

JOSEPH BYRNES

Our Neighbors, Our Heroes: Forest Park Veteran's Oral History Project

NC: OK, today is Dec. 5, 2017, and I am Nancy Cavaretta for the Forest Park Historical Society Oral History Project interviewing Joseph Byrnes. Hi Joe!

JB: Hi!

NC: OK, before we get started because I know you have a lot of great stuff to tell us, um, just some basic facts, ah could you please give us your date of birth?

JB: Oct. 20, 1946.

NC: OK, and what is your current address?

JB: Forest Park

NC: Thank you. And what branch of the military did you serve?

JB: United States Air Force.

NC: United States Air Force.

JB: That was my permanent, Air Force, but I was attached to the Army.

NC: OK understood. You can tell us more about what that attachment involved. And what was your rank and where did you serve?

JB: Ah, my rank at exit was a staff sergeant, and um, I served, let's see, Texas, North Dakota, and 2 years in Viet Nam.

NC: Very Good. Um, do you have any other family members who have served in the military or are serving?

JB: Yes, well my father, 3 uncles, probably about 20 cousins.

NC: Wow!

JB: My dad came from a big family and as a matter of fact one of my cousins served in WWII and he was killed (inaudible, 1:38) My father was a decorated individual with the Army. He had 3 Purple Hearts, 2 Bronze Stars, and a number of combat badges for places where he had been. And, he was very pro-military and pro honoring military people.

NC: Yes, well to kind of link on to that because so many times when you see that line of service in families, you know, people have, they're inspired by those who went before and I'm just curious, what was your reason to go? Were you drafted, what was the context at the time.

JB: Well I did get a draft notice. When I came home, I was going to college at the time and I come home and my mother said my father wanted to talk to me. And, he said, "I opened this by mistake, because it said to Mr. Joseph Byrnes", and he was Joseph Byrnes, I was Junior and he was Senior. and he says, "It's a draft notice." I go, "Well, I don't really have to do anything because I maintain a pretty good average in college and everything." And he looked at me and he said, "Joe.." and that's when he started talking about my uncles, my cousins, that when their country called, they went. He says, I don't he says, getting drafted, none of my family was drafted they all joined, so I said, "OK."

So, like I went back to school, and talked to a couple of the people, I talked to Ray Meyer.

NC: So you went to DePaul?

JB: Yeah, you know what, you're probably best in going, in joining. So I figured the easiest place to go would be the Air Force. I had nothing against anybody, you know. And, so in 1965, I um, went up and I joined the United States Air Force. And they gave me like 3 weeks to get my things together, and um, Oct 1, 1965 I went down to the center, and they took us out on buses, took us down to the airport, and flew down to Lackland Air Force Base.

NC: Wow. I've got a question about that? Why did you say that the easiest would have been the Air Force? What was your perception?

JB: Well, I, you know I am pretty good with communications skills and things like that so I didn't think, that, that if anything I would be up in one of those air craft and you know radioing information back in case, you know, I do get sent over to combat zone. I kind of thought that I probably would never be on the ground with anything. You know, but I know that they had Air Force over in Viet Nam but I don't think that, I was trying to get the feel that I tell you what, I was no, I didn't look forward to going anyplace, you know, like Viet Nam, so. But when I got down to Lackland, they took a battery of tests again and they found out I was good with language and communication.

NC: Kind of confirmed what you thought.

JB: Yeah, and I figured, OK. Then I only was there for 2 days in the 1 barracks and they put us over in the other barracks, with some Marine and some Air Force, some Army and some Navy guys. And that's when I found out that I was going to be learning how to speak Vietnamese because they caught us early.

NC: OH. What was the training like for that?

JB: It was conversation. I'll tell you I, could I speak the language and understand everything everybody was saying? I could understand about 50% because it was conversational and when you, when I walked into that, that classroom there was 10 cubicles in there. There was 10 guys in there and each had a cubicle and you had earphones, and that's when the gunning sergeant come out and said there's 6 dialects in the Vietnamese language, you'll learn 3 of them in the 9 months that you are here. So, ah, it starts out like, Hello. Cho Cho is the female, unmarried. Co is a married woman. Chow-Em? Is a married woman, Co is a man. So then that's how they taught us, "how are you? how are you?" So it was all repetitious. So at the end of the week you could you could speak to a Vietnamese saying it's a woman, Cho, like this is a nice day, you know. So, that's how they taught you. You know you would get all this stuff in. And then after that I went to combat infantry training because I knew where I was going. There was no doubt in my mind that they're not going to teach me Vietnamese.

NC: Yeah, right and in that year it was running high and escalating.

JB: And, um, so, after that I went down to learn how to jump out of good airplanes down in Ft. Benning, ah, I was down there for 3 weeks. Then went down to Florida,

Tindle Naval Base was down there. The Air Force had a base down there too, but this was a Navy base, and that's where we learned jungle training. And they said you could go home for 30 days and then Christmas Eve be out at the airport-be out in San Francisco, Travis Air Force Base to, for your flight out to..... When I looked at the order it said Da Nang.

NC: So, I have a question for you about that. It's going a little ahead of myself, but you're stepping into a very controversial and little known from, from how history was going to take it, um, conflict. But, at that time we, our families watched that combat on the news on TV every night. How, how did your family react to the orders to go to Da Nang?

JB: My dad was kind of like really mixed about it. because he thought he forced me into doing something. I said, you know what, I probably would have done it anyway, you know. You know I was thinking, do I take a military deferment? I don't think I would have done that. I thought about it and thought about it and as I saw some of the kids in the neighborhood going, like from here. I didn't know too many kids from here 'cuz we moved here in 1961 and I didn't know hardly anybody here.

NC: Where did you live before Forest Park?

JB: We lived in Glen Ellyn. We lived in Glen Ellyn for 2 years and then it just got too much because my Dad and my Ma were older and they were transporting back and forth to work. I was going to De Paul Academy, the High School De Paul Academy and so I started school at 9 o'clock, my dad started work at the truck driver at 8 o'clock, then my

mom started work at ten minutes to 7 at Aldens over at Roosevelt and Austin, no Roosevelt and Cicero. So we would have to get up at 5:30 in the morning to get in to drop my Ma off, and then get down by my Dad, I'd get on the EL and go all the way around to go to De Paul Academy. They gave me some scholarship money to play basketball and football.

NC: So this is 1961 and you are moving here so by the time you are going to Da Nang you, you see all these kids in the neighborhood who are also being deployed.

JB: Well, I started seeing some of the kids that I graduated school at De Paul going. I can remember some of the guys I went to school with, but you know, I wasn't a loner but, you know what, I didn't live in the city. When I walked out of that school, I got on the El and all these guys lived like where the gold coast is now? I didn't hang around with them too much because I had to get back so we could go back home. But as I was run into some of the guys that, when I was going to college say that this guy went to join the Army, or this guy joined the Marines and I saw some of these guys going and I'd just think well, you know, so I will leave. Probably along the way I'm going, someone is going to be knocking on my door, so I'm going to have to make a decision. My Ma was just devastated! You know, I'm the only child.

NC: OH!

JB: She was, she was devastated. My relatives when I left to get on the plane out of here to go to Travis, I had 50 relatives there!

NC: They came to Travis?

JB: No, they came to O'Hare here to see me off.

NC: Oh, to see you off to Travis.

JB: Yeah. Then I had a contingent of Byrnes's over there at Travis, but they were only allowed to go so far. And I could see them and I could wave to them because it was like closed in. I don't think they really wanted people that were going to Viet Nam to go out of this one place where we were, because we were in a separate area for where the public would welcome people coming back like at another terminal, so they were holding up signs, I could see them as I was going out to the plane because they wouldn't let us get really close enough. I think that they didn't want anybody to try to turn around and leave when they see relatives. When I got in the plane I figured that when I get over there it's a day ahead so I don't have 365 days, they have 364. Well, that was it.

NC: Wow.

JB: We didn't fly into Da Nang. We flew into Ton Shanhut which is down in Saigon. And if you look at a Vietnam map, Saigon is here and Da Nang is up here. It doesn't look like much, but when we landed it was like 7 o'clock, 6 o'clock at night and it was a 3 ½ hour flight up to Da Nang. So, they told us where we had to go and we grabbed our duffel bags and weapons.

NC: So they're sending you to North Viet Nam.

JB: No, no, no! They're sending us to the northern part of South Viet Nam.

NC: OK, the northern part of South Viet Nam.

JB: Yeah.

NC: So, close to the border.

JB: Well we were about 60-70, 80 miles I would say to the border, from the DMZ.

NC: When you got there, what was your job? What was your task there?

JB: I was with the thing called RPC and then they took us from there, and um. Well the first night I was there I was with the Vietnamese. We landed in Da Nang, and as we were flying I could look out the portals and look down and I could see all these like lights in the sky. Well, it's got to be for Christmas, I think. And the loadmaster in the airplane started laughing, he says, "Those are flares!" I said, "What?" He said, "Well, there's probably infiltration going on in those base camps down there so they are putting up the flares so they could see if there are any infiltrators." And he said, "Pretty soon you are going to see some booms going off," and you're going along and all of a sudden you see some flash of light and he says, "That's the artillery firing where the suspected, well we called them "gooks," were. "Oh boy!" Then I get off the plane at Da Nang and they put me on a helicopter and I landed about 15 miles North of there. I was with the South Vietnamese base with all of these other guys and it's 11:30 at night and I'm in a tent. That was my first night, my first day in Vietnam.

NC: Now how old were you at that time?

JB: 19. Everything was happening so fast.

NC: Tell us a little bit about the style of combat. There is so much contrast in the gorilla warfare like be everywhere, but be nowhere kind of idea.

JB: Well, in most of my units, we were trying to stop infiltration. So we worked in small groups, 10 South Vietnamese to Americans. We were there for ambush, and what we did was when they were trying to infiltrate in, they were already in South Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh trail or wherever trails they were using to come out of Laos and Cambodia to come in here and also from the DMZ. What we tried to do was get in pockets where we knew were weak. We didn't have forces that could withstand a regiment coming in. So, if we scared them enough to think that they were up against the same amount of men that they were bringing in, that they would go back and try another route, or they would go over to the stronger defenses that we had. So, it was a pretty well thought out plan. But, I was fortunate to work with a bunch of good guys. So that, one thing about the Vietnamese we worked with, you hear some bad stories about the Vietnamese, they would never leave an American, even if you were dead. Somebody else in their outfit that had to get killed because they were helping a wounded American or a dead American fallen down, it didn't make any difference-their job was to get that American to the LZ and get them out of there because they believed that we were being a big help to them fighting Communism. I was kind of torn when they brought us back to our base camp to Da Nang and they put us in barracks. I couldn't figure out that why they would build a 2 story barracks in a combat zone. Utterly amazing! Let's just put a target on there and a bull's eye, you know. They said we got too many people there and they're going to be coming in here and we need space for them to sleep. And I go, that was very comfortable sleeping in those tents down over here, 'cuz we were in the tents for 3 weeks till the

barracks were ready to move into. We were in those barracks for about a month ½, they got a new base commander and then they told us to take down all of our sandbags from around the bottom portion. I don't know if you've ever seen a barracks in a tropical area. It's wood up to, you've got 2 bunks, well right up at the 2nd bunk there's screening that goes all the way around. So you could look out, the guy in the 2nd bunk could look out, and the guy in the 1st bunk could look out because there was screening down there. The sand bags blocked down below so the only guy that could see what was going on would be the guy in the upper bunk. I liked the upper bunk because it got a breeze. So the sandbags were pretty well close to that screening area so, this would be the top of the sandbags and you could look out. When you took that down, this was all bare, only thin wood, and we're going "What are we doing this for? It took us a week to put all these sandbags together and build them around the whole barracks here." And he said, "Well, base beautification." I said, "What are they going to plant flowers here? Or, what are you going to do?"

NC: But that was a move during that time to put people in communities that were like peaceful and beautiful.

JB: But, I got to tell you, that will be all well and nice if you were in San Francisco, or Lackland, or something like that. But, people are shooting at us. You know, I don't like to sleep with a flap jacket on. And then July 15, that's when 1st rocket hit, hit right at the base and that's when Jimmy Price got killed, and Jerry Samuda, Teddy. I mean, our unit was devastated!-decimated is just a better word. 3 killed, 8 injured 8 wounded out of a 20-man unit. Granted not all, we were called an Advisory Team 69. So in Advisory 69

they had like 20 advisors plus the Captain, and the Colonel that over saw all the units. And when you lose 11 out of your 20, granted that some of the wounds were superficial and were treated and then you went back, so there were probably 6 guys, the 3 dead and 3 that were never coming back were coming back, 2 were not coming back, 1 was coming back after about a 2 month hospital stay. But, then the rest of us were patched up.

NC: Did you sustain any injuries?

JB: Yeah, I did. I got a Purple Heart out of it. I didn't know I was even wounded. It's just that everything was happening so fast that night. I could hear Teddy yelling, but I couldn't get to him because the 2nd floor had caved in, right in the middle of the barracks right onto the 1st floor, there was all sorts of stuff. Lockers were turned over, guys were yelling for help, you know you start try to get out and somebody'd grab you. Felix Cantu was injured in the bunk area right across from me, and he had a piece sticking out of his neck, he had pulled it out and it started bleeding and I, so I took my T-shirt off and I said, "Felix put this around there and let's get the hell out of here!" Probably it was a little bit stronger language, but then we tripped over Skates, a black kid from the south side of Chicago. He's laying on the ground and he was over on that side and it seemed like the guys from the initial blast where it landed were in pretty bad shape or killed, but were in pretty bad shape, from the stuff that came out when that rocket flared. And when it flared, he got stuff in the bottom of his feet, so he hopped on my back, I got him out. So we get into the bunker and there are guys in the bunker that are already wounded from another barracks. Then all of a sudden, Marines started coming in and they had just come back off a patrol. They had 6 trucks when it started when the aircraft started going off across

the street from where we were at. They came into our bunkers and they had medics with them, thank God. But I'm going back to get Teddy. I can't leave Teddy.

NC: No. This is at the point now when you are about to tell us the story about Teddy.

JB: Yeah, I met Teddy, he was when I first got there he wasn't a favorite of one of the sergeants, so I says, he was from West Virginia he talked with a little drawl. So he asks me where am I from and I says, "I'm from Chicago." He asks me if I was a gangster. "I said no." And, so we just kind of hit it off. We worked together from the time I got there until July, and a, but they didn't put 2 of us in the same bunk so he couldn't go down below me because we were with the same team. So if something happened to both of us, they would have to replace both of us. If one of us hit, which is kind of common sense, right, if you think along those lines, think about it. But, if one of us got hurt there would still be another one. The other guy could continue on and train anybody's coming in and give them the outlook on the Vietnamese we were working with. So, not only was he my best friend there, but we ate together and screwed up together. We did perimeter duty and I always used to go along with Teddy. I'm not saying I'm a goody 2 shoes, but we always got in trouble with something coming in late, or hiding in the Airman's Club when they were closing. We didn't get Article 15, but they did make us do some extra duty. I said, "I'll stand perimeter guard before I ever have to empty those pots." Oh, what a terrible thing that was! We had to do that for 3 days oh my God!..... But now, I had to get to TEDDY! So, in a bunker you have one entrance here, and one entrance at the far end of the bunker. And when I was coming out the bunker Sergeant Huff said, "Byrnes, get back in here." Now, there was a little light in the thing there like you have in

a cave in a coal mine where they put those little coal lights, and I said, "I got to get Teddy, he's in there and he's calling for help." They were already patching up Cantu and Skates, and they were calling for Airvac for some other guys. And he said, "Get back in here, you're wounded." And I said, "It's not my blood! This is Skates and Cantu's blood." He said, "You are bleeding from the side and you're bleeding from your face."

NC: You didn't realize.

JB: No, I didn't even know. I felt in the initial thing when the rocket went off, it blew me out of my bunk. I landed on the floor and I'm going, what just happened and then I, some of the other rounds started coming in and I'm going, oh man. No warning nothing.

NC: Did you have a weapon nearby?'

JB: Yeah, but it was all the weapons we had. Mine was in my locker and my locker was loaded with shrapnel going through it.

NC: Right

JB: And, so I went around the front and the front is caved in. And that's when Huff grabbed me and said, "They're in there with Teddy and they're getting him out and they've got an Airvac coming in." Well, at that point they said there was infiltration and they were going to infiltrate along the perimeter, so we went to the con bunker and we grabbed weapons. He said they wanted all walking wounded, anybody available to.. and there was about 15 to 20 of us that went over and grabbed the weapons and went over to the perimeter and held off anybody who was trying to come in. And then the Marines

came from the other side of the base and did a sweep and took care of anybody that was out there that needed taken care of. Then I went back in and I wasn't tired, but I was trying to reflect everything. They're calling role and, nobody, guys are not answering. I'm going..."What happened?" Target, Boone, Humphreys, Price, Samuda-all gone. I'm like, "What the hell is going on here? Where are these guys at?" I saw them just before we went sack time and they got a list of the people that were missing. They knew where Teddy was because whoever that Marine helicopter pilot was, that stuff was going off all around him and he's just coming back for more guys, coming back for more guys. He was running them about 6 miles, 6 or 7 miles away to China Beach, dropping them off, coming back, and grabbing more wounded guys. So, we figured that the guys that weren't answering hopefully were back on the airplane.

NC: And that's where you were hoping Teddy might be?

JB: Yeah, we weren't allowed to go back into the barracks. They brought another group in to check out the barracks to see what the damage was and to see the casualties were still left in there, and they found Price's dog tags because there wasn't too much left of him because when the rocket landed, it landed right at the base of their bunk. So when it went off, the percussion and anything that was coming out, the first thing that they hit was Price and then across the way was Jerry Samuda. So then they found Jerry's body, and they found Anderson's body. So we knew that there were 3 guys that, but Teddy was not in there. No. That's when Sergeant Nawers come up to me and said, "Your partner's at the Naval Support Activity in intensive care down there." We found out that Cantu's down there, Boone's down there, and Tarkington's down there. And I'm going, "How are

they?” and he says, “Well, they’re not going to be around for a little while.” So that’s when he got the jeep and we drove down there and I saw Teddy for the first time. And I mean, Ugh! They had already amputated his right arm, and his legs, there were just all sorts of stuff on his legs because he was like in a thing from here down. And now we’re sitting there and they might have to take his legs too, oh God. “ I tried to talk to him and he was all doped up and I asked him, “How are you feeling, Teddy. He says “Pretty good, pretty good.” And when the nurse come over and said, “You guys aren’t supposed to be in here.” And I said, “Well, let me just talk to him a little bit more and he said, “No, no, no..” “Oh, go ahead, he said, I’ll see you for lunch.” And, just like that, he didn’t know and I still remember him laying in there, and, I don’t know. And, then we left there and we found Tarkington, we found Cantu and Boone. We thought his wounds were a lot more serious, but they weren’t. So, the next day he came back. It took 2 weeks for Cantu, and 2 months for Tarkington to get back, but they sent them back. He, as a matter of fact, he saw Teddy for a few moments in Tatchikawa, Japan when they stabilized him. They put him on an aircraft and took him to Tatchikawa which was a big hospital, that if you were wounded in a country, and they stabilized you, you went to Tatchikawa where there was a pretty good chance they could save your life. So then that’s when we talked to Teddy and the guy got the telephones hooked up and I got to talk to him. They amputated, his right arm, they amputated his left leg. And his right leg was pretty well, I don’t know, a lot of the meat was off his leg, but they sewed some stuff back on him and everything else.

NC: Was he able to keep his right leg?

JB: Yeah, he did but then the next time we tried to get a hold of him, they said that he was gone and made it sound like he was dead.

NC: So they said from the hospital that he was no longer there, that was the answer.

JB: No, they said he was gone. Did he go home? We're not a liberty to say, but we can tell you that he's gone.

NC: So gone could have meant anything.

JB: Yeah, but we took it that he was dead.

NC: Dead.

JB: So, we went on with what we had to do. I came home just before Christmas of '67, or '67. I was there from Christmas Eve of '66 to like the 19th of December. They let me go over there. I came home and I had a 30 day leave. I went home and I could talk confidentially to my dad about stuff, but I never wanted to say something in front of my mother because I still had some service time. I told him about Teddy, and I told him about the other guys, like who's in the family. It really was..... Jim Price is from Winchester, IL and he's buried down there. So, that was amazing! Then, they started getting short of people, and I volunteered to go back. I went back after, after the Tet Offensive. After the Tet Offensive, the Viet Cong ceased to be a fighting force. The North Vietnamese used people in the south to be the front runners to attack all these different places and most of them were killed, believe it or not. So now there was just the North Vietnamese but they were crack troops. I mean, I got to tell you something

amazing, these guys were good troops. So, they sent me back for a little bit of retraining, and I went back over. I was coming back to meet staff sergeant and I got an Army Commendation Medal, Air Force Commendation Medal, and it didn't mean too much to me. At that time it didn't mean too much. You know, it meant a lot to my dad, my family, and stuff like that, but they were just something you put on your chest or you don't put on your chest. you get that thing that they give you and you put it in a drawer. Then when you die, your grandkids look and "Oh, look what's here!" It didn't mean that much. Then, when I was coming home, they said, "Well, where do you want to go? I said, "Well, I'm partial to Florida and California for the warm weather, so if I could get one of the any bases around there I'd be happy." And they go, "Well we want you to re-up!" I said, "What do you mean re-up?" They said, "We want you to spend another 4 years. We'll give you every PCS, no problem." Wait a minute. " And then we'll give you \$3500.00 to re-up because you are in a critical field."

NC: And what was that field?

JB: Advisory. We were attached to Mack V out of Saigon and that had all the advisory teams and everything else, so, when you mention 1131st Special Activities Unit, back in the day when you were with a bunch of guys, they'd say, "What unit are you with?" "Advisory team 69." "Well, what's that?" "We're out of Mack V." "What unit are you with in Mack V?" "1131st Special Activities Unit." "Oh" I said, and I can remember telling this Captain, "Captain, did you ever play baseball?" he goes, "Yeah." "How many strikes do you get in baseball?" "You get 3 strikes." "Then you're out, right?" "Yeah." "I've been to Vietnam twice, I know if you send me back there, I'm going to be out and

that I'm not coming home. So I'd just rather spend the rest of my time in Florida or California and get out in another 4 ½ months, and that would be it."

NC: Were you confident that they could promise that to you?

JB: Well I thought that they could put me where I'm..... I just did 2 tours of Viet Nam, I mean, wouldn't you be nice enough to send me some place where I want to go? You know where they sent me?-Grand Forks North Dakota. "Grand Forks," I said. I know North Dakota. I was pretty good at Geography. North Dakota was a state, but I don't know where Grand Forks is. Then I'm looking at a map and oh.. So I went up there, and I signed in and there's a Lieutenant, Officer of the day there and I went in on a Sunday. I was supposed to be there by 5 o'clock Sunday and I was there at 4:59. I'm walking through the door, my pay records, and my orders and everything else, I gave it to him, popped him a salute, and the guy's looking at me and I've got all these ribbons and he's going, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Sir they sent me here, sir." And he looks and he goes, "Well what do you do?" I said, "I advise." He says, "Who do you advise?" I said, "South Vietnamese. He said, "We have no South Vietnamese here." So they put me in a barracks first, what they call casual, but they're not permanent till they find you a space." So then I had to go back there the next morning and then I went through the same thing. I advise, OK, boom, boom, boom. But they give you a meal ticket card, and go to the laundry, and to go have food and stuff at the chow hall. And so for 3 weeks I reported in, and then they moved me over into a trailer with another guy. There was 2 guys in the trailer. The trailer was really nice! But then all I had to do was call in to tell them that I'm still on base so they didn't think that I ran away. But basically I didn't do

anything. They wouldn't give me an early out. They wouldn't say, OK, there's nothing for this guy to do here, let's just discharge him. And, I wasn't causing any problems 'cuz I just did what they told me to do. The guy that I was with was a spooky guy. He'd get dressed, then he'd put on this blue scarf, and this baseball cap. He was with the 321st Missile Squad. He was one of those guys that they took out for 3 days and they put them in a missile silo 'cuz those were where they launched the missiles in case somebody attacks us, they fire back at them. Now he finally told me. Then I kind of felt like, this guy's from Viet Nam. He might be crazy, I don't want to talk to him! Then, I got discharged, went home. I was one of the lucky ones. I come back with some sort of sanity. I can't believe that I used to have a lot of faith in the thought that they're not sending me into harms way without a lot of protection. What they missed was the protection for the guys that came back. There was guys that were drafted, that went through combat, infantry training, and then went right over to Vietnam. And when they got finished, they come back and they discharged them right there. You sign a form saying if something starts bothering me, I can go here, or go there. And all these guys want to do is sign this thing and get the hell out of there. They don't want to but there's no classes. When people called us baby killers, we were babies! We were 17, 18, 19 yr. old kids that came from all walks of life, that never been in a situation like most of them were. Some of them might have been in gangs on the streets of Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, but they were never in sustained combat like all these kids were put into. And, you know, did we kill kids in black pajamas? Sure! I wouldn't doubt that we killed a lot of them, but they were trying to kill us. We're sending kids over there and then coming back and turning them loose on the streets with no help with psychological effects. You

know, you hear the old story where guys walking down the street and they hear a backfire and they drop to the ground. That's true! Because if you are coming back to a society that first of all, is looking at you like you're a pig, and you're getting stuff thrown at you... I was on the bus when I got out when I came back the 2nd time and they were throwing feces at the bus, they were throwing bags of urine at the bus and everything else. I'm looking and most of the guys on the bus were Marines. Most of the Marines just wanted the bus to stop so they could go and take these guys out and they would have! I mean, they would have killed them! I'll tell you, the Marines were different, they were in a different situation than I was. When they went out, they were put in combat situations where they got ambushed and they had to fight their way out-same thing with the Army guys. The Marines up north, like in Khe Sanh where they spent all that time in Khe Sanh, and then they closed base.....hey, if you're going to close base, close base! Why put all those guys in jeopardy? Why get them all killed and then bring them out after you know it's not sustainable to, that they come right up to the perimeter. Now, get 'em out of there! Get 'em out of harms way! But now I'm looking at these kids and I'm going, all college, you know? I know I wouldn't have turned into any of those guys if I took the deferment, but I don't think they understand that they are out here protesting. Are kids that were out there doing something for their country? A combat guy, a soldier, doesn't tell the military what he wants-the military tells the soldier! The soldier goes where the military tells him. The soldier acts on the orders that he gets from the superiors. I just thought it was so terrible that I could see the anger in some of these guys on the bus when we're coming back. Then they look at you, well at least we got each other! You know, that was the thing-that's why you see that a lot of military guys stay together. And

I think I told you that I can tell you every member of that 20-man unit that I was with. I can tell you every member of it. And, believe me, there's nothing like remembrances of those guys, just shame on me for not trying to keep contact with them. But, you know, we all didn't go there together. Some were replacements. So we had staggered, so when I left, the guy that replaced Teddy was there and he became Senior then he got a guy. When that guy left, this guy became Senior and he got another guy, you know. So, that's the way it worked. I'm just so sorry for all those guys that come back that had psychological problems. You think that coming back from Desert Storm, and from Iraq, and Afghanistan-that these guys have problems?

NC: Do they?

JB: No, and they're taking care of those problems with the VA and trying the best to take care of those things if guys go and report it-Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome is probably, with Viet Nam guys, 10 times higher now over at Hines because now people are realizing that they have bad dreams, and they have things that happen to them that they start taking drugs, or not wanting to do anything, or they have violent tempers and stuff. Nobody looked at that when Viet Nam guys were getting out. You know what they told me when I got out? When they gave me my discharge orders they told me I had 2 years in active reserve, but, you know what, if the case comes to it, they can activate you on that reserve thing and call you back in. Until that time, fine! But they said, "so what you want to do is this. When you get home, apply for unemployment." I said, "What, and stay on unemployment 3 or 4 months, and look for a job?" And I go, "I'm not the kind to sit around, right. When I get home, I'm not going to apply for unemployment, I'm going

to look for a job! Unfortunately, the field that the military taught me, there's no good work on a job application, so I didn't do what they told me. I found a job loading containers out of the airport. Then, I went into sales with an airfreight outfit. Then I passed the test for the airlines and I worked for Sabina Belgian World Airlines as a salesperson and was there for a few years. Then in 1973, I had taken the test for the Forest Park Police Department, and I joined the police department. The official date was the 14th of January, but I was in there earlier.

NC: And what year was that?

JB: 1974. My total unemployment from my military to my civilian life was probably 8 days.

NC: Wow.

JB: I felt that I can't sit around because then people ask you questions. People that are pretty good people will ask, "How was it?" And I don't like to talk about it that much. It's very hard because I don't know who I'm talking to and I don't know if somebody's going to say something that's going to set me off. I'm not a violent guy, but don't push the limits too much, then I can get by.

NC: And it was a volatile time! People had a lot of strong feelings about the whys and wherefores of the whole Vietnam situation.

JB: Well, we were, the more and more you look into it. Teddy and I used to talk and say all we're doing here is propping up governments. You know, that guy out there in the field, I don't know what he does at night, he might be a Charlie out there at night. This

guy doesn't care who wins. He gets pushed around by people coming out there, and the government side. At night, Charlie comes in and takes 1/2 of his product. He's used to that! So, he's not getting help here, and he's not getting help there-he doesn't care who wins! Because it's going to be the same thing, whoever wins is going to do the same thing to him. You know, so he just wanted to go around planting his rice fields, and planting his wheat fields, and that was that. Now we took large groups of people in areas of the cities like Da Nang, like Hue, the Imperial city, like Saigon, (like Ban Rang, the train?). In all these different cities we hired Vietnamese because Americans, when we were in the United States we trained, we cleaned our own barracks we did this, we did that, you know? We start hiring Vietnamese to do all this for us. And I have a cubicle and it's cement floor and all I have to do is take that little Vietnamese broom and clean it up, or wipe down my lockers with a dust rag. But yet, we hire. What happens is that when the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong took over cities during Tet, they bound people that were either Catholic or worked for the United States Government and killed them! They killed educators. They killed representatives from the town. They killed nurses or doctors, and then they took the nurses and they forced labored them into hospitals that for North Vietnamese wounded, North Vietnamese VC wounded. Well, there were atrocities on both sides, but I would say the most was probably on the north side for all the assassinations they did of people. Hue, the Imperial City of Hue, when the Marines finally got it back, they were finding that it would be nothing to see digging up a row of the ground that was red, to find 100 bodies along the road where they were executed. Were we right? Any time that you take young individuals, men and women now, and you train them, and you put them into harms way, and we still don't learn that if you send

somebody into harms way, you should have an exit strategy-how long they're going to be there, what their purpose is, and when are you going to get them out of there.

NC: Yes.

JB: We, we try to pick fights with people that have been defending their countries for hundreds of years. The Teleband, the Afghan people-they fought everybody, they fought the Russians to a standstill, you know they fight-that's their country. They know where all the nooks and crannies are. The North Vietnamese has never lost a war. Chinese, Japanese, French, American, and now Russia, -5 major nations couldn't take over a little country like Vietnam because of the people's determination, because they lived there.

NC: That's right. Yes.

JB: They don't need us to go in there and tell them how to live. They don't need us to tell them to be a democratic type of government, or a free society. They don't need the Russians coming in there telling them to be a communist. They don't need any of these other countries coming in trying to tell them how to live their lives.

NC: You know that was one of the questions I was going to ask you in terms of like lessons learned, wisdom from the experience and I think you really, really nailed that and helped us all to understand, that outcome of your mind of what all this meant.

JB: You know, the bottom line is you could take all the Vietnam veterans and put them together and they'd probably say, "We should have gone back, and we should have won!" You know, maybe somebody would have taken a different outlook on us. But

nobody likes any major battle that American troops were in 'cuz they never lost!-never lost a major battle in Vietnam. But we lost the Tet, and everybody said we lost Tet-we decimated 3 regiments of the North Vietnamese! We took the Viet Cong out where they were no longer a fighting force because we never lost a battle. We didn't lose that Tet-we were very unprepared for it. We didn't have enough intelligence to let us know what was going on, and that's something that the upper echelon wasn't looking at. We shouldn't have left there like that.

NC: Yes. And I think it's taken our country, the whole world, decades to even embrace or try to understand the totality of what actually did happen.

JB: When you look at the age group that was over there, we had old salts that were in Korea. You know, we call them "lifers" who spend their life in the military? But they were our bread and butter. They were guys that were there and they're telling you "OK, we're not going to do this because I want all of us to come back from where we're at", you know? "So, when you go out there, this is how you do it." That increased the average age, and then you had other things that increased, when they say that the average age of an American over in Vietnam was 22-23 years old. OK, well that's not totally true because you've got all the people that are ranks, you know, all the guys down in Saigon, all the pilots, you know, copilots, AWACS guys and all that stuff. They were older, so that added on. If you look at the combat soldier, ask somebody the age of an average combat soldier. Then you're going to hit the nail on the head there. Average age of combat soldier in Vietnam was 19.

NC: 19.

JB: You know, 19 is, my God, your second year of college! You can't drink, you're not 21, and I'm trying to remember whether you could vote then too. We could do all this stuff and be sent into harm's way, but you can't drink..

NC: You couldn't vote either at that time.

JB: You couldn't vote, no. So we can't even vote to change what the people that are sending us there if we wanted to change it. But that's the whole thing, all the tremendous amount of knowledge that we lost in life there-the cream of the crop. And not only the guys that joined, the draftees, you know, they came from all walks of life too. And they might have been in trouble in the city that they lived in and they had the choice a going to jail or joining the military or getting some sort of stuff against their record. If you join the military nothing goes against your record. And they go out there and then they get a group of guys, a group of guys who were your brothers.

NC: Yes. Now speaking of your brothers, I want to end this with, I know how it ends with Teddy, but for our official record, I'd like you to finish that story so that we can understand.

JB: OK, ah, well I thought that Ted had died in Tachikowa. So for years, I never tried to hook up with anybody and all of a sudden there's this thing called 'Together we Served.' I tried to look him up on that. They had a guy helping me and said that there's was a guy with that name, but he lives in Virginia, and you better get him because it doesn't look like he's going to live that much longer. I called the number and I left a message, but nothing, you know. So I figured it was the wrong Teddy, it was a wrong guy. But then, I

looked up more names and they had a thing for Jim Price, a memorial, and they had all of his information, when he was killed, where he was at..., and when you went down and there was a memorial for him. So I put a memorial in. I wrote that I was there with you, Teddy, Park, Felix, Pedro, Louis, and I put my telephone number down. And about 8 months later, I got a telephone call. And you know how I say you get close to people? I said hello? And he says, "Is this Joe Shotsburns?" And I draw and I go, "Teddy!" I almost dropped the phone. I said, "Where are you calling from, are you calling from upstairs or downstairs?" He says, "Well I'm calling from Florida." He says, "Where the hell are you at?" and I said, "Well, you know I thought you were dead. They told us you were dead." He says, "Well, I'm alive. I'm down here in Florida!" So we started talking on the phone, then he said it's gets too expensive, so we started communicating on the computer. So, at least 3 times a week, we send messages back and forth. But when we started talking, he says, well he doesn't remember too much about anything about Vietnam, and about what happened or anything, so I made arrangements to go down and see him. And he said, "Will you come down?" He said, "I'll pick you up at the airport and we'll spend some time together."

NC:: Joe, how long ago was this when you first made contact with Ted?

JB: Ah, almost 4 years now. I remember landing in Tampa, getting off the airplane, and walking over to console 15 to get my bag, and my phone rang. And he asked me where I was. I said, "Well I'm waiting for my bag here at the console 15." He says, "Well you dumb ass, your bag's over here at console 16. You got to look up to see what the flight is coming." I said, "Well they told me 15." He says, "don't, we're over here." I said, "Well

how am I going to recognize you?” He says, “Well you dumb bastard, I’m the only one walking around with 1 arm and 1 leg!” Then it was OK. I didn’t know how I was going to react. You know, there was a guy that I felt I left. I’d wake up at night thinking about that-if I would have pushed harder on something could I have gotten in there? Or should I ran around the other way and went through the hole instead of going to the front? Or going around the front, and then going down? It was like he knew that I did everything I could to get to him. I’m going again in January, I’m going down there. This will be my 4th time going down. I try to do it once a year. We know that the stuff that they sprayed us with and the injuries that he has, that we’re going to keep on going as long as we can with this. Man, it’s relaxing when you go down there because he’ll ask a question, and I’ll be able to fill him in on a little bit of the details. You just knew that Sergeant Huff didn’t like him. And so, after I talked to Sergeant Huff, I was the guy that kind of broke ice with a lot of people, like if somebody would make comments like, “Aw, Jesus, Johnny! Yeah, just think, they could have sent you to Vietnam! Not that bad! There are worse places than this is a hell hole here! There are worse places Teddy, don’t say nothing. There are worse places than Vietnam. If you think this is a hole, they’ll find another hell hole worse than this to send you to.” On visits, we go and we do things, we shoot pool. For a one-handed pool shooter, he shoots pool pretty good! I showed you that picture of those guys? Every time I go down there they get all the guys together playing pool at Dave’s house. Usually about 5 or 6 guys get involved in it, but then when I first met these guys, Dave had a pool thing there and 18 guys showed up.

NC: Wow

JB: So, every time they were asking when is Joe coming back because he tells great jokes. So, we all get together and Teddy goes “He was my boss.” I go, “No, I was your team member. We were a team, you know.” “Yeah!” “But he told me what to do.” “I didn’t tell you what to do.” So we’d sit there and we’d start going back and forth and all these guys start laughing again, so, you know we break a lot of the ice with that stuff and, it’s just the way we were together in Vietnam. Never was tension

NC: Same dynamic today. Beautiful ending.