hercules is, was known and called at that time Power Company. I think, am, probably originally it was gun powder and explosives that they built and I guess they diversified over the years. Then he came back down here and started in school and ended up getting married and went to work for, ah, Allegheny Power Company and he's still with them, in Columbus, Ohio.

JH: All right, so now you're, you've left Marshall and you're in the service. Where did you get your basic training?

JW: It was Fort Campbell, Kentucky for basic training. From there I went to Fort Leavenworth, Missouri for, for a clerk-typist school and I guess I won't comment too much on that. And then when we graduated from there most of us got orders for Vietnam. And they had, ah, personnel had found a paper in my file where I had signed to go to jump school during basic training but had been overlooked and gave me the choice of going to jump school or Vietnam. So I took jump school. So I went to Fort Benning, Georgia for that, in the middle of August. That was quite an experience. And by some miracle got assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and stayed there, well there was about 300 of us went there and they screened about 8 of us out of the crowd and on the basis of our test scores offered us an opportunity to get involved in the finance

office there. So, of course we took that. Stayed their about six months before our orders for Vietnam.

JH: So you were at Fort Bragg 6 months? (mm mm.) And then went to Vietnam. Okay. What was, I paused what was your first, ah, station in Vietnam then?

JW: Well, I was assigned to the 101st Airborne Division. We flew into Cam Ranh Bay, ah, 2 days before TET of 69 [the] TET Offensive was in 68] and, I believe the next day they were preparing all the Vietnamese personnel. They allowed Vietnamese on most of the large bases to do menial type work such as KP, rather than having the transients do it, and different duties like that. But,

JH: Transients, now what's that?

JW: Well, Cam Ranh Bay the majority of personnel, see that's people just landing there and then from there they're flown out to _____, and things like that.

JH: Oh, service personnel.

JW: Yes sir. (Okay.) But since it was a TET they were carrying them out, we ended up doing KP so we didn't get any sleep that night. Early the next morning they put us on a C130, several of us not, course a lot of us went all different directions in the company. We flew to Dinh Quan where the 101st Rear Base Camp was located and, ah, pulled CQ that night, soon as we got there so that was 3, I believe, that was 2 nights without sleep. Well, he let us sleep about an hour and a half or so but _____ also was

permanently stationed there. He let us get hour and a half, two hours sleep and took a chance of getting himself maybe in a bind I know that. And, ah, we started processing that day, getting our records all in line. And that night was my first experience of incoming. We had a rocket mortar attack that night, this is the airport, up. It was quite a show. I guess the most frightening thing was, we hadn't even been issued weapons yet at that time, (Mmm hmm.) so we were, if anyone had gotten on base in our area it would have been very difficult for us to defend ourselves. And then we went through 2 weeks of P training and then were assigned our permanent units which I stayed at Dinh Quan. Most of the division was North, quite a bit north of there, up in the I-corp and I stayed at Din Hua with the Finance and the Rear Echelon for, I think we stayed there till, I believe it was September or October of that year, which is close to 10 months. And then when the marines moved out of the I-corp we moved up and took their place at Cuu Loi, and that was about September or October.

JH: Now, when you went over there you said it was, you got there 2 days before the TET Offensive, the beginning?

JW: I believe that's right. One or two days, I believe it was two days and I believe it happened the second day I was there, so the night of the second day.

JH: Well did, did you guys have any sort of, ah, idea what was going on then? I mean

JW: No I really didn't. I didn't even. I didn't even realize that were landing there like a day or two before TET.

[paused] I don't know why. I guess, you know, we were just kids, I was 19, you know. We were just kids. We really didn't know what the hell was going on. [paused] Course, [laughingly] it didn't take long to find out. [laughs]

JH: Yeah. Just sort of generally at this time among the new enlistees and draftees, what, what kind of attitude did they have towards, ah, towards being there? Was it a patriotic thing or, ah,

JW: Well you can't, it's difficult to speak for other people but (mm hmm.) I know for me I, I felt like it was a duty that I was going to have to live up to sooner or later. You know, when you're 18, 19 years old even then you try to reason things out and, ah, the way I reasoned joining the service and going ahead and getting it behind me was that, I didn't want to get started in life, I didn't want to get married and have children or something and then get drafted. (mm hmm.) So, I decided I'd just get it out of the way then because news, ah, broadcasts were predicting another 10 years involvement and things like that (mm hmm) in Vietnam. Which it turned out to be about another 7 years actually. I think it was about 74 (mm hmm.) when we finally got out of Nam altogether. (mm hmm.) So they weren't too far from being accurate.

JH: So did you, you did a one year tour or

JW: No I stayed over there 18 months. Ah, if I'd come back after a year I'd had a year to pull in the States and I knew I was so sick of the service at that time that if I came back here I'd probably get in trouble because I didn't see any way I could fit back in to a strict military life and be tolerant of it. So I just decided to take a chance and stayed there 6 months longer in order to get a 6-month early out.

JH: Oh I see. If you re-up for 6 months you get

JW: If you, well if you had 6 months or less when your D-Rose date which is your return back here to the States, you could separate from active duty, if you had 6 months or less left on your enlistment _____. (slight pause)

JH: Hmm. I didn't know that. So you didn't like that, what was it the regimentation of the service?

JW: Well, I don't know. I felt pretty much like a prisoner in a sense because well maybe even worse than a prisoner because first of all you didn't make any decisions for yourself, ah, you couldn't go anywhere or do anything other than what you were ordered to do. You ate, slept, thought, worked as you were told to do and work days usually lasted anywhere from 10 to 12 hours. And then guard duty most nights all night, you might get an hour or two sleep. And of course that consisted of a perimeter guard and bunkers and periodically we'd have to go outside the perimeter and, ah, walk through the rice patties and stuff like that, you know. Just, I

think it was just more a game or something the military was playing with us and anything else. I didn't see any real need for us to be outside the perimeter like that. That's why they built the perimeter to begin with. (Ah-huh.) I think it was just, ah, a way to keep us, well I keep wanting to use the word suppressed. I'm not sure it's that accurate but it was just a way to keep us in line. And, and, ah, keep it fresh in our mind who the authority was and who we were, which, course all, we were expendable people. I'm sure is the way we were looked at. [pause]

JH: Is that, is that pretty much the way, ah, you felt about it?

JW: That's the way I felt about it.

JH: You were considered expendable?

JW: That's the way I felt about it. An, we were given orders many, many times that we were not to fire at anything or anyone unless we were fired upon first, and things like this. Which is ridiculous. That's not the way wars are fought and it's certainly not the way they're won. But the majority of the time that's what our orders were.

JH: Would you consider that was, ah, a military policy or a government policy? That's the kind of order coming right from the top?

JW: Yeah, I think they did. I think the social pressure here in the States coming from, this is sort of an honorary statement, coming from people who really didn't have any idea what the hell was going on to begin with. I think social pressure

from them, ah, caused the top leaders of the nation to come up with ideas of this nature trying to, trying to prevent themselves from looking too much like the aggressor I guess.

JH: Yeah, that's one thing I've wondered about too. Now, the guys in the field over there, did you have any, did you have much exposure to what was going on back home at that time? I guess this was about the time the anti-war movement was getting underway, say 69, something like that.

JW: Yeah. I'd say, I'd say that's right. Really in I'd say 70 probably is when we really, would be in the 70s. Although I believe that's when Kent State happened, (Mmm hmm.) ah, that summer. And, we got a little bit in the Stars and Stripes, we got the Kent State story in the Stars and Stripes and that was very depressing to that, ah, to think what we might be going home to because we were living in a military life which is, if you're in the military in a situation like that, for you it's marshall rule, that's what it is. You do as you're told, when you're told, by the government. It's just that simple. And it, and to us it seemed like this thing was developing in the United States where even the citizens were starting to promote this sort of, ah, of an influence in their lives. And it really concerned us. And when I come home the first thing I noticed was that there was so many more police hired right here in Huntington.

Cause I came back to Huntington, a girl that I was very fond of was here as a freshman in school and it really, ah,

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really disillusioned you know, about the country that I had left course I just, it was so obvious to me there was so few police really when I'd gone in the service and when I got back you could see 'em on every street corner. And, even in my hometown I think the police force there about tripled, something like that.

JH: Lewisburg?

JW: Yeah. National Guard of course, it had got a lot, tremendously bigger in that 2 years and 7 months time. And it just seemed like things were starting in the same direction here as what I'd experienced there. It really kind of concerned me and turned me very much against the system at that time, which was not good for me, I know.

[pause]

JH: Okay. Let me get some times straight here. Now your, your last several months in Vietnam then where, where were you stationed at? Your last 6 months.

JW: Well, ah, basically the Phu By Way area. I spent, ah, the last several months I spent some time at Camp Diehl which is the base camp for the 101st [hundred and first] and also at Camp Evans, which is a smaller base camp for the 101st. This sort of shifted around within, within a division some, (Ah huh.) and different classes. [pause] I did a lot of money escort and made some trips to Saigon, things like that. We'd fly around in a helicopter with half a million dollars MPC. Stuff like that, just an officer and myself.

Walk the streets of Saigon with a footlocker, half a million dollars MPC.

JH: Is that right? What's that now, MPC?

JW: That's military payment certificates. (Payroll?) That's what they use for, ah, money over there.

JH: Equipment purchase and that kind of stuff?

JW: Mmm hmm. All they did is, be an officer with a 45, a pistol and myself with an M16 and half a million bucks.

JH: Lord have mercy!

JW: I was very fortunate, never had any problems whatsoever like that _____.

JH: Okay now. Your 18 months is up and you come back home. Do you remember your trip home at all?

JW: Oh yeah.

JH: Did you come back

JW: I'll never forget that because I, I'm not exactly sure what time of day we left over there. I think it was in the morning, around 6 or 7, something like that. We got back about 3 in the morning, I think, and, ah, first thing they did was herd us in to a mess-hall and give us a steak and eggs breakfast, which I suppose we were supposed to be impressed but [JH laughs] I don't think any of us gave a damn whether we ate or not.

JH: This is before you left?

JW: No this is after we got back (Okay, okay.) to Fort Louis, Washington. And, ah, after that course immediately started

processing us and by about 7:30 in the morning we were at the airport ready to go home. All they did really was check us for venereal disease, ah, see if there was any drugs in our blood, things like that, issue us some uniforms, pants, and put us on the street. That's about what it amounted to. Ah, wasn't any deprogramming or any, you know, nothing like that, about going back into civilian life. And I was going to Lewisburg by about 2 in the afternoon.

JH: So once you left Fort Louis you, just like on a private airline, boom, back to

JW: They, they sent, they, ah, supplied us, of course, with money for transportation and bused us to the airport. After that we went on our own. And that was it.

JH: And 36 hours before that you'd been in Vietnam I guess?

JW: That's right. Thirty-six hours before that I'd been on duty in Vietnam. [pause]

JH: So what was it like getting back to Lewisburg?

JW: I really don't know. I, it's, an,

JH: This is about 1970

JW: Ah huh. October of 70, October the 18th was the day I was seperated from active duty. I don't know. It was really strange because I just didn't fit in anywhere. I felt, ah, very withdrawn, from everything. I couldn't comprehend the people around me anymore because life had taken a whole different meaning for me after my experience. It seemed to me like everyone here is just living in a fantasy world and

it still seems very much that way to me. I, there's so many people here that just have no idea what's going on in the rest of the world, the essence of it. I mean, I'm sure they read the newspapers and things like that just like I did and watch news broadcasts and listen to the radio. But until you experience these things you just really don't know what they're all about. And it is very much a fantasy world in this country. People have, have a way of life and things that very few people in the world have. You have even a security of life if there really is such a thing here, most of the world has never, has never even imagined having.

So, I don't know, it's, it's been difficult for me, I think.

JH: What, what's it like being on a college campus right now?

When did you come back to school anyway?

JW: Well, I came back down here last fall, a year ago. And course now at this age it's, can't really expect to fit in to begin with, over 35 it's hard to mingle among people between 18 and 21 years of age and really be accepted. Ah, I've made a few friends among the younger group as some do from time to time and things like that, usually when they have a problem sometimes, things like that. I really don't know how to answer that question. I never felt, I didn't feel accepted here, when I got out of the service I went back here for two semesters. And

JH: Pretty much right away, after the service or?

JW: Well, I got out in October I started school in January. And, I felt very rejected by most of my peers, especially when they found out I was a Vietnam veteran. Of course the students were very much against military personnel and, basically for that reason is why I left after 2 semesters _____ Just, ah, just wasn't much pleasure in going, really.

JH: Was there an open hostility or was it more or less (In some) sort of a shunning type thing?

JW: In some instances there was, ah, verbal abuse, much of the time it was just, ah, being ignored, you know, like if you really weren't a person. Just like, you know, just who is this guy, you know, he's really not here sort of type attitude, just ignore him and maybe he'll go away, that sort of thing.

JH: Did you have any contact with other veterans on campus at that time?

JW: Ah, only the fellow who's here as my room mate now, course he's not here at the moment, but he and I grew up together, our mothers were even pregnant together. We stayed together. He was down here at the time. He dropped out some time in the middle of the fall semester when I got out, never, never came back to school until this summer I talked him in to coming down for the summer and just giving it a try to see what he could do. I told him maybe it'll help him realize who he is a little more, you know, and he

decided to do it, which is good. He just found that he can cut the mustard if he wants to. And I think that's been a good experience for him, I hope it has. That's what I'd hope it would be is give him more confidence in his own abilities. But we stayed real close together and my brother was here. And he and I have always been close, we shared the same bedroom when we grew up, things like that. (Mmm hmmm.) So that helped a lot. (Ah huh.) And of course the girl that I married was also down here at the time and that, ah, made things quite a bit easier for me.

JH: Was this the same girl that you mentioned a little while ago?

JW: Yes. [pause]

JH: Alright, ah, there's a few years here that we haven't accounted for yet. When you, when you came back to Lewisburg and then you came to school in January and stayed a semester or so, I guess you said.

JW: I stayed that semester, I went back to Lewisburg that summer and drew unemployment all summer which was, I guess, a privilege that was given me for having served in the Armed Forces. And then I came back that fall, ended up fall semester and started in the winter semester and ran into an English instructor who insisted that things would be her way regardless of what, ah, different critics, different critics had different opinions about things. She picked out what hers was and ours had to be the same so I decided that was

too much like being in the Army. JH laughs) and the hell with it.

JH: Well what's it like to face, well obviously you've done it so you'd be able to tell me, I've talked to several guys that, that said one of the hardest things about coming back to school was that, exactly that type of thing. Well this is, it was so important for this English professor, you know. I mean, after being through the situations you've been through, how, how would you react to something like that?

JW: Well, obviously the way I reacted was I totally rejected it and, ah, to the point that it probably cost me in the long run. I left school because of it. Ah, I don't know. I think a person can only be subjected to so much being within the lines [loud clicking noise in background] that you just don't want to stay. Anytime you run into it they're gonna, just gonna totally reject it. Whatever the cost, personal cost might be. I just (Mmm hmm.) it's a little bit more than I can handle and really it makes you sort of angry when you run in to that sort of thing. Now supposedly, you know, we were raised in this country when I was a young, youth, we pledged allegiance to the flag every morning, said the Lord's Prayer, and, ah, believed in basic things. The basic, ah, advantage to living in this country is personal freedom and the right to develop your own right as long as you don't infringe upon someone else's right, the same thing. And of course, military's the exact opposite of

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that. It's a, military is a dictatorship. I suppose it has to be that way _____, perhaps they wouldn't be able to function, everybody'd be fighting the system. Then when you come out of something like that, and when you feel like you payed, you, you can indeed call it a debt to society for being a citizen. When you feel like you've paid your price, you come out wanting an opportunity to formulate your own life. And you run into some of those basic attitudes that you experienced or were exposed to in the service. It's very disillusioning. You see the system as not at all what it was supposed to be or what you had been programed to believe it would be. And it's, it's very disillusioning. So I just dropped out and moved to Richmond, Virginia and got a job, went to work.

JH: I think you just articulated something that, ah, that a lot of people I've talked to have felt but they haven't got it across quite that well. Ah, what did you do in Richmond then and why Richmond, any particular reason?

JW: Well, we went to Richmond, a friend of mine that I made down here when I was here, amazing enough I did make a few, very few friends, ah, he got married. He and his girl friend got married and decided that they were going to drop out of school and, ah, first we were going to move to D.C. then, after checking into it, the job market was so favorable in Richmond, Virginia that we chose Richmond, Virginia. So we moved up there in January. (Seventy-one?) Yeah. And, ah, I applied to people like, ah, Feltmores, Reynolds Metals

Company, some, some of the bigger corporations. (Mmm hmm.) Never heard anything from them, of course. Big drive then was minority groups and females they were hiring. (Mmm hmm.) And, ah, I can't prove this but I felt like Vietnam veterans, you know, were being discriminated against in employment offices, it was claimed that they were given preference. I never experienced any of it. Cause I ended up having to take a job for two fifty an hour in a junk yard in order to get a job. Well I had to take my job at minimum wage which was about two and a quarter. Then a couple of weeks before then one of the trucks on the truck dock, ah, that was mostly night work and I didn't care for that, so I took this other job. And I worked there a couple of years. And I, ah, I went to work for a year at an Inspector Engineer Company at minimum wage. Took it because I had the opportunity to get overtime and make a little bit more money. Ah, went back to the junk yard made, played dumb, one against the other, to see who I could get the most money to get back with. (Mmm hmm.) Well actually to get out of the salvage yard. (Mmm hmm.) And, ah, after that got lucky and got a job, ah, at a fork lift company as a mechanic trainee and in 4 years time I worked myself up from mechanic trainee to service manager of the organization. (Mmm hmm.) And finally was making a decent income but was paying a hell of a personal price for it as far as, ah, having to take, having to solve everyone's problems, you know, you had lend of side one, begin side two! . . . , Richmond was a 24 hour a day town so I got a lot of calls,

night and things like that, from customers. And, ah, my marriage ended there. I don't know, I guess it was about 77 or 78.

JH: Now you got married here and then

JW: Well, I married in Richmond right after, I enlisted in January and I chuckles) on April first of, ah, 71, yeah, 71, we were married and she joined me in Richmond. And then in about 77 I guess it was, we were divorced. And, ah, I stayed there. We'd just bought a house about a year before that. And, ah, I stayed there a couple more years to build equity in it so I could get cash out of it. (Mmm hmm.) Sold that and moved with that company, with the same company, took a job in Danville, Virginia with Goodyear Tire and Rubber Plant. They had prod, contract all their service work there. They were having problems. So I went down and stayed about 10 months and it seemed like everyone were happy. So I went to Lynchburg to another branch office that was having problems, stayed there about 6 months when they decided to sell the business. And when they said, told me they were going to sell the business I said, "Look, lay me off. I want to go home and get back in school." And, ah, they were kind enough to do that so I could draw unemployment (Mmm hmm.) for a while.

JH: So had, by this time had you been considering for a while now to get back to school? You separated and divorced and you sold your house and moved around a few times.

JW: Well that spring

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JH: Ready to get back in

JW: That spring extended GI Benefits to 10 years, from 8 to 10 years. Which I thought would include me. Well as it turned out before I could get out of the company it was the first part of October, that fall. And I came to Huntington to the VA office and talked to people about whether getting Vietnam, well not Vietnam but veterans benefits to go to school on. They said I couldn't get 'em because by the time second semester started my 10 years would be up. So then therefore I would be eliminated from that program. So I had to go back to Lewisburg and get a job, enroll at night school up there which I worked at True Value Hardware Store for 2 years and went to night school. And then I came down here and borrowed money to go to school. (Mmm hmm.) Course I had, one semester I had to drop out a couple years ago up there. I was arrested for my second DUI (driving under the influence). I had a, I had developed a drinking problem over the years. And, ah, so I finally went to VA, this was the second time I went to VA cause in May oh, an, well let's see, it must have been May of 71, must of been May of 72 I went, May of 71 I went out to the VA Hospital. I was so damn nervous I just couldn't hardly deal with myself. So I decided to go out there and talk to somebody, see if, you know, (Mmm hmm.) there was any program or anything, some kind where maybe they could help me. And I talked to a psychiatrist out here and he asked me the pertinent

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questions like, "Do you ever feel like you want to go out and kill a bunch of people or anything like that?" And I said, "No. I didn't think I was insane I was just nervous." So he asked me if I ever contemplated suicide or anything like that. I told him no, I really had no desire whatsoever to end my own life. I was just nervous all the time and I was wondering if there was anything they could do. And he informed me that there was nothing they could do so I just gave up on VA at that time. And said, you know, there's no use talking to these people, they don't care, ah, they're not interested in us. We're just, it appears that we're nothing but a burden to the system. So I didn't, ah, approach the VA about anything for several years after that. And then when I finally got my second DUI, I was convinced that there ha, there was something wrong with me mentally or emotionally, and that the place for me to go was the Vietnam Veterans Hospital in Salem, Virginia which is basically, ah, deals, which basically deals with mental emotional problems (Ah huh.) veterans have. (Mmm hmm.) I went over there and they, and was interviewed by a board and they seemed to think that my major problem was an alcohol problem. So I went through the five and a half weeks of programs over there.

JH: You went in there voluntarily? I mean the guys out here never recommended that or anything, or

JW: No. It wasn't recommended to me at all. I didn't, I wasn't even aware that they had an alcohol program or anything. (Ah hum.) I just figured, you know, to use slang, it was

just a nuthouse and I felt like I was probably on the verge of going waco so I just went over there to see, you know, if there was some, something they could do for me. Plus I, I knew, I had taken some legal courses up there and I knew more my rights than I had when I was arrested the first time for DUI. (Ah huh.) So I had requested a jury trial which I knew would buy me time. And I could get over there and, ah, get in a program and possibly avoid going to jail for 6 months to a year. Although I did lose my driver's license for 10 years with a chance of getting 'em back in 5 and that was 26 months ago. It's been 26 months since I've had, ah, anything with alcohol in it whatsoever. (Ah huh.) And, ah, so you know, here I am. I'm 35 years old and I don't have a job. I go to school and I borrow money and rely on grants to go to school and I can't drive an automobile for possibly another 3 years. (Hmm hmm.) I've been in and out of several jobs. I've been married and divorced. But I'm still trying like hell. (Laughs)

JH: What, ah, program are you in here?

JW: I'm in a criminal justice/legal studies program here with minors in English and management. I'm an honor student and I have a 3.53 overall average. (JH whistles) Out of the 32 hours I've completed at Marshall last year and this summer I've, ah, made only one D and all the rest are As. So, even when, well I had my first DUI, I just finished a semester at the Community College with a 4 point average and I was

drinking til 3 or 4 in the morning at least 3 nights out of the week. I would go out in between classes and have a shot or two (mmmm mmm.) and stuff like that. So, fortunately I guess my mental capabilities haven't been harmed to much from several years of drinking. But, ah,

JH: Did your, did your drinking problem exacerbate in Vietnam or is that something that developed after you came back?

JW: No actually I didn't drink at all in Vietnam. (mmmm hmm.) Ah, I drank quite a bit before I went, as a teenager which I'd say a large percentage of teenagers do drink. (Mmm hmm.) But I didn't drink at all in Vietnam. I got in to a bunch of _____ and some friends who felt like red-necks were the ones who drink, that alcohol was a bad drug that caused violence. And, so we smoked pot, if we did anything that's what we did was smoke pot. And, ah, when I came back some of my friends were drinking but I sort of, I maybe have a glass of wine or a beer once in a while, or something like that. But that was all the desire I had. And, ah, then, after moving to Richmond I went to work for the Construction Engineer Company, it was loaded with alcoholics. I'd say 50% or more of the people, even top management, there were alcoholics who drank from their desk during the day. I fell in with some of them. And that's when my drinking really started to becoming a problem.

That's one reason I left that job. (mmmm hmm.) And got in a job where I didn't drink, during, during the week anyway. I

became a weekend drinker for quite a while. (Mmm hmm.) Then after my divorce is when my drinking got really bad and became a daily thing. Of course, I moved into a high pressure job by then. And five o'clock [S]till came the liquor store was the first stop on the way home. And, ah, after I did that for a couple of years I then came back to Lewisburg, of course that continued. I'd say for the first year I was back I didn't do anything. I went to school at night during the winter but I didn't work, I didn't have a job. I just went on what I had saved. And then when I got down to my house well I sold it to try to finance my different activities. Then I drank just about every night of the week till 3 or 4 in the morning and started getting to the point where it was 2 or 3 day binges, stuff like that.

JH: Mmm hmm. Other than you, ah, your buddy that you're rooming with here, do, are you involved with any veterans groups or any veterans, anything like that? Or is

JW: No I haven't. I'm not.

JH: There is no VVA on campus or anything like that is there?

JW: Not that I know of, no. There is a Vietnam Veterans of America down here on 7th Avenue I believe. I went down to one of their meetings although it never did turn out to be a meeting. I went down, there was supposed to be a meeting but it didn't turn out that way. There was a few of them milling around there. I think they just, just getting into the building (Ah huh.) getting established and ... I go

around these groups and usually all you hear is how the government owes me money and this and that and how Agent Orange ruined their lives and how different things have ruined their lives. Although I feel like society if, I feel like if I can acquire a debt to society, society can also acquire a debt to me. And I feel like society a debt, society's debt to me is to help me become a better citizen. And the way, the best way I know of they could do that for me is to help me finance my education, which they are not willing to do. And that's really my only complaint. I mean although they ignored me, ah, in 1971 when I wanted help with my nervous condition at that time which I'm sure played a big role in all the occurrences in my life since then, I didn't get it, still, the only real complaint that I have is the fact that I can't get veteran's benefits for educational purposes. (Ah hum.) I'm never gonna stop being a veteran. There's nobody gonna be able to take that experience away from me. I paid taxes for many years after I got out of the service and I feel like if anyone's entitled to benefits from the government for educational purposes I am. You know, of course I can't get 'em. I feel like I've paid for them twice. I paid enough taxes to pay the United States four or five veterans benefits. The thing that bothers me is that you so called Vietnam era veterans out here who never left the United States who are presently drawing Viet. benefits for educational purposes. (Mmm hmm.) And, ah, I think it's a total injustice to those who actually served in the combat area. And, ah, for that

reason I think, I feel like really, and I hate to say this but I feel like really, the majority of the American people are a bunch of ass holes, because we paid the price that most men aren't willing to pay. We did the dirty work that most of them didn't want to do. A lot of them left the country in order to avoid it. (Mmm hmm.) A lot of them did who knows all kinds of different things in order to avoid going. We were man enough to say yes, we're American, we're United States citizens and believed that it was our obligation to serve our country when we were asked not by our choice. And we did that. We did that in good faith that the system would stand behind us, but the system didn't stand behind us. And, ah, I tried very much, I used to be very, very bitter about it. I try not to be bitter about it anymore. It's difficult not to be. Ah, I pretty much just accepted it as a fact of life and something I'm going to have to live with, and hope that it never happens to anyone else. That's what [someone in background - "Joe"] will, that it doesn't happen again.

JH: You said you had developed a sort of, I guess a hostility or a skepticism about, you know, the system is pretty broad term and you were kind of elaborating on that some and I'd, you know, like, I'm interested in hearing that if you want to, ah, continue.

JW: Well, I guess the part that disillusioned me the most is that pretty much the attitude seemed to be that the best thing to do with Vietnam veterans is just sweep 'em under the rug, you know, just sort of, if you ignored them long

enough they'd go away. And, if you'll check the statistics you'll find most of 'em did, they're either dead now, or in prison, or insane, ah, a mental institution, things like that. So most of them did, in one form or another just sort of disappear from the scene. There's very few of us really left out here in society. And I doubt that there's a very large percentage of us who are able to function in society right now in a productive way. Which, you know, there's nothing anyone can do about it, it's already been done. It would be nice though, to see the system try to do something to help the few of us that are left out here and are still able to, to function, ah, as, as productive citizens and who want to be productive citizens. Like I say, there's not much we can do for Vietnam veterans now other than maybe, give us a few opportunities that we have been denied up till now. So, and use us for an example for the system to realize that this should never happen to a group again. I mean, it's convenient. While we were in Vietnam serving, ah, our peers were over here getting educations, landing the better jobs and all that. And there really wasn't much left for us when we got back because the economy swung the other direction over the years. And all our opportunities were very limited, there was definitely a social prejudice towards us. We were supposed to be the drug crazed murderers (Mmm hmm.) of the 20th century, this sort of thing.

JH: That, ah, that social prejudice and public attitude, I know you indicated it was definitely strong when you first came

back to the campus here, has that moderated any or is it, ah,

JW: Well, the younger generation it's, it's really nice in a way cause there's a lot of them who are very interested in what happened to Vietnam veterans. And of course I'm sure they're interested because they don't want the same thing to happen to them, is one reason. (Ah huh.) But, ah, they seem to be taking a little different point of view of it. Taking it curiosity; really, what did happen to these guys, ah, I don't know, you know. I think that's one, I think it's just basically died down is what it is. You know, you ignore something long enough it'll die down and that's pretty much what's happened. There are a lot of veterans that fought and fought and fought over certain issues to the point, unsuccessfully to the point where they just given up and said 'to hell with it,' you know, they're not going to do anything for us. We're not going to get any recognition for what we've done, course they spent millions of dollars to build some kind of a damn monument in Washington, D.C. for, for those unfortunate ones who died and never came home which are the very ones we can't, definitely can't do anything for, while they still continue to ignore the ones that are alive and could, could be a little something maybe done to help us get back into society. (Mmm hmm.) Ah, I know personally I stay to myself most of the time. I have ever since I was in the service. Ah, friends of mine can vouch for that. It seems to bother them more than it does

me. They even question me, why the hell don't you get out more and do things. But there's really no point. I don't, ah, I don't understand a lot of the activities that people seem to find so much pleasure in and, ah, I'm sure they don't understand where I'm coming from so I don't see much point in it.

JH: Do you have much contact with your family still? [clears throat]

JW: Well, yes I do.

JH: They still live around Lewisburg?

JW: Yeah, my mother does, my dad died...

JH: That's right, you mentioned that.

JW: ...a year ago last Memorial Day, my Mother's there. Yeah, I have quite a bit of contact with her. I didn't for several years until about 4 or 5 years ago and, ah, then I got back together with my family. And my brothers, I, you know, I get in contact with them from time to time [JH clears throat] and we all get along real well. But, ah, really that's I guess one of the few stabilizing forces in my life is the fact (mm hmm) that my mother's still alive and one of my brother's is married, one of my brothers who didn't serve he's still married and, ah, he's a school teacher, seems to be doing real well. My other brother who is a Vietnam veteran got divorced a little over a year ago, so he's living the single life like I am. The situation's

quite a bit different, he has a good job _____ and living in Columbus, seems to be doing pretty well.

JH: What do you, ah, anticipate, say, over the next couple of years? What do, what do you hope to do?

JW: Well, I have high aspirations. I'd like to go right from undergraduate work into graduate school. I hope I can get a graduate assistantship here or somewhere else.

JH: Would that be in the same field?

JW: Well, I'm going to shoot for one in one of two fields. I'm going to take whichever one I could get. (Mmm hmm.) I'm going to shoot for one in legal, in, ah, criminal justice and also one in English cause I'll have about 21 hours in English when I graduate. (Mmm hmm.) And hope that I can get one of those I, you know, I, with my age and unemployment at 35, I'll be 36 when I graduate, BA degree. That eliminates me from all government jobs. They're all, 35 is the cut off on _____ (Really?) federal jobs and most states and cities also. Especially in my field. Yeah, all government jobs is 35.

JH: Really? How about, no waiver for veterans or anything like that?

JW: I'm not aware of any, that I know of. Supposedly this ruling was passed a few years ago to eliminate what they call double dippers who are retired military personnel who get government jobs, end up drawing two retirements. Ah, I think it's just an excuse.

JH: That's absurd.

JW: Ah, an excuse to discriminate against a certain age group, myself, that don't abuse it. If they wanted to eliminate double dippers they should have eliminated double dippers and not base it on age. Ah, it also very conveniently eliminates the vast majority of Vietnam veterans from any government jobs. So, I don't know, you know. The, it very discerning to me that it's taken me several years to get my feet on the ground enough to come back and get an education and now when, that I finally am able to borrow enough money and a little grant money and things in order to finance that education that I'm going to be eliminated from the majority of employment offices, the better employment opportunities in this country. So, ah, I don't know, you know. I just don't know how to look at it. I'm just going to take what I get out of this life, that's all I can do now. Ah, if, if I'm fortunate enough to get a GA and, ah, get my masters and then I can't find employment I guess I'll have to take a shot at some kind of private enterprise or something like that. [JH clears throat] Cause you can't, ah, you know, you got to live somehow.

JH: Ah huh. Did you ever think about law school?

JW: Yeah but then, well that's really one of my, originally I wanted to do but finance is such a problem and (Yeah.) I really don't see in the immediate future how I'd be able to do that. Of course time's running out on me. I've got to

get in some kind of functional occupation. And gee, and I'm willing, even with law school I want to eventually end up on a university campus instructing. And (Ah hah.) if I can do that also by going through a, going to a master's program and hope, eventually a doctorate. So I can reach my ultimate goal either direction I go. And since law school would most likely be a lot more difficult to finance than (Mmm hmm.) a master's degree would be, I'll probably go with the master's, take that first.

JH: Yeah and law school seems like its, they're not, they're not so good about giving people money while they go through.

JW: Well, there's not too many handouts, (Yeah.) ah, going round these days. And especially if you're 35 or above, things like that, ah, they're going to say, well this guy's a little bit too old. We want to give the opportunities to younger people, ah, who will have a longer working life, things of that nature. So you know there's a lot of things that you have, I have to consider in any approach I take. Especially in the education field. [pause]

JH: You pretty satisfied with the program at Marshall?

JW: I'm satisfied with instruction and I'm very dis, I guess dissatisfied, you know, that no one, I don't think they're too concerned whether I'm satisfied or not. [JH snickers] The way the administration handles things here. Ah, there's been several instances, I remember, the attitude that the students are here to serve the administration rather than the administration here to serve the students. I think its

a dinosaur from about 50 years ago. I hope the new president here will be able to change that and realize that this university doesn't click without the students, that these enrollment problems are climbing which they have a decline this year, they have had a decline in the last several years and it's basically the result of the administrations attitude toward the students here. That's exactly what it is. This is, this is the 80s, the latter part of the 20th century and people are not here to be ruled dictatorially and when they run in to that type of atmosphere they're, when they're spending this money or hard earned money of their parents and a lot of it of their own, they're gonna find a university somewhere where the atmosphere is, is, ah, more in tune with the times and aimed toward inspiring students to excel rather than to control them, (Mmm hmm.) as if they were just, an, so many numbers on a sheet of paper and a source of income to the university.

JH: Yeah, I think students do lose sight of that a lot of times. Particularly the younger ones. That it's, ah, you know, the school wouldn't be there if it weren't for them. It's their money that's paying all those salaries.

JW: That's one thing that concerns me about the majority of this younger education. They're very, very content to just throw up their hands and say well, that's the way it is and we have to learn to live with it. That's not the way this country was built, ah, that's not the way, that's not the type of thinking this country evolved to the point it's at

now, and of course we could probably debate for a week [uh chuckles] on what point this country has reached. But, I'd like to see some more of the good American attitudes that brought this country into birth. The type of thinking that Patrick Henry died for. [music in background] The type of thinking that George Washington and his colleagues worked to establish and the type of thinking that Abraham Lincoln led this country to and died pursuing. An, I'd like to see that type attitude come to life in, in the society in this country. But if we really concerned ourselves with the individual citizen and his development and his contribution to society, rather than what society can get out of him. (Mmm hmm.) Sometimes, it seems to be, [small pause] that's, that's the feeling I get here at this university. I, I don't know if I should relate this or not because the gentleman apologized to me the next day but, I went over to the finance office to get my grant money for this fall, and, ah, it wasn't ready which I'd done all my paperwork and everything as recommended to be done on it, and in by the proper date. And the reason had, they had held up my grant money was that last March when I filled out the form where I was living in the dormitories at the time, which was a big mistake, and, ah, when it asked the question where my house would be, if I remember correctly I didn't mark either one, whether on campus or off, but anyway my form had been marked on campus somewhere along the line. I suppose because I was

living on campus at the time. (Mmm mmm.) And, they had of course the forms I filled out going to summer school, they had determined that I was living off-campus and therefore that makes a difference in how much grant money you get, it's about \$400 a year. And when I learned that, the first question I asked is why am I being discriminated against because I live off campus, which I asked the young lady who is, who was helping me at the counter. And her superior overheard me and said, "We don't discriminate against anybody, I'll take care of you in a minute." And I thought, well that's fine. And he started in with, about tax payers [JH chuckles] we taxpayers and [JH laughs] this and that, you know, and this kind of shit. (JH: The 'ol saw.) And, I don't know how old the fellow is but I have a feeling he's considerably younger than I am and I asked him pointedly, I said, "Look mister," [JH chuckles] I said, "I've been a taxpayer for 20 years. I'm a Vietnam veteran, I spent 18 months in Vietnam and I can't get VA benefits because I been out of the service over 10 years. And I said, "If there, any damn body standing at this counter [JH chuckles] that I feel is entitled to grant money, it's me." [Paused] He said, "Well," he said, "we don't discriminate against anybody." I said, "Well, someone's discriminating against me cause I'm not living on campus, and my simple question is, is why." And he said, "Well, it's the Board of Regents." I said, "Okay, that's what I wanted to know." JH: He said, we don't discriminate the Board of Regents does. [Laughs]

JW: His attitude was still, ah, ah, I don't really know how to explain it. It seemed like he was angry and resentful toward me for some reason. And, and he went on and on about how, about tax payers and all this stuff and I just told him, I said, "Well the board of Regents is approved me to have this money and granted me this money, and the Federal Government has approved me money and granted me money and I want my money." He said, "Okay, I'll, we'll have it for you tomorrow afternoon, stop by." Well the next day when I went over to the cashier's office to pick, and pick up my check, as I was leaving he came out of the door to the cashier's office, I suppose he was handling some kind of business, and apologized to me for the day before, which I graciously accepted and told him I didn't think either one of us had conducted ourselves as the gentlemen that we normally did. Which I can understand that he's also, he's in a high pressure situation, especially that time of the year (Mmm hmm.) with a lot of complaints an bull shit from a lot of people so that was alright. But it's like I told him that day when this occurred, I just looked at him, I said, "That's exactly the problem with this university." I said, "You people think that we students are here to serve you and we're not. You are public servants. You're employed and paid through public funds. You're here to serve us. And when this university realizes that, you'll find that you have a lot [JH coughing in background] less enrollment.

problems here and you'll have a lot better community life on this campus. Because I've been associated with Marshall University since I was 5 years old. My mother, L.H. clears throat when I was 5 years old, came down here to summer school in order to get her teaching degree and her Masters and she went on 30 hours beyond masters. She's now retired after 30 years of teaching. I've been associated with this University campus since I was 5. I have a brother who has 30 hours beyond his masters from Marshall University. And this is the second time I've attended Marshall University. And I have never seen this campus so dead, and the students so uninolved in what goes on at this university (That's true.) as they are now. (That's, that's.) It's pitiful and it all stems from the attitude of the administration. Until that changes this university is going to do nothing but go downhill. I told him also that the very reason I was not living on campus this semester was because the dorms were no more than slums, which they're not, and that they could not supply the services which were advertised in the student handbook and in the contract that would be there; such as laundry facilities on every other floor, a lounge area. I lived in Holderby Hall, the lounge was locked 90% of the time I couldn't get in there, which our laundry room (end of tape)