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Jacob Sellers

HON 396

May 3, 2005

Interview with Dennis R. Johnson, April 2nd, 2005

Transcribed and edited by Jacob Sellers on April 25, 2005.

[JACOB SHANE SELLERS]: Okay. This is Jacob Sellers interviewing Dennis Johnson on April 2nd, 2005. I just have to ask you a few questions. First of all, what branch of the military were you in?

[DENNIS RAY JOHNSON]: The Marine Corps. United States Marine Corps.

SELLERS: What division?

JOHNSON: First Marine Division.

SELLERS: What was the highest rank you achieved?

JOHNSON: I was drafted in the Marine Corps, and my highest rank was Corporal for two years of military service.

SELLERS: You were in there for a total of, what was it, about two years?

JOHNSON: I was in a full two years.

SELLERS: Okay. Served in the Vietnam War, right?

JOHNSON: Vietnam War. '68 and '69.

SELLERS: What were you doing before the war, as far as, like, career goes? Before you were enlisted, drafted.

JOHNSON: I worked construction work, and I was in a machine shop.

SELLERS: Didn't you work in the mines also.

JOHNSON: No, I didn't work in coal mines until 1970, until I got out of the Marine Corps.

SELLERS: I thought you had worked there before. And what was your first impression of the war before you went, before you were drafted or anything.

JOHNSON: Oh, I was just a typical American. I thought it was just a gung-ho thing to do, go fight for your country, you know, like most people thought it was. Except for the hippies that just believed in love and peace.

SELLERS: You said you were drafted, right? Drafted to go into regular service, just the army?

JOHNSON: Yeah, I was drafted in the army, and I joined the Marine Corps on a two year plan. Judge Garvin (?) in Fayetteville had me drafted...for fighting.

SELLERS: For fighting! Tell me about that. What happened there?

JOHNSON: I was just in High School, and this black boy, colored boy, this negro, he slapped me and I hit him over the head with a chair in the study hall, and then about a year later he decided he was gonna knife me, kill me, and him and his two brothers, two of them cut on me and one of them beat on me, and they went and got a warrant for me...went to court and I told the judge, "just forget about the whole thing," you know. I said, "Every dog has his day. Judge Garvin didn't see things that way, and he questioned the two boys that cut me, and one of them said he cut me with a kitchen knife. Judge said, "A case knife, a butter knife, a what?" He said, "No, sir. A butcher knife." And the judge said, "You was plannin' on doing bodily harm." And the boy wasn't real smart, and he said "Yeah, Judge, we was planning on killing him," and he said he cut me with a six-inch knife, and his brother said he had to beat on me or his two brothers

woulda cut him. So he ended up...they got on probation, and then they couldn't draft them where they was on probation, so they drafted me. Said I was inciting a riot, but...

SELLERS: That is just crazy.

JOHNSON: That was back when Martin Luther King was in there, and they felt they was just discriminated against...you know.

SELLERS: You said once you were drafted you requested to be put into the Marine Corps, instead of the Army.

JOHNSON: Yeah, I volunteered for the Marine Corps, two year draft, to keep from going into the Army.

SELLERS: What made you want to go into the Marines instead of the Army?

JOHNSON: 'Cause, they was the toughest, best fighting force.

SELLERS: No other reason? You didn't have any other negative opinion about the Army? You just wanted to be in the best of the best?

JOHNSON: And a couple of friends of mine was in the Marine Corps, and they said I should go into the Marine Corps. When I went into the Marine Corps, they put us all on a bus, swore us in, and took us to Paris Island, and when you came on Paris Island...it was an island, and the bus pulled on the island, and the drill instructors looked like state police all standing around, screaming, and hollering, and they had footprints painted out on the pavement. And the drill instructor stepped onto the bus and said, "I want y'all standing on those footprints in three seconds," and he said, "there'll be no smoking on my footprints." So we mingled around, got off of the bus. We were standing on the footprints and this one boy had a cigarette, and he had the fire away on it, had it hot

boxed. And the drill instructor walked up to him and said, "I told you there wouldn't be no smoking on my footprints. Said, "Stick your tongue out," and the old boy stuck his tongue out, and the cigarette—the drill instructor grabbed that cigarette out of his mouth and put it out on his tongue. You know, they, they'd teach you right from wrong.

SELLERS: And there were no repercussions for that? Like, the drill....at that time the drill instructor could do things like that and get away with it, right?

JOHNSON: Oh, yes. It was during war time, in Vietnam, and the military only had two months to train you. Military, just plain military, and that wasn't using a rifle or nothing, just basic rifle fundamentals. They had to beat it in your head. What the military ended up in, they read your mail before you sent a letter home, so you couldn't write mommy and daddy and tell them they was mistreating you, or your congressmen or senators. And, you know, they just beat it in your head. They, what they done, it was all psychological. It was psychological. They broke you down till you felt you was low as a worm. You wasn't fit to be on this earth. Especially in their Marine Corps. Then they built you, developed your mind and your body to *be* a Marine. They brainwashed you. You didn't think it could be done like that, but it's easy done. And they brainwashed you until they could tell you jump on ten men at one time, and you'd think you could whoop them, you'd do it...without hesitation.

SELLERS: How did you...how did you take that break-down, when they were knocking your character down, you know, kind of...like you said, making you feel as low as possible?

JOHNSON: Well, what really backs all of that up, being brainwashed, is them telling you, "We can discharge you for not being military fit," you know, to serve in the Marine

Corps. And you couldn't come home and face your family if you had any backbone at all, you know. You couldn't come back and face your...say, "I couldn't...couldn't be a military person. I couldn't hack it. I was just a wimp." You couldn't come back and face your family and do that.

SELLERS: And they wouldn't let you back in any branch at all or just the Marines?

JOHNSON: Well I suppose if you got out of the Marines, you *might* be able to get in some other line of service, but they had you motivated. You had to be motivated, like you wasn't allowed to speak to nobody when I was in there in '67. You weren't allowed to speak to nobody for two months. Drill instructor said, "I'm your mommy. I'm your daddy. I'm your God Almighty," said, "You don't do nothing but breathe without asking me." You had to request permission to speak to them, and if they didn't want to speak to you, they'd tell you, "Just get, Maggot. I don't wanna hear it." And you had to ask permission to go to the bathroom. You had to ask permission to speak.

SELLERS: You want to pause where it's kind of starting to snow now and head inside?

JOHNSON: Well, I reckon we could.

[Break to move into the house after it began to snow outside]

SELLERS: Okay, we're in here where it's warm now. I couldn't handle the cold. Where were we? You were talking about boot camp. What was an average day like? Like once you got started, your routine from when you woke up to when you finished in the day?

JOHNSON: Oh, you woke up about five o' clock in the morning. Everyone had to be

standing at attention in your rack. Then you'd probably go out, and you'd do exercise and go out and run up to five miles a day to start with, and then you'd go to the mess hall and eat, and then you'd do exercises. They'd send you to school to see—and give you tests and stuff—to see what you was best qualified to do out of three choices you picked, like mechanics, or tanks, or trucks, or combat engineer, building bridges, carpenter work, or whatever. You know, you had a basic M.O.S. Everybody was basically a grunt, which is a foot soldier, a foot marine. You know, that's your basic, but you each had sent to school to taught different skills while you was in the Marine Corps.

SELLERS: And what was it you went in for again? What specific type of work?

JOHNSON: I went in to be an engine, uh...my first, where I was a mechanic and my dad owned a junk yard, so I was mechanically minded, but uh...I went in to be a heavy equipment operator. And it so happened I tested out good enough to be schooled for a heavy equipment operator. But then, after they sent me to 'Nam, I became a mechanic on river boats, on tug boats for running a ferry across the river, because they didn't have enough mechanics, and I tested out best on mechanics so they made a mechanic out of me...on those river boats. But, after you finished your basic training in boot camp, they sent you to a different company, different companies, for school, then after you finished...no...they sent you to infantry training on how to fire any kind of gun, and after infantry training they sent you to your school for your, whatever M.O.S. you was qualified for. But in basic training you had to learn how to take a M-16 rifle apart, or M-14 rifle, and take a .45 pistol apart and put it back together, like, blind-folded in forty-five seconds.

SELLERS: You were in the States training for eleven months before you went overseas,

right?

JOHNSON: I was in training, boot camp for two months, infantry training for about two months, and then I went to school for about six months.

SELLERS: For the mechanics stuff.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SELLERS: And you were allowed to come home for a little while before you went overseas...

JOHNSON: Yeah. Whenever you visit boot camp, and then you go to infantry training, you got to come home for a couple weeks, on leave for about a week or two. After you was in there for about four months you got to come home for a couple months.

SELLERS: What did you do while you were home?

JOHNSON: What did I do? Just ran around, and seen all my friends, and drank beer, and played Billy Badass.

SELLERS: So, as far as family goes, were people upset that you had to go over to fight?

JOHNSON: Yeah, they appreciated what I was doing, and looked up. Except, big cities you went in, you know, people protested it, you know, because...called you baby killers and stuff.

SELLERS: So by the time you went over it had already escalated to the point where that kind of protest was heavy?

JOHNSON: Yeah. That protest was pretty big. And, uh, like Martin Luther King was protesting, burning cities and stuff, you know, and having people killed where they... Ignorant American people made a national hero out of him, Martin Luther King Day, where he had all the cities burned and everything. He just done more destruction, and

then they made a hero out of him. My, always my opinion, the Afro-Americans was never discriminated against. Nothing compared to the American Indians. You know, they just killed them for living.

SELLERS: I remember you telling me a story last time—unfortunately I didn't get it on tape—where they were supposed to send somebody to pick you up after you came home on leave before you were supposed to go overseas. Didn't something happen with that? Like they were supposed to come pick you up and then didn't...

JOHNSON: Oh! I came home one weekend on a weekend pass, and whoever picks you up, you know you meet in a big circle like a carpool, out of North Carolina, or you know, South Carolina, and whoever gave you a ride up to West Virginia was responsible for giving you a ride back. And I came home one weekend, and this boy didn't pick me up to take me back, and I waited three or four hours—which I would, still would have been unauthorized absence because being five minutes late is just like being twenty-one days late. As long as you wasn't absent over twenty-one days...twenty-one days was AWOL, but up to twenty-one days was unauthorized absence. I just waited and stayed home an extra week and went back the next weekend.

SELLERS: Didn't you get in trouble when you got there?

JOHNSON: Oh yeah, they handcuffed my hands behind my back. Two MPs come up to the barracks and kicked me down three flights of stairs, and went before a full bird colonel, and he fined me like sixty dollars, but he didn't but my rank from private first class, but it was in my record books, and I had to spend a lot of time as PFC before I made Lance Corporal—that was the next rank above it—and then I made Lance Corporal, and then I made Marine of the Month, and then I made Corporal.

SELLERS: Could you not defend yourself because that guy didn't pick you up?

JOHNSON: Oh, I could have told on him, and got out of it, but I wasn't that kind of person to rat on him.

SELLERS: I didn't know if you could explain, you know, "My ride didn't get me."

JOHNSON: I told him, but I didn't tell him who it was, the man's name, because he would have blamed him for all of it, and I just wasn't that type of person.

SELLERS: Do you remember what day you had to leave home to go over to Vietnam?

JOHNSON: No I can't remember. I spent twelve months and twenty four days in Vietnam. Uh, the Marine Corps spent twelve months and twenty-four days, which is thirteen months. The Army spent, like, twelve months. The Navy spent like six months, come home for a couple months, go back six months, come home for a couple months, and then go back six months. But, I couldn't remember the exact date when I went over there. I got out in September of '69, and it was time for me to be discharged from the Marine Corps, and it was in September when I got out, of '69. So you can back up thirteen months. That's when I went over there.

SELLERS: So that would be August of '68, or whatever?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SELLERS: How did you actually travel? Was it by boat or by plane?

JOHNSON: No, we flew a plane to California, and then from California we went to more training, infantry training, and then, oh, a big Boeing Jet took us over.

SELLERS: Where did you land?

JOHNSON: We landed in Danang. And when we landed, they took us all to a big building, the whole plane load of us. Different branches of services picked you up there,

and then you reported there, and you know... And then they put us all in a big long building, everybody who was in the Marine Corps—I don't know what the Navy and the Army done—but they set us in this big long building, and passed out joints of marijuana...

SELLERS: Who?

JOHNSON: The Marine Corps did.

SELLERS: I mean, like, the officers?

JOHNSON: Yeah. And we all sat around, and they showed us the marijuana, and let us see what it looked like, and see what it smelled like. And then we lit it, and we seen what it taste like, and we seen what it felt like. Then they stood there and told us, said, "If we ever catch you with it, you're up shit creek without a paddle. You know, you're going straight to the brig."

SELLERS: So what happened on your first day once you were over there?

JOHNSON: Well, after that first night we was there, and then they sent us to different company areas. Whatever battalion or company you was with, they sent you there and you reported there.

SELLERS: How did you feel on your way over? Was that frightening, waiting to go over there and be in that--

JOHNSON: No! It was exciting.

SELLERS: What about the night before? You weren't nervous at all?

JOHNSON: No. I was just rearing to see what it was like.

SELLERS: Had you had any family who had been in the war before, or...?

JOHNSON: No, I had friends that had, and told me about different things that happened.

But usually when you first got over there, they'd put you on guard duty around the battalion, around the outside of the battalion for a few days until you got to see what it was like.

SELLERS: What other kinds of things did they have you doing over there, as far as any sort of everyday work that you would be doing as a job, if there was nothing going on specifically. I know you mentioned before helping to put together the bridges.

JOHNSON: Well, you had to work on the equipment and stuff for the inspections, keep all the equipment in good shape. You had to pull guard duty, and work on the equipment was really all you did.

SELLERS: Just, any kind of equipment you worked on?

JOHNSON: Dozers, cranes, everything but...common, but when it got into motors and stuff, rebuilding motors and stuff and light units, you'd send them to what they called Zulu Maintenance where they had people trained just to work on motors and electrical stuff. And then you, they would send you on a truck convoy, but like each day before you went out of your compound, whether it was in the battalion rear or out in the bush, they had to send sweep teams out in the road to check for mines and stuff, you know, because they just couldn't send a truck or a convoy out on the roads, with a lot of dirt roads, without sweeping the roads to make sure there wasn't no land mines buried or anything, you know for to run over for a truck to blow up. But that was a everyday thing. You had to sweep the roads because they would bury mines and stuff along the roads of the night.

SELLERS: Did you always stay in one area or were you moved around the country a lot?

JOHNSON: You always had your, like your battalion rear was just outside of Danang, but you would go to different bridge sites or ferries to work, and they would send you out for a month or two, however long you wanted to stay, out in the bush you called it.

SELLERS: Did you make any friends while you were over there?

JOHNSON: Friends? Yeah, I...several friends, but I lost all the addresses. Never had any contact with any of them since I came back. I ran into, like, three boys that was around here that was over there at the same time I was, and I seen them. And one of them died about two months ago.

SELLERS: So did you have people in this area who you kept in touch with?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SELLERS: And those were the same people you were friends with before you went in?

JOHNSON: I never had touch with nobody that was in my battalion since I came back. Just people I ran into for an hour or two over there, just three or four guys. But West Virginia had more people in Vietnam than any other branch of service.

SELLERS: Really?

JOHNSON: Yeah, from...there was more people in Vietnam from West Virginia than in any other state in the union.

SELLERS: That baffles me, that there were that many people who went from West Virginia when we aren't really that large of a state.

JOHNSON: Well, they just volunteered, you know.

SELLERS: Said you were excited on the way, well not really excited, but that you wanted to know how things were gonna go. Once you actually started seeing how it was over there, did the feeling change at all?

JOHNSON: Oh, well, yes. I learned to get scared when I was shot at. And, you know, when they bombed I watched the planes bomb, and jets, Cobra jets. But back then in '68, there's no comparison to a war in back then than it is now. You just, you didn't have...just big missiles was all. You didn't have small missiles or trucks that carried missiles or nothing. And you didn't have none of the technology you've got today. It's just unbelievable how much technology they've come up with as far as using small missiles and stuff.

SELLERS: When you were traveling around did you just travel by boat? I remember you telling me a story before about how you would have to, either when you were building the bridges or just traveling in general, you would have to shoot at the bodies before they were tied to explosives.

JOHNSON: You traveled on trucks. They was part of the time going from one compound to another or one work site to another, and you traveled on trucks. But we had a road going from North Vietnam to South Vietnam, from up North, from the DMZ all the way to South Vietnam you had a Route 1, the main route, one route going straight down the middle of the country. South of Danang, I forget how many miles it was, you had a [?SangKabang?] River, and we couldn't keep a bridge in because they kept it blowed out all the time. So there we had to run a ferry to haul the traffic across the river, because they couldn't keep a bridge in. Everything going across the river had to go by ferry, whole convoys and stuff, you know because we couldn't keep a bridge in. And then we'd take the ferry down the river of the evening and park it and stand guard on it. But we'd put the whole convoys across the river, and there was an artillery battery across the river, and everybody would stay in the artillery battery because it was a big artillery

battery, and you was safe there. And they'd mortar that artillery battery all the time because they could destroy everything in the convoy, you know, staying in the artillery battery. And if things got too rough on our side of the river, there wasn't but about twenty of us there, we would go down the road about a quarter of a mile and we'd get in Dodge City's compound.

SELLERS: That sounds really familiar for some reason.

JOHNSON: Oh, John Wayne made that movie, *Dodge City*.

SELLERS: I knew I had heard it somewhere before.

JOHNSON: They had a sign up: "For Sale." Wouldn't nobody give two cents for it. It sat on a little hill, and...It was terrible, because they would have bombing up the river.

And then when monsoon rains come, like we have a winter time...snow, they wouldn't have snow, they would have cold rains, and they called it monsoons, and it was just rain, rain, rain. And all those dead bodies would float down the river, and when we was standing guard on the ferry we had to shoot those bodies floating in the water so they wouldn't have a bomb tied to them. And then we would have to throw half bound blocks of TNT off all night long, no further than five minutes apart, just mixing times up, so if they was swimming in with scuba gear on to blow the ferry up we could kill them with a percussion. Then the next morning when they daylight come, you'd have to take a big long pole, bamboo pole or aluminum pole, and shove the dead bodies out where they was piled up and shot all to pieces, shove them out so they would float on down the river so you could go to work.

SELLERS: What about the story you told me about the bodies washing up the river, and you went out to get a drink of water one day—

JOHNSON: Oh, no, we'd go swimming of the evening, and dead bodies would float into you if you weren't looking, and we'd take that, we had a Navy [?Mike?] boat, and we'd take it up the river sometimes in the evening, there at dark, and shoot those villages all to hell just to have something to do.

SELLERS: All enemies in there?

JOHNSON: They was Viet Cong, the biggest part of them. Or it really didn't matter to us, we was just killing people.

SELLERS: As far as the swimming goes, if there was a river full of dead bodies why would you go swimming in it? I mean, I would just go without the swimming.

JOHNSON: Well, you had to take a bath somewhere.

SELLERS: Well, I thought you were just talking about swimming around. "Hey, let's go to the pool." "Let's go down to the river."

JOHNSON: Well, yeah, that's what we'd do everyday. It was hot all day and we'd go swimming of the evening. Didn't nobody wore swimming trunks. We all just went naked.

SELLERS: You weren't worried about disease or anything, from the stuff in the river?

JOHNSON: Just never... We took malaria pills. It never dawned on us.

SELLERS: What's the—I know, obviously, it wasn't a good time—but if you have any good memories, as far as just being with people or anything like that, between the hard parts. Is there anything about it, any moments where you were able to relax? Or was it just constant tension except for the couple days you were able to come home?

JOHNSON: Now, see, when you was over there for thirteen months you got R and R. You got to go to different countries for two weeks. I forget what countries you could go

to. You could go to Australia, different countries, but you couldn't go to Hawaii. Just the officers went to Hawaii. You could go to Australia or Japan or different countries.

SELLERS: Where'd you go?

JOHNSON: Nowhere.

SELLERS: You didn't go anywhere at all? Were you not able to or just didn't want to?

JOHNSON: I just didn't want to.

SELLERS: Why not? I mean, if you could get out and go see a place that wasn't in that situation, wasn't completely riddled with war.

JOHNSON: Well, instead of spending money, I just saved my money.

SELLERS: I thought they just sent you there for free. Stupid of me, I don't know why I would think that.

JOHNSON: They sent you to different countries free. The trip there and back didn't cost you nothing. But the money you spent while you was there, you had to spend your own money.

SELLERS: How much were you able to earn? I mean how much did they pay you for being over there?

JOHNSON: Oh, God, in '68? It wasn't much. It was according to your rank. Probably three or four-hundred dollars a month, hell, probably a hundred dollars a week.

SELLERS: Was that cash that you had just to spend for yourself? Because didn't you say that they had a certain kind of money they would print out, and then change that periodically?

JOHNSON: Yeah, you didn't... You got a pay voucher, and you could send what money you wanted to home.

SELLERS: So, total they only gave you three or four hundred.

JOHNSON: Yeah. It wasn't much at all.

SELLERS: What about when you got out? Were there sort of benefits at that time?

What kind of benefits or pay did you receive once you were back home, if any?

JOHNSON: Oh, we got, like, a maximum bonus was four hundred dollars, according to how many different medals you had and stuff. You had to have a certain amount of medals and stuff to get the maximum four hundred dollars.

SELLERS: And that was just a one time bonus?

JOHNSON: One time bonus.

SELLERS: So you had to go to work when you came back, like immediately?

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah.

SELLERS: Was that when you went into the...started working at the mines?

JOHNSON: Yeah, I went back to construction work for a little while, and then went back into the coal mines.

SELLERS: What made you go to the mines instead of just staying with construction work?

JOHNSON: Because, the heavy equipment you had to move here and there on different road jobs or building bridges or whatever. So I didn't want to do that. I wanted to stay in once place, so I went in the coal mines.

SELLERS: Did you stay here in Fayetteville?

JOHNSON: Yeah, I lived here the whole time. Fifty-seven years.

SELLERS: What kind of work did you do in the mines when you got back?

JOHNSON: Roof bolt operator. Installed bolts into the roof of the mines to keep the top

supported, from falling down.

SELLERS: Where there a lot of other veterans working with you?

JOHNSON: Yeah. There was a few, but it took, oh, probably six months to get adjusted to back here in civilization, because you couldn't stand to be around over, oh, six people was a crowd to be around. And it just tore your nerves all to hell for cars driving so fast. And everything moving so quick, you was always suspicious.

SELLERS: The back of your mind was always telling you it was a threat.

JOHNSON: Yeah. Like, Debbie and Tina busted a balloon when I come home, and I fell right in the middle of the kitchen floor and was ready to start shooting at people.

SELLERS: How long did it take you to get over that?

JOHNSON: Years. I still have flashbacks. That's why I don't go turkey hunting, because everybody running around in camouflage, the next thing you know I'm sighting a gun at them, so I just go deer hunting. I don't turkey hunt.

SELLERS: What's the difference?

JOHNSON: Deer season you wear blaze orange.

SELLERS: You don't have to wear orange when you're turkey hunting?

JOHNSON: No.

SELLERS: Why not?

JOHNSON: You wear camouflage.

SELLERS: That doesn't make any sense.

JOHNSON: Well, a turkey can see so much better than a deer.

SELLERS: I mean, the same risk is being run of someone being shot...

JOHNSON: You just don't have to wear any blaze orange turkey hunting. Is that thing

running?

SELLERS: Yeah, it's running still.

JOHNSON: Turn it off a minute, and I'll smoke a cigarette.

[Interview stopped for brief break]

SELLERS: We were just talking about the other countries that were there.

JOHNSON: Branches of service. You had the British, or the English over there, and you had the Australians over there, and you had the Japanese over there, and you had the Koreans over there. Different branches of service that belonged to the Geneva Convention was over there fighting right along with American soldiers, but they had their own companies.

SELLERS: And who was it you said didn't adhere to the Geneva Convention?

JOHNSON: Korean R.O.K. Marines didn't have to go by Geneva Convention. They could kill anybody any time they got ready, and they wasn't penalized for it, not unless their own officers, battalion officers would give them any discipline. And sometimes they would just court-martial them and shoot 'em on sight, their own soldiers, depending on what they'd done.

SELLERS: You said the North Koreans would--

JOHNSON: The South Koreans was there.

SELLERS: Sorry. Sorry. The South Korean R.O.K. Marines would just go up and down the street shooting civilians sometimes.

JOHNSON: No, when you was out in the country. Out in the country. They wouldn't

do it right in front, in the middle of a city or nothing. But if anybody give them a big hassle, they'd shoot 'em. You know, piss 'em off, and they'd kill 'em.

SELLERS: Tell me about the Playboy magazine one more time.

JOHNSON: Oh, we was riding down the road in a truck. I had a Playboy magazine. The Korean R.O.K. Marines, they was, a big fantasy was looking at Playboy magazines. Two of them got in an argument over it, and I just told them the best shot could have the magazine, and I just thought they'd shoot at hogs or water buffalo or something, but they started killing civilians, little kids and women out in the rice patties, so I had to tear the magazine in half and give each one of them a half to get them to quit killing them little kids. I didn't mind them killing old women and men so bad, but when they started shooting at them little kids, you know, on bicycles, along the road, that's taking it a bit too far.

SELLERS: Why was shooting little kids worse than shooting the older--

JOHNSON: Well, just a little kid you know. You'd much rather kill a man or a woman as you would kill a little kid.

SELLERS: Yeah, I guess. I don't know. Shooting anybody in general...just... I remember you telling me before about something else that happened, you got in an argument with one of them.

JOHNSON: Oh, I got in an argument over one of them, Operation Arizona, over a raft I had at one bridge site. One of them took my raft, and I couldn't talk none, they put me out with 'em to keep maintenance up on a bridge, a walk bridge, and I got in an argument over a raft. He had took my raft out in the river and I told him to bring it back, so I couldn't talk no South Korean, so I cussed him in Vietnamese. So he come to the bank

with [?k-bar?], a knife, and was gonna kill me with it. So I almost shot him with a rifle, and they got him stopped, and then I explained to them what happened, and they took him up in the middle of formation and two of them held him by each arm and beat him with a 2x4 out of a wooden pilot, beat him unconscious, over the head and back and shoulders, arms, beat him unconscious until I told them there wasn't no use, sense in killing him, you know, because they liked me pretty well.

SELLERS: Why were you...I was under the impression that it would just be Americans with Americans and French with French, British with British. Why were you with the Koreans?

JOHNSON: Because they had different islands and swamps and stuff, and we had to put walk bridges in over to them to keep from wading water waist-high. You know, put little floating walk bridges, and had to keep maintenance up on them.

SELLERS: What was Operation Arizona?

JOHNSON: It was just a operation they had to clear out a few thousand acres that they had Viet Cong in there, a Viet Cong strong hold, and they had to get in there to clear the out where Viet Cong had different compounds and stuff. And then sometimes you was out, and like up toward the DMZ, it was mountainous up there and you had to shoot the side of the mountain, oh, maybe a half a mile wide, half a mile high, or a mile high, all night long so if Viet Cong was coming in to attack you, you'd kill them. And you'd have to shoot the side of that mountain all night long to keep them from sneaking in on you.

SELLERS: Here's a question. Just something that was kind of, I was wondering about. If they Koreans—was it just the R.O.K Marines or was it any of the Korean soldiers didn't have to adhere to the Geneva Convention?

JOHNSON: Just the Korean R.O.K. Marines.

SELLERS: Why were they allowed to do that by other nations who were adhering to the Geneva Convention.

JOHNSON: You got me. Well, I don't know.

SELLERS: I just figured that they would try to put some sort of stop to it. I don't know why. Is it maybe that that would seem like an act of war to Korea if we tried to stop their soldiers during that?

JOHNSON: They disciplined their own soldiers, and that's all they would accept.

SELLERS: I just didn't know why we would, why any of the countries who were part of the Geneva Convention would allow the R.O.K. Marines to do that, to the civilians and things when you weren't supposed to. What was the difference between doing it yourself and allowing someone else to do it?

JOHNSON: Well, hell, there was so many people getting killed over there, like, sometimes there was as many people got killed in one day as has the whole Iraqi War has. You know what I mean? More men got killed over there in one day than the whole Iraqi War has put together, you know what I mean? You had a thousand times more people killed over there than you did over in Iraq or Iran or wherever, but, you know, that was just a political war, that's all Iraq and Iran is, just a rich man's war is all that's for, my opinion.

SELLERS: I agree wholeheartedly.

JOHNSON: Iraq and Iran, over in Saudi Arabia, they want that oil. They can refine that oil for fifteen cents a gallon. Mexico owns us billions of dollars. Mexico does, but Mexico's got all kinds of oil. They could pay us in oil. But the United States don't want

Mexico's oil, because it costs sixty-five cents a gallon to refine Mexico's oil where it only costs fifteen cents a gallon to refine the oil over there.

SELLERS: Where'd you find that out?

JOHNSON: A Mexican told me down at Point Pleasant, was a petroleum engineer.

SELLERS: Oh, yeah, I remember you telling me that now. Back to what we were doing before, not to go off on a tangent all the way from what we were talking about earlier, but while we're on the political aspect of stuff—What did you—I know you said you just thought it was duty to go over and fight for your country when you were going. What did you know about the war, the Vietnam War before you were went, before you were drafted?

JOHNSON: They just had the American people brainwashed. The reason we fought the Vietnam War was on account of Russia. Communism. They said communism was taking Vietnam over, killing the people and stuff, just like "Haddam" Hussein was, and Osama Bin Laden was over in Afghanistan, and Iraq, and Iran. It's the same thing. The government just put up a front, and has brainwashed the American people. Like, Vietnam was fighting communism. Over there they say we're fighting terrorists. But we don't have no terrorists. Only terrorists we have is, you know, that fifteen or twenty people who came over here after money and learned to fly a plane so they could bomb the Trade Center. That was weapons of mass destruction. They haven't found the first weapon of mass destruction over there in that Iraqi War. You know, they ain't found the first weapon of mass destruction. They just telling the people that are there, just to cover up the fight—

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE; BEGIN SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

JOHNSON: ...weapons of mass destruction, which there ain't no weapons of mass destruction. They ain't found none. You know, what we're over there fighting, for oil, and we're fighting over there for Bush's daddy. 'Cause, see, they went over there for Osama Bin Laden, right, for bombing the—

[Stopped recording until we finished an off-topic discussion]

SELLERS: We were talking about the, like you said, the political perceptions, like how Vietnam was sort of a political war, how we were brainwashed into thinking we were going over there just to battle the communists, and now obviously you see that that was, that what we were told was wrong, or a lie to get us to support the war—

JOHNSON: Because, the United States is a wartime economy. That's the whole thing. Every time there's a war going on, business is good. Business is good for the whole country when a war's going on. That's a fact. You killing people off, making war materials. Every business is good. It's going up all over.

SELLERS: When did your perception change? When did you change from being extremely patriotic about the war, and just wanting to go over there and fight. Not necessarily changing that you wanted to fight for your country, but when did you realize that we weren't just over there to fight communism, that we had a different goal?

JOHNSON: Oh, just about the time the war was over.

SELLERS: So, was it after you got home that you really started to see it?

JOHNSON: Yeah. Oh, I realized watching the news and everything. I wasn't brainwashed. I could see what was going off, and see what the war was accomplishing. The war wasn't accomplishing a thing. What'd we do? Left how many thousands people got killed in Vietnam? A hundred thousand or something?

SELLERS: More, I'm pretty sure.

JOHNSON: More than that. Got killed for nothing. But, business was good during the Vietnam War, economy was good.

SELLERS: How'd you feel about that? About that sort of deception that happened, you know, for them telling you were going over there for one reason and then finding out it was something completely different?

JOHNSON: I had hard feelings against the political leaders of this country, just like I have now over us having political, you know, fighting a war over weapons of mass destruction, which they don't even exist. We're just over there for a wartime economy, fighting for big politicians who own these big corporations, over there getting all that work done, big multimillion dollar contracts and the tax payers paying for it. That's all the war's over. And to get the cheap oil over there. The price of refining it is what this war's all over. We got oil we use out of Mexico. Even every drop of the oil that comes down the Alaskan pipeline, we don't use a drop of it. Every bit of it's sold to Japan, because we can buy oil cheaper. They claim we can get more money out of that oil selling it to Japan than we can... It's the only thing, in a nutshell, the war's for the rich to get richer and the poor to get poorer.

SELLERS: Did you encounter, in this area, in West Virginia, did you encounter any sort of protest, or any sort of hard feelings towards you?

JOHNSON: No, the protest was just mostly in big cities. You know, where you had large populations.

SELLERS: So there was no sort of—

JOHNSON: You had a few smart people who figured out what the war was over, trying to tell everybody what it was over.

SELLERS: As far as the homeless population goes, from what I understand, at least the way it's understood now, a lot of soldiers came back from Vietnam and ended up being homeless, just not having a place to stay or end up with addictions that they had acquired that they couldn't really kick. Was that a problem in this area? I mean, you said that you only had a few people working with you had been in the war, but there were tons of people from West Virginia.

JOHNSON: No, that wasn't a big problem. It was in the big cities.

SELLERS: Once again, just big city stuff.

JOHNSON: Yeah. A lot of people, it wrecked their nerves. They ended up seeing people killed, and just, bombing and everything, it just totally affected their nerves, but, right now everybody's coming back from Iraq saying their having war, whatever that is, flashbacks. There going to get them a check for it, the government's paying them for it, but you know they forgot about the Vietnam veterans, and the Korean veterans, most of the World War II veterans is all dead. You know, like this country elected Clinton for President. What was he? A draft dodger. How did they put a draft dodger in the White House as President? This country's going to hell in a heartbeat.

SELLERS: How did you—let's see—Kennedy would have been assassinated right before you were sent over to Vietnam right?

JOHNSON: He was assassinated, what, early sixties?

SELLERS: Was it early sixties or mid-sixties?

JOHNSON: It was about sixty, sixty-four.

SELLERS: So, Johnson was in office at that time.

JOHNSON: Johnson had him killed didn't he?

SELLERS: That's what a lot of people say.

JOHNSON: See, what the government, the things the government don't want you to know, investigations, like Kennedy being killed, that was sealed off in documents and everything, for fifty years. The government wasn't allowed to release those documents for fifty years. They just told the American people what they wanted them to hear. So they said, fifty years was up here, was about up, and the government said, "No, we can't release those documents over Kennedy being killed, because there's too many American people who was still living when he was killed and would raise so much hell about it." I think Johnson really had him killed. 'Cause, what, Johnson become president after Kennedy was killed, wasn't he? Yeah, Johnson had him killed.

SELLERS: So, what were your feelings toward the political offices at that time, like the President and things when you left?

JOHNSON: You know, we was just doing our country's duty where we was brainwashed, but when Johnson was President and he stopped the bombing of North Vietnam, and then the Viet Cong started really putting their supply lines in and doing a hell of a lot more fighting, that if President Johnson would have been sent to Vietnam, they would have killed him in Vietnam, the own American troops would, for him stopping the bombing up North. You wouldn't think they would turn on their own

president, but when he turned against him to stop the bombing of North Vietnam it really pissed the soldiers off to no return.

SELLERS: In the weeks, the last few days before you were scheduled to come home, and you knew obviously that you would be coming home soon, did you still do the same kind of things that you always did, or did you try to avoid certain assignments so you wouldn't have to worry about going into combat, like, right before you came home?

JOHNSON: Yeah, absolutely.

SELLERS: What kind of stuff did they have you doing then?

JOHNSON: Well, they'd usually when you had two or three weeks left, they would send you to the battalion rear where you wouldn't, be less chance of you getting killed, 'cause they didn't want you to spend a year, and we spent thirteen months, but they didn't want you to spent twelve months and so many days and then get killed right before you, time for you to come home.

SELLERS: So what were you doing the last day? Do you remember? I mean, what kind of things did you do around there?

JOHNSON: Just on guard duty around the battalion.

SELLERS: Just waiting to go home?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SELLERS: What was it like when you came home?

JOHNSON: Oh, I was a nervous wreck. My nerves was shot. I almost had two or three nervous breakdowns. I had to go get pills and everything, because everything moved so fast, and too much excitement, you know, I wasn't used to things moving so quick, and you know, like—

SELLERS: So you couldn't even enjoy yourself once you were home?

JOHNSON: No. You know, you'd hear loud noises and you'd think you was getting mortared or getting shot at or something and it would just scare you to death. You stayed a nervous wreck, and it took, oh, hell, years though to get really adapted back. Or sometimes when my mind goes to wandering, I hear loud noises, it scares me to death. Even though it's been thirty years...

SELLERS: I remember you telling me a story last time I was down here about—I can't remember if it was in, I don't know if it was, but Dodge City is the only one that comes to mind—a time when they were just constantly bombing from a long way away, like, just launching bombs over into the middle of a city you had set up, in the middle of a little area.

JOHNSON: No, we would put the convoys across the river, and they would stay in a, oh, artillery battery, I can't remember the name of it, but the convoys would stay in it because it was safe, then a company of grunt soldiers come in and stayed in the artillery battery. You know, you had an extra company of men in there plus the whole convoy and their troops, and all them, and then the Charlie Company had come in and stayed in the artillery battery, and they found out Charlie Company was staying in the artillery battery that night, or two or three days. So the Viet Cong found out about it, and Charlie Company had been killing a lot of people, burning villages and stuff, so they decided to hit the artillery battery, and they just overran the artillery battery. Next morning when daylight came there was eighty-two of them inside the barbwire, inside the compound, was killing people, throwing satchel charges which blowed up tanks and machinery, ammunition, everything...bunkers.

SELLERS: Were you just in the middle of it all?

JOHNSON: I was on the opposite side of the river, just twenty of us, and we, they didn't...they just mortared us for a decoy. So, they was all watching us get mortared, so they snuck in on the artillery battery while we was getting mortared. They wasn't watching their defense lines, and they was in the barbwire before they ever knew it. They was inside the compound, blowing up buildings, tanks, and everything, and they just, everybody just started shooting dead in the barbwire, whole company of men and the whole artillery. But they couldn't call Puff the Magic Dragon, 'cause he put a bullet in every square foot, one pass over a football field, but they had done got inside the compound, so Puff couldn't do them any good.

SELLERS: What was Puff the Magic—just a chopper?

JOHNSON: No, a big airplane that had four mini guns on it. Shot 60, M-60 machine guns that put a bullet in every square foot in one pass over a football field, but the Viet Cong had done got inside the barbwire too close, and he couldn't do no good. All he could do was just fly around and drop big flares, with parachutes on them, like it would light up about a mile radius, or a half mile radius, like daylight, and it would float down slow, and he kept dropping flares so, it was dark, so you could see what you was shooting at.

SELLERS: Here's something I remember. The story you told me about walking outside and seeing the lump off in the distance that was the man who had gone AWOL and who had stayed out there for weeks, he had no food, just sneaking into dumpsters and things. You remember telling me about that?

JOHNSON: Oh, that was in boot camp.

SELLERS: Yeah, will you tell me about that again? I just thought that was a really interesting story.

JOHNSON: We was in boot camp, and we was gathering up enough people to start a platoon, it took eighty in a platoon and you, we had to get up, have enough people there, three-hundred and sixty for four platoons, and they had us on details, raking, and just doing different things, you know, picking up cigarettes and raking the sand and stuff down at Paris Island, and I knowed there wasn't any rocks down there, and I looked up under the barracks, old wooden barracks was up off the ground about twenty inches, and I looked up under the barracks and I seen a hump up under there, and I got to looking and I figured out it was somebody because there wasn't no rocks around, and a guy had went AWOL. He was overweight, and he had went AWOL, crawled up under the barracks with his entrenching tool his shaving kit, and his poncho, and he'd dug a hole out in the sand and laid his body down in it, and covered his self up with the poncho, and he had a diary of what he did each day. Each night he'd go out and search the [?dipsy?] dumpsters, the trashcans for something to eat, and the guards would get after him, and he'd run and get away from them. And he wrote in the diary that he'd ate his bar of soap, but he didn't like his toothpaste quite so well, so he just ate a half a tube of it, and he'd been like under the barracks for twenty-some days, and they got him out and beat him, made him run up and down the street, which he couldn't run, he couldn't walk. He could just drag his feet because he lost so much weight until he passed out, and they took him to sick bay, and the Navy Corpsman said if he had spent—they estimated what he'd eat, in his diary each day—and they said the only thing that kept him alive was the fat off his body. Said if he'd have been under there one more day, he would have starved to death.

You know, it was just a mess, but it taught you what they could do, you know, 'cause you was on that island and didn't have no communication whatsoever with the outside world. You wasn't allowed to make a phone call. You couldn't write a letter home unless they read your mail.

SELLERS: So there was no way for the guy to get discharged. That's why he was hiding right?

JOHNSON: They gave him a mental discharge.

SELLERS: Did anything else happen like that? Do you know of any other guys who attempted to get out?

JOHNSON: Oh, I had a friend of mine. We had four drill instructors, and we had the platoon established, you know, eighty of us, and all four drill instructors walked out in the squad bay. One of them said, "Any man here thinks he can whup me, go into the head," the restroom, great big bathroom. So this one boy from Charleston went in there, and, to fight the drill sergeant, and he liked to've beat him to death, that drill sergeant. So they called another on in there, he whupped him, and they called another in there and they whupped him, then everybody got scared and two or three guys ran downstairs and got some more drill instructors up there to get him under control.

SELLERS: I'm sorry, I think I misunderstood. The guy was beating up the drill instructors?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SELLERS: Oh, my goodness.

JOHNSON: But they give him a court-martial, a general court-martial. They put him in the brig for like two months, and they give, he had to eat cold sea rations and work like a

dog for two months there, and then they gave him a discharge, dishonorable, he couldn't adjust to military life, just because the drill instructor said he could whup him, and he whupped the drill instructor. So he got a dishonorable discharge.

SELLERS: That's funny. What about over, once you were in Vietnam, how was the environment, like as far as your, I guess I don't' know what to call them, your leaders, the men who were above you, as far as that relationship, like, it wasn't nearly as bad as it was in boot camp—

JOHNSON: No, but you knowed your military duties, and your military obligation, and they was less slack on you, but you had to follow orders to the T. If you didn't follow orders to the T, you got court-martialed or whatever.

SELLERS: Did you know of anybody who would try to leave once over there. I mean, to make it to an adjacent country or anything like that?

JOHNSON: Well, that's why they wouldn't let you go to Hawaii, because you could catch a flight to the United States.

SELLERS: Well, even if you went to Australia or something, I mean, did a lot of people just go to places like that and never come back?

JOHNSON: Yeah, well, when I was there they had two or three guys that went AWOL from the military and joined the Vietnamese, that's still in Vietnam right to today. Because a buddy of mine seen one one night, and he stood right over top of him. Viet Cong said don't' shoot him, he's dead, and the boy just played dead, but there was soldiers that went over there that went with the North and fought with the North, but the military never would say nothing about that.

SELLERS: What? The American soldiers would fight for the North Vietnamese? How

did that happen? Why would they even go do that?

JOHNSON: Well, they done it for money, and for anything they wanted. The North Vietnamese would give them anything they wanted to fight for North Vietnam. You see, they had a woman over there, I used to hear her on the radio over there, they called her Hanoi Hannah. And, who was that other woman they had up at Alderson? Tokyo Rose? During World War II?

SELLERS: No idea.

JOHNSON: Yeah, Tokyo Rose, she was up at Alderson, and she was, radio, and she'd talk to all the G.I.s on the radio and tell them, "Japan's winning the world war," to "give up G.I." and "Your girlfriend's waiting on you." Well, they had a woman in North Vietnam like that, they called her Tokyo Rose—

SELLERS: Hanoi Hannah

JOHNSON: Hanoi Hannah, and she'd do the same thing, talk to the American troops, say, "Your girlfriend's wanting you at home, she got a new boyfriend, and your mommy and daddy is warning you don't fight the war, you're fighting a losing cause." They had her over there, and, you know, they'd get loud speakers and get outside your compound, tell you, "G.I., don't fight. Give up. You're fighting a losing war." It was just propaganda. But some, a few of the Americans did go to the North and fight. I know that for a fact. But the American government wouldn't admit to it, you know.

SELLERS: Were there a lot of—obviously there was protest there—but where there soldiers there who were against the war, but had no choice to fight?

JOHNSON: No.

SELLERS: I didn't know if there would have been—

JOHNSON: No, in the military you wasn't allowed to protest.

SELLERS: Well, I didn't mean protest, but as far as among the troops was there ever a lot of talk of the cause being right or wrong?

JOHNSON: No, no.

SELLERS: So that wasn't even entertained at the time? Because you hear a lot about soldiers who would come home and then join protests, things like that, once they got out of the military, and I didn't know if those seeds had been planted—

JOHNSON: When you come back to America you just wanted to feel safe and have a good time, you know. You had to adapt, readapt your body. Like, the plane trip home, the airline stewardess was scared to death of you. They was scared to death, because you hadn't seen any American women for like a year, you know what I mean? And, like, when I was over there, I was over there twelve months and twenty-four days, and I never seen a building, like a house in the United States, or a skyscraper, or a hotel, or a Wendy's or nothing. We seen one prefabricated building, and that was outside of Danang, like Freedom Hill, and I never did see a city the whole time I was over there, so you can imagine what happened when I come back here after a year, and throw you in a city when you been isolated for the year.

SELLERS: A couple more things I wanted to ask you, and if they're too touchy just tell me. One thing I remember talking about, the kind of stuff before...you had hear their religion, their religious practices—

JOHNSON: Buddha?

SELLERS: Yeah, tell me what you were telling me about that before.

JOHNSON: Well, they didn't believe you could go to heaven without your whole body

was there, and at a bridge site one day a dead body floated up on the river, and I just poured diesel fuel on it and set it on fire, cause it lay there for about a week and was stinking, and it had probably already been dead for a couple weeks.

SELLERS: Was that right next to where you had camp?

JOHNSON: Where we was working.

SELLERS: Why didn't anybody else get rid of it?

JOHNSON: Just didn't nobody get rid of it. Civilians walked by like they didn't know it. So, but, when I set it on fire, all them civilians knowed it, and they come down there and rolled it in a piece of white silk and buried it right there on the river bank. Then about a week it washed up again, so I just went down there and took a shovel and dug a hole under it, and stuck a half-pound block of TNT under it and lit the fuse, and there wasn't nothing left, just, for the birds to eat, know what I mean? Got rid of the stink and that problem. I had to answer for things, you know what I mean? I knowed how to operate.

SELLERS: Did you not get in trouble for doing something like that?

JOHNSON: No. Didn't nobody, wasn't no officers standing around watching me.

SELLERS: Didn't you also have to pull the Viet Cong off the road to clear the roadways sometimes?

JOHNSON: Yeah, when they killed them along the road you could pile them along the road and they'd haul them to Danang to a morgue, and then everybody that got killed, all the military personnel went to Danang to a big long morgue, just picnic tables, and they cut the bodies open, and pulled a autopsy on them and then put them in a body bag and tagged it and sent them home. Part of their body was missing, you know, they couldn't

go to heaven, and a lot of times that happened, you know, you could sell, like, ears over there for twenty dollars, twenty dollars was a lot of money. But you'd just take a ear, cut it off, lay it in the sun, soak it down with salt and let it lay in the sun, it'd shrivel up, and you could sell it. Some people made necklaces out of it, and wore them when they was out in the _____.

SELLERS: If you don't mind me asking, if you don't mind repeating this, what did you, didn't you say sometimes you would cut parts off--

JOHNSON: Well, I seen men cut parts of the body off, and just walk down the road and just throw them in the rice patty, so the whole body wasn't there, and, you know, sometimes when all those dead bodies would pile up in the ferry from all night long washing down the river with trees and brush and stuff, and you'd have to shoot those bodies and blow them up, and then the guts and body parts and shit would blow all over you, and then it was the hard part, taking a pole, in the smell and stuff, taking them out and pushing them down the river so you could go run the ferry that day. Because, you know, nobody knowed 'em, you couldn't bury all those bodies. You know, just push them out and let them float down the river and fish would eat them after a while, but then there wasn't a lot of fish around where we throwed that TNT in the river, because that explosion killed the fish.

SELLERS: Obviously it was frightening the entire time you were there—

JOHNSON: Oh, I was a growed man. I cried, cried, and I prayed, and I cussed, but I made it back, you know, and there wasn't no way I was going back again, for a second term, you know, because once you get shot at for a year, it puts the fear in you. You know, some of those boys re-enlisted, but they didn't get shot at. Once you got shot at—

they might have had a job in the battalion rear--

SELLERS: Office, or--

JOHNSON: Yeah, and once you got shot at for a year, wasn't nobody that big a fool to go back and get shot at again, you know what I mean? Because life's precious, and it can be short over there at times. If you don't know if you're gonna live one day to the next, you don't care what you do. But see, everything the military destroyed over there, the United States government had to pay for it, for every tree they bombed and tore down, for every hog or water buffalo they tore up, they killed, they had to pay for all of it. That war cost the American government a large amount of money just for trees and livestock and stuff was killed.

SELLERS: Is that all from Buster on your arms?

JOHNSON: Yeah.

SELLERS: Joe had a, like I said, he had a big Maine Coon, Lynx. He'd wrestle with him on the ground and he'd just eat his arms up, and there'd be scratches all up and down them and stuff.

JOHNSON: A raccoon?

SELLERS: No, it was a cat. Their pet. What would you say, once again, if you don't want to talk about it you don't have to, but if you had a single-most frightening experience you had over there, regardless of whether or not it was in combat, when would you say the moment you were most afraid was?

JOHNSON: Oh, we was on a convoy going around the First Marine, going through the First Marine Division compound, and it got overrun with Viet Cong, and the convoy going right through the middle of it, and they was mortaring us, and the mortars was

hitting so close, I was in a ditch, the only place to get, and gravel and rock and stuff was cutting the back of my neck, and I was afraid it'd cut my spine, and I would turn my head sideways so it would blow my ear off instead of cutting my spine. And then a fighter plane was bombing a tree line one day, and it dropped the bomb didn't come loose quick enough, and it come right at me. There was a ramp built up for the bridge, and it hit on one side of the road, and I dived on the bank on the other side, about a four-hundred pound bomb, and it blowed me out of the rice patty, about thirty or forty feet. And then I got shot at several times. I got scared when I got shot at, make the hair stand up on the back of your neck. And then we got rocket attacks and mortar attacks, and that would scare the hell out of you, mortars hitting all around you and stuff.

SELLERS: Did you write home a lot?

JOHNSON: One letter a month.

SELLERS: Who'd you write to?

JOHNSON: My mom.

SELLERS: What kind of stuff did you usually write about? I mean, did you tell her how bad it was?

JOHNSON: No, I didn't want to worry her. I just asked her how everybody was doing, and tell her I was doing fine. You didn't want to tell them nothing would make them worry any more. You tried to keep that stress and stuff off of them.

SELLERS: What kind of turnaround time did you have on letters?

JOHNSON: Turn around time?

SELLERS: Yeah, like, let's say you mailed it one day, how long would it take for them to get the letter?

JOHNSON: Probably about a week.

SELLERS: I didn't know, because of the distance, if it would take a long, long time.

JOHNSON: Probably a week. And then I wanted some homemade peanut butter candy real bad, you know, so mom sent me a box of homemade peanut butter candy she had made at the house, and when it got to me it was molded.

SELLERS: Oh, really?

JOHNSON: But I raked the mold off and eat it anyway.

SELLERS: I've always wondered, did you do a lot of stuff with horses? I know you were, especially with Mom and Uncle Denny with barrel riding stuff. Did you do that before you went over?

JOHNSON: Yeah, and then I was raised on a farm, that's why blood didn't bother me. We butchered our own cattle and hogs and stuff. A lot of people from the city, biggest majority of people from the city had never seen, hunted or killed nothing, or seen butchered hogs or cattle, or seen anybody shot, you know, a lot of people went in the military who'd never shot a BB gun, but, you know, it was easier for me to adapt than it was for a lot of them.

SELLERS: What about when you came back? Did you start doing stuff around the farm right away, or were you just spending all your time in the mine? After you finished construction work you just spent your time working there?

JOHNSON: I worked construction for about six months. It took a long time for me to adapt to civilization.

SELLERS: I was just asking about the barrel riding and things like that, as far as just the messing with the horses as much as you did when Uncle Denny was—

JOHNSON: No, I always fooled with horses and stuff, but I didn't get into competition until I came back.

SELLERS: Was it right after you came back?

JOHNSON: Yeah, right after I came back. Well, how long have we talked?

SELLERS: I don't know.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE