

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DARRYL JOHNSON
Forward Observer, U.S. Army, Vietnam War
2015

OH
1966

OH
1966

Johnson, Darryl., (b.1945). Oral History Interview, 2015.

Approximate length: 5 hours 13 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Darryl Johnson, a Chicago, Illinois native who spent his late life in Green Bay, Wisconsin, discusses his service during the Vietnam War as an infantry forward observer as well as his early life, his schooling, his return home and his experiences with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Johnson was drafted in 1968 and talks about his basic training at Fort Benning [Georgia], advanced infantry training in South Carolina, and a short time spent at Fort Lewis [Washington]. Johnson describes his duties and experiences in Vietnam including several anecdotes involving near death experiences. He reflects upon the interactions his comrades had not only with the Vietnamese villagers but how they treated one another. He also mentions his thoughts on the use of Agent Orange and napalm. Johnson comments on the political atmosphere in the United States during the Vietnam War including peace protests and the Civil Rights Movement and explains how he readjusted to civilian life. Lastly, he goes into detail regarding the coping mechanisms he used overseas and after returning home, including the Road to Recovery Program and Artists for the Humanities.

Biographical Sketch:

Darryl Johnson (b.1945) was drafted into the army in 1968. He served as a forward observer with the 4th infantry division in the central highlands of Vietnam for one year and then finished his service at Fort Benning until he was discharged in 1970.

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, 2015.

Transcribed by the Audio Transcription Center, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

[File 1]

Brooks: Today is Wednesday, March 18, 2015. This is an interview with Darryl Johnson, who served with the Army during the Vietnam War, 1968 to 1970. The interview is being conducted at the Madison Central Library. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks, and the interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. So, we're just going to start at the beginning. If you can tell me where and when you were born.

Johnson: I was born in Chicago, Illinois, on March 1, 1945. I was the youngest of three; two sisters and a brother, and good family, parents both at home. We lived on the North Side of Chicago, in a nice neighborhood. We owned our home. I was the youngest, and my sister, Abby, was eleven months older than me. My older brother and sister were like ten years ahead of us. My mom had a couple miscarriages in the between time. So it was like two sets of kids, and so we always looked up to the older brother and sister for a lot of advice and guidance, and of course they always looked to us as their personal slaves.

So, just talking about the early years, my mom was an at-home mom, and my dad worked a lot, full-time, and then one or two part-time jobs. It was a very nice neighborhood, I love that neighborhood. We almost were a minority in that it was pretty much a Jewish neighborhood, and so there was Jews and Gentiles, and my playmates were kind of diverse, but it was pretty lily-white and a nice, secure neighborhood. We did a lot of--it was the type of neighborhood where there would be a dozen kids out every morning, looking for each other, to see what we were going to do and play.

I had a--I was a product of a mixed marriage, in that my dad was a Baptist and my mom was Catholic, and that just hangs with me forever, because that, at that time, was considered a mixed marriage. My dad had to promise that we would be raised as Catholics, and get a Catholic education, and so we all went, all the way through high school, in parochial schools. That was a good education, though it sheltered me, in retrospect. I think about all my friends who were products of parochial, of public schools rather, and thought of myself as being kind of naïve in that regard, which was okay. It's okay if kids, even today, grow up a little bit sheltered and find out things a little bit later. It doesn't hurt them. But I was pretty naïve.

Brooks: And what did your dad do?

Johnson: My dad worked for Railway Express, and he would go into homes or businesses and estimate how much space it would take to move from one location to another, and then give those people an estimate of the cost. He did that for Railway Express, and then later, North American Van Lines. He had a heart attack, a severe heart attack, when he was fifty--early fifties, and at that time, I just recall him being in the hospital for a long time. It might have been a couple of months, I don't know, but it was a long time, and I remember that it meant that at home, it was just my sister and I that were at home at that time, and we had to be quiet. He and I no longer could throw the ball around, or I never played ball with him, and yet, I'm a great baseball player today. I play, and I know that he would have loved to have played when he was a senior, but at the time there was no senior this and that. You had a heart attack at fifty and it meant that you take it easy, you don't get excited, you don't have--salt is something that, you know, and so I had a bland diet as a teenager. He and I didn't do a lot of stuff after that, and so, and he never worked full-time after that, he had to work part-time. So there was a role reversal in the family. My mom had to go back to work, and she became a very strong figure in our lives.

So that was-- he worked part-time for North American Van Lines. He had another heart attack when he was like sixty-something, but took good care of himself and what he ate, and he always talked to us about being active and things like that. He made it to seventy-six, so he was a good role model for me.

Brooks: You would have been pretty young, but do you remember anything about the Korean War, hearing anything about it?

Johnson: My brother in-law was in the Navy, in Korea, after the war. No, the details of the Korean War, as a youth, all the movies were World War II movies. The John Wayne movies and others who did World War II movies, that we followed as kids. We just had a big appetite for those kind of movies, my buddy friends and myself, and there wasn't a whole lot of Korean War stuff. The Korean War has become sort of a forgotten, or a silent or not much about it, but as youth, we knew that ah, well that was a war that we didn't win. That was a war that ended in a stalemate, and there's North and South Korean, and the South Koreans are our buddies. So, I mean, we had kind of a naïve view of what was going on, but we were very tuned-in to the advance of communism and the fact that communism was, it seem like right around the corner. In grade school, we used to have air-raid drills, and fire drills, but we had as many air-raid drills, because of the fear that we--you know, that Russia could send rockets or attack us at any time. It was a genuine fear, and what would we do if we were the only two people left on earth at the end of a nuclear attack. You know, we went on, having these long discussions about that kind of stuff. Communism would cause us to deny our religion; otherwise we'd be killed, you know, what

would you do? Would you do that, would you say you're not Catholic, or are you willing to get executed.

And so, there was a lot of propaganda and a lot of fear going on when you mentioned the Korean War. We had air-raid shelters. There were people on the block that had bunkers in their backyard that they had built and stocked, in the event of a nuclear attack. So I mean, I remember that stuff pretty good.

Brooks: So, you went through high school on the North Side of Chicago, and then what was next for you?

Johnson: Well, I should mention, I went to Catholic school at DePaul Academy, but I, ah, just in the evolution of--I made three and a half years and found that I was out of place. I always was put in the comparison with my brother, ten years older, who graduated and went to University of Illinois, or IIT, Illinois Institute of Technology, and graduated as an engineer, and then a Marine pilot. So this was supposed to be my destiny too, but I didn't feel it then, so halfway through my senior year at DePaul, I became kind of rebellious. I wasn't kicked out of school, but they thought I shouldn't be going there any more. So, I finished up at Roosevelt High School, which was in my neighborhood. It used to take me an hour to get to DePaul, and an hour back home. I'd leave, dark in the morning, and get home dark at night. And now I was at Roosevelt to finish.

So it took me four and a half years to get out of high school, because of the requirements, but that's where I sort of found a little bit of identity there, because all of a sudden there were girls sitting next to me. Oh, my God, how do I deal with that? Because I hadn't had, since fourth grade, there was no girls, and all of a sudden I was kind of popular, because I wasn't Jewish, and Roosevelt was pretty heavily Jewish, and so girls were asking me out. That's where I met Judy and ah, we've been--eventually we got married and things like that. But, so, graduated from Roosevelt, but that--I was having a real identity crises. After that, because Judy was going to Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, I was going to go to Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. I went there in nineteen-sixty... the fall of '64.

Brooks: You would have been nineteen.

Johnson: Yeah, I might have almost been twenty, because I worked for a little while. College was at my own expense. My parents were willing to send me to a junior college in Chicagoland, but because I wanted to go away and I wanted to be near Judy, it was all at my own expense, so I worked while I was in school and before. So, the fall semester, it might have been '64, yeah, nineteen, yeah. Boy, you're good at math.

Brooks: Well, not usually, but I think I nailed that one. So, did you have any thoughts on what you wanted to study or what you were going to do after school?

Johnson: I thought that I would be a physical education major, was my first major. I love everything about sports, I played all sports. My problem, again, being a naïve kid, and with an identity crisis, I didn't stick it out to play high school sports, and because I was at DePaul for a little while, I was on their football team, but then senior year, I had to go to Roosevelt, they were all set. So I didn't play—didn't graduate playing football, baseball, or any of the sports I really loved, so when I got to Northern, I tried out for football and didn't make it as a freshman. Tried out for baseball, didn't make it as a freshman. Always looked at everybody, yet I was as good as them, I can say that now. I was good as any of the other kids going there, but I didn't feel it, and I didn't think I was as good as them. If I was in a room full of other people for any, for any kind of activity, sports or academics, I would always be looking around saying, some of these people are, are much better than me. I didn't have a lot of confidence, except when I was around Judy or in classes with her, then I felt confident, but on my own, I was not self-directed very well.

Brooks: So you started the courses to be a physical education...?

Johnson: Physical education. I thought I'd be a coach at some point, and that went on for a year and a half, and I just felt that unless I played sports at the college level, I would not be a good coach. It's a little true, but not true. You look at some of the world's best coaches today, they were mediocre, at best, some of them, at the sports that they coach. But at the time, that's the way I felt, and so I switched out of physical education and became a management major. My brother in-law, Ernie, was someone I looked up to greatly and spent a lot of time with, and he was a management major at DePaul University and I thought, I'll follow in his footsteps. So I studied management for a while, but I just really wasn't attentive, you know. I was more--I would never miss an intramural sporting event, but I could miss a class now and then, or a lot. And so I was always flirting with academic probation, for the next two years, and some classes I liked, but then I realized that I don't think I like business either. I ran out of money, so I, about halfway through my junior year, walked out of--stopped going to classes, and tried to find a job in DeKalb. I walked down the street, into a foundry that said help wanted, and they said, "Sure, we could use you." I worked a foundry job for three days and was spitting black, dirty phlegm, at the end of the day, on the way home, but making decent money, and I'm wondering oh gosh, maybe I should get back in school, but I wanted to have some money.

I was walking home one day, with a guy from the foundry, and he said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm working, it's a decent job with decent pay," and he said, "Look at me. How old do you think I am?" I said, "Well, you're fifty." He said, "No, I'm thirty-eight," and he said, "You're going to look like me if you keep working here." Because, you know, the environment at a foundry is not pleasant. It's dusty, dirty, tough work, fast work, piecework. I learned what piecework was about, you know, you get paid based on the number of pieces you complete, that are accepted. And so, that only lasted three days, and again, I'm thinking I'm a loser, but after I walked home, on the way home was the DeKalb Fire Station, and I just walked in and I said, "Are there any jobs open here? I've always thought of myself as being a fireman." And one of the firefighters said, "Well, you're in luck. The chief is right over there." He just happened to be visiting from his office, which was not in the fire station. "He's right over there and last night, the city council just approved three new positions, you ought to talk to him." So, I said, "Excuse me," and I talked to the chief, and he saw that I had three years of college education, and was pretty big and strong, and he said, "Take the test," and I did, and I did well, and I got hired as a fireman. That was a real big boost to my confidence and a real wonderful two years that I worked there, before I got drafted.

Brooks: And what was Judy doing, what was her track in that time?

Johnson: What was I, what?

Brooks: What was Judy doing during that time?

Johnson: She was in school, and she was on track--she was a home economics major at the time, that's what it was called, and ah, she also was cook for her sorority house. So, she always did the right things in her class activities and her studying, and so she was doing that, and she was supportive of me in terms of dropping out of school. She always told me that, you know, you could be hanging on the backend of a garbage truck, picking up garbage, and she'd be happy with me, as long as I'm happy with my job. So that was always comforting, to hear that from her. I needed encouragement, but this firefighting, the camaraderie of working on a fire department. I saved some lives, I worked on the ambulance, that was one of my duties as part of the rescue team, and that, I grew up a lot during those two years. And it was-- Of all the jobs I've had, that ranks number two. Yeah.

Brooks: So tell me about being drafted. Did you see it coming?

Johnson: I think a lot of people then, rationalized well. There was no lottery system in 1967, '68. It didn't come about until later. So, all you were doing was

running the risk of being drafted, and of course, following the news a little bit, I knew that President Johnson had really upped the number of people that he wanted in Vietnam, to three hundred and fifty thousand, then four hundred, then a half a million, then almost six hundred thousand, in Vietnam. So you knew that oh, you could get the letter any time, but I thought as a fireman, that maybe I might be insulated from it.

So I got my first draft notice from Chicago, saying that I have to report. So I gave it to the chief and said, "I don't want to go," and he said, "Well, we just stuck a little over six months of training into you and we don't want you to go either," and he said, "Let me see what I can do." He said, "You don't have to worry about it for now." But then within, about a year after that, then it really did go over five hundred thousand in Vietnam, and the Draft Board in Chicago sent me a second draft notice. I took it to the chief, hoping that he once again would save me. I was a good fireman and had good relations with everybody on my shift and other shifts that I worked, and so he wanted to keep me, but when he got the second letter, he reached down in his desk, pulled out a box, that I recognize now but didn't then, it was purple, and he opened it up and there was a Purple Heart, and he said, "Most of us here who are older than you did our job, and you're just going to have to go now and do yours." I remember asking him, I mean, "You don't expect me to come back with a Purple Heart do you?" He said, "No, just do your job," but he wasn't going to intercede and so, damn it, that was it, I had to go.

I didn't want to go. I never considered alternatives to going, like running to Canada. Basically, my point of view at that time was that those people, the people that were going to Canada, and it was starting to happen, I thought were traitors, I thought should never come home, back to America, were a disservice to the country. People who protested, and protesting was starting heavily then, especially in the Ivy League schools, and then in Madison too, was sort of a Midwest hubbub of activity and awareness, but we looked at it as unpatriotic. How could they?

So, you know, my dad had been in World War II, my grandpa in World War I. My mom told me that I had great, great grandpas that were in the Civil War, we dated back to them. My dad came up to me and he said, "You're going and you're coming home too," and that always--just a little sentence or two from him always made me feel confident that ah, well that's exactly what will happen, is I'll come home and do my service. So that was the feeling at the time. I really didn't know anything about Vietnam. I, like so many college kids at the time, college-age kids, even though I was a fireman, I was very apathetic in terms of ah, if there was nobody in my family that was involved, then I didn't even bother to check the news daily. It's only when all of a sudden your number is called, that you become very aware.

So I was just willing to follow orders and listen and do what I was told, I mean that's basically how I was brought up all through grade school and high school. You don't talk, you listen, you know? You're to be seen and not heard, was the stuff that we were told, and so I was a good candidate for being drafted and being a good soldier, because I could take it all in and do it.

Brooks: So this is what, March, I think?

Johnson: Yeah.

Brooks: March of '68. You got the notice and then what happens next?

Johnson: I had to go to Chicago, and like the first day of anything, it's a real headache, a real nightmare. The whole induction, the lining up for the physical, the talk amongst everybody about well, you know, if you say the wrong thing, they might not take you. If you pretend you're gay, and gay was not a term that was used. If you pretend you're queer, maybe--no, I can't do that, I can't pretend anything other than what I am. But it was very nerve-racking, a hundred guys in a line, all stripped down naked, bend over for the prostate exam. It was very demeaning and shots and stuff, but that's how an army has to be. We were told there's a reason for everything, and so just obey orders, because there's a reason for everything, and I believed that. So, the first day, a big headache, but it was over with and I answered all the questions right. What kind of person are you? Well, I love being outside, athletic stuff. What did you do when you were--I used to climb trees and things. Are you good with cooking? No. How's your academics going? Well, I like academics, but I really like getting outside and hiking and everything. Infantry, boom. I was told that I would report to Fort Benning, Georgia, for basic training in a couple weeks, so I was able to go home for a couple weeks, put my things in order and get ready to go for basic.

Brooks: And how did Judy feel about you leaving?

Johnson: Her dad had served in World War II. I'm doing a piece on her dad right now, an art piece. He walked across France and was in the Battle of the Bulge, walked across France, opened a concentration camp with bolt-cutters that they had, and liberated that, and while he never spoke about that much, Judy knew about his service. And so I felt different than what anybody would feel today, or perhaps some then, I felt like I had a job to do, that the people of South Vietnam wanted the chance to have self-determination too and democracy, and that we needed to make the world safe for democracy, that that was our job, and that if it meant dying for that cause, I was willing to do it. Not hoping, but willing to do it, and plus

I was arrogant enough to think that once I get over there, we're going to kick ass and the war will be over in months. Now that there's been all kinds of money, and equipment and resources are going to Vietnam, that certainly, we're going to win it. You know, we had enough slanted/biased news coming our way, telling us that we would, and the fact is, we never did lose a major confrontation in Vietnam, it's just the will of the people that couldn't sustain us. At the time, up until '67, '68, most of the American public was behind the War in Vietnam, was very much for it. I like to make comparisons between that and Iraq. After 9/11, everybody was for that war, but then after, after a while, after a year, the American public tends to start thinking no, it's taking too much time and too much money, too many dead bodies. Anyway, so my thinking at the time, and Judy's also, was that I would go, I'd come back, I'd be a good soldier and we'd help contribute to winning the war.

Brooks: So you go home and you get ready to go to Fort Benning. What are your expectations at that point, about training and deployment?

Johnson: I heard a movie came out right at that time. It was a John Wayne movie and it was called *The Green Berets*. Nothing but propaganda. Very little accuracy to what was going on in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, or most anywhere else in Vietnam. It was like a World War II movie form, placed over the Vietnam conflict, and let's make John Wayne--and anyway, I watched that and I thought that, some of my expectations were that well, if I go to Vietnam, there's going to be booby traps everywhere, that this guy, Charlie, the Vietnamese are little people, not too smart, you know, if I was in a room with five of them and one of me, that would be about even. Just so much arrogance that was going, that was in our society at the time; couldn't be defeated, I'll never die. But I knew that basic training would be tough and that it would be physically grueling. I was in great shape. Plus, I used to tease my mom that now, I'm finally going to get some good food, because my mom was a lousy cook, and I said, "I'm going in the Army to get some decent food." I always teased her about that.

I was not really prepared for the reality of basic training, wasn't prepared for Vietnam, the reality of it, and the strength of the enemy that I was going to be facing. You know, I didn't even spell Vietnam right, that's how little prepared we were. I didn't know anything about the culture of Vietnam, the geography of Vietnam. Oh, I thought it would be like World War II, jungle, fighting in the Pacific, when Vietnam really is, yeah, there's a lot of jungle, but the Central Highlands are not--it's jungle, but it's a higher elevation jungle. The southern part of Vietnam, with the beautiful rice paddies, is very different. So, I wasn't ready for any of that. Today, I think we've learned lessons from Vietnam, are that we prepare our men and women to know something about the culture, the language,

and the terrain and the history, and none of that existed at that time, we had to learn that.

Brooks: When you got over there?

Johnson: Yeah.

Brooks: Can you tell me a little bit more about basic training? Was it all physical preparation?

Johnson: I ate up the physicality of it, though they tear you down, no matter how strong you are, and fit you are, they tear you down and build you back up in a lot of different ways. Physically they do it, emotionally they do it, you know, your hair is gone and everything about you. I went in with a lot of guys from Chicago, most of them were South Side. I didn't know one person that I was drafted with. It would have been nice if I did. And all these guys, you know, people have an influence on you, based upon what you see in front of you, and appearance, and when it's all shaved off and you're all put in the same clothes, well, wow, you look a whole lot more equal to one another. Being in a bunk, next to a black person, for the first time in my life, I had to learn and figure out who were good people and who weren't. But I ate up the physical part of it. It was brutal, but I was pretty strong.

It was demeaning, not to me though, because I could take it, and so nobody was in my face very often, putting me down or telling me I was stupid, but I saw a lot of other people that way. I learned a valuable lesson in life, a huge lesson in life that I use, you know, you're only as strong as your weakest link. So, if there's somebody that you're in a crucial situation with, whether it be at war or trying to figure out a problem at work, the weakest person that's working on that project needs attention, needs help. You're only as strong as your weakest link. The other thing that I heard from somebody, probably a drill sergeant, was you're only as fast as your slowest person. And so if there was somebody slow out there, we had to get them across the finish line, if our unit was going to qualify. You were timed for this and that, running the mile, and so those guys that were getting shamed and who came in way out of shape, fat, and could not run a quarter mile, let alone a mile, we found ways to get them motivated, either through intimidation or through encouragement. Those were big lessons to learn, and so right away, I think the Army was preparing us for infantry and combat duty, in trying to realize that there was problems that you, by yourself, cannot handle. You need a team.

I never shot a weapon before, and in the Army, I became-- I was-- my hand-eye coordination, my eyesight was terrific, and so qualifying for

rifle, .45 pistol, shotgun, no problem. I actually enjoyed those days, taking target practice and stuff, it was fun.

Brooks: Did you have any memorable drill sergeants or instructors for anything?

Johnson: When you first get off the bus, I don't know if they do it, they can't possibly do it the way they did it then. All the drill sergeants would be lined up as you get off the bus and you arrive, and right away they're screaming at you to get off the bus, and you're lower than whale-shit, and you're nothing. You're going to be writing home to your momma tonight and crying, and we're not going to be happy until one of you guys goes into your barracks crying and puking, or whatever. And so intimidating, my drill sergeant was that way, but yet, I saw another guy who seemed to be more encouraging, and I wished he was my drill sergeant. But I needed, and I, to this day, when I was working on it, I always refer to, I need a little drill sergeant looking over my shoulder, to tell me what to do, even if it's intimidating, just keep me straight. So, again, the Army says there's everything for a purpose, and I think that there is no room, at that time, for a troop to get off the bus and say, well why do I have to do that? There's no room for that. You do it or someone's going to beat you into doing it, or you'll be deprived of food or something. It's very intimidating. People call it demeaning. I didn't view it as demeaning, but I could see where people thought of it, that type of experience as being demeaning, especially if it was focused on them for some reason. I pity the guy who got drafted who had a learning disability, who might have been dyslexic, or who, for some physical reason, could not--a breathing disorder that wasn't diagnosed or whatever. Those guys were picked on and couldn't do better, they were doing their best. So, you learned... it was a little survival of the fittest.

Brooks: You mentioned you didn't go to training with anyone you knew. Did you kind of form relationships while you were there and get close to some people there?

Johnson: I got close to some of the Chicago guys. They were all South Siders, so we would tease back and forth about, "Oh, sorry you were born on the South Side," that type of thing, you know, and high school, what our high schools did, and theirs. I got kind of close to them, but I was very shy. I was not an extrovert. I was a huge introvert, but you can't survive if you don't socialize in some way, so I started making friends and communicating. Made friends with some of the southern boys. There was a lot of guys at Fort Benning that were from Georgia and the South, and even though their accent was so heavy, and I'll tell you, for the first time in your life, when all of a sudden you're talking to a black guy from the South, who has this huge southern drawl, it's like a different language. It's something you get used to and you get to love and appreciate, but at first

it's very startling. So, basic brought us together and got us to become some real close friends there.

One of the lessons in Vietnam, again, was that a lot of my friends later on that I met, that were Marines, were Marines together in the same units from basic training, all through their advanced training, all through their experience, wherever they were stationed, whereas at the time in Vietnam, so many were being brought together, so many being trained, and then we were scattered to different locations for advanced infantry training, and then scattered. A lot of us, most of us, went to Vietnam, but we never served--we never got to stay together much, only a few of us did. Most of us were scattered elsewhere, and I think that was really, a losing strategy in Vietnam, in that in the Army, units sometimes were not real close from basic training on, and so it was always getting to know somebody new.

In Vietnam, the forward observer, that's when I got to Vietnam, I became a forward observer, and the guy who trained me was leaving to go home in a month. That kind of thing--I could be getting ahead of myself a little bit, but I mean, in school, when I talked about Vietnam and why we lost, it was like equating it with the Green Bay Packers drafting Aaron Rodgers, finding out that he's just an awesome quarterback, one of the best, but keeping him for one year, and every year, going to a new quarterback. How successful would the Packers be with that kind of arrangement? That's the way we were fighting Vietnam and it was a losing strategy, doing it that way, whereas again, my dad spent three and a half years, but when he came home, the job was done, and he didn't come home until the job was done. We didn't realize that at the time, but later on, I realized that that was one of the reasons that we lost.

Brooks: Basic training, were you ever able to get off the base at all? Were you ever able to have some free time?

Johnson: There was one time, we got off base and we went into Columbus, Georgia, I think it was, for a weekend. I have very little memory about it. I know everybody was antsy to get in trouble, but I didn't. I had a few beers, watched a movie and got back. That's the only time I remember getting out of, getting off base; one weekend. It was an eight-week basic training. I got sick and almost had to be what's called recycled. Recycled meant that you had to start from square one again. Recycled basic people were looked down upon, and so I had to get better, but I was sicker than I had ever been in my life. I don't know what hit me, but I got out of that hospital, I got back, and I was just able to finish basic.

And actually was, again, my ratings were--they made me a platoon leader. So, I had some leadership already, even with that setback, but so I mean really, there wasn't much time for getting out of town or getting a little

mini-vacation, because I think the Army knew what was needed. They had to get you to advanced infantry training and get you over to Vietnam.

Brooks: Tell me about advanced infantry training.

Johnson: I went-- I should tell you, between--no, that's right. I had a little bit of time. I think I went home and saw Judy graduate from college, and then back to South Carolina. I just don't remember doing it, but South Carolina was where I went for advanced infantry training and there, they realized they had me specialized in--I was in 11. Eleven Bravo MOS was military occupation. Your MOS was infantry, but 11C was infantry mortars, and so I was trained for indirect fire. These mortars were something that could fire high explosive stuff a pretty long distance. And also, because the way they were set up, they were mobile. You could actually carry them, it didn't need to be trucked, which was a perfect weapon in Vietnam, because the Central Highlands, there was no roads. So I was trained on mortars, and then during the course of that training they realized that maybe I could do more than that. I could be out where the mortars dropped their explosives and be a forward observer. Depth perception, ability to read a map. I was a little older than most of the guys drafted, by a year, and I was kind of calm. Part of that was because I was an introvert and didn't show much emotion, and so they decided I should be a forward observer. So I spent, that was another eight weeks, of doing that.

Brooks: And that was Fort Bragg, or somewhere else in South Carolina?

Johnson: No. Hmm.

Brooks: We can look it up later. I was just wondering.

Johnson: Yeah, we could, or it will come to me. Advanced infantry, it was less demeaning. I need to probably mention that the barracks were a whole lot newer and nicer, and we had bunk beds and partitions between, and so it was nice. The guy below me, I walked in, and he said, "I won't be here long because I'm queer." I said, "That doesn't bother me, as long as you don't mess with me," and he said, "I'm really trying to get out of this thing." I don't know if he was acting or not, but his eyebrows were shaved and penciled in, he wore makeup, and so he was doing everything he can to get out. That was an experience, because guys beat him, and I stopped the beatings a couple times, because I thought the guy was a nice guy, and he respected me by not making me a part of his issue. So I protected him a little bit, but he did get out. Anyway, that was that part.

Judy, after graduation, and a girlfriend, came to visit me at my new--three months before I got drafted, I bought a 1968 Plymouth Barracuda, convertible, midnight-blue metallic with white racer stripes. That was a

very tough car, a sharp car, it became her car. And so she got in it with a friend of hers, Judy Coyne [sp??], and they drove to South Carolina, and they toured all the way from Boston, down the coast, and they came to see me, and I thought that was really exciting. I was on guard duty the night she got there, and so I got to see her through a fence for five minutes, but that was really cool.

At the end of advanced infantry training, you could go home, and you got your orders. So, I remember being outside the barracks and getting my orders, Vietnam, not unexpected. I was hoping for Germany, but Vietnam, and so to go home, my brother, who was a Marine pilot, said, "I'm picking you up." He was stationed somewhere in the States, and he flew a Navy T-28, small aircraft, a trainer plane, into that fort in South Carolina, and flew in to pick me up. All my buddies that had gone through advanced training, were waiting for the jumbo jets to come and pick them up, and he lands on this, just, "skid, skid, skid, skid," on the big, long airstrip, comes around. I have to get into the flight outfit. People are mistaking me for an officer and they're saluting me. I get in this plane behind him and we fly out of South Carolina. That was an experience. I flew a small aircraft all the way to Chicago, with him, and that was special because for the ten years before that, I seldom saw my brother, he was stationed here and there, and so that was special. That was advanced training, and then I was home for a couple of weeks, before I had to get on a plane to go to Fort Lewis.

Brooks: How did you spend that time at home?

Johnson: I stayed at my folks' house, on the North Side, Judy was home, and so it was pretty much, day and night, spending time with her. I saw some friends from high school a couple times. So, just relaxing and spending time with my dad, just watching television with him, because that became a big part of his life, and that was it. It was not real eventful. Judy and I talked about what life was going to be like when we get back. Should we get married? Should we get engaged now? We thought no, we shouldn't. There was the problem of her being a Methodist and me being Catholic, and what are we going to do about that if we get married. So we spent a lot of time talking about this and that. As it turned out, while was in Vietnam, she approached my mom and said, "Would you sponsor me if I took Catholic education and converted to Catholicism?" Well, that made her my mom's favorite daughter-in-law, although she never played favorites, but I could tell. I mean, it was just a wonderful thing, that she did this on her own, and I found out about it while I was in Vietnam, and it was neat to know. I mean we don't--we're not really actively religiously anymore, but at the time it was huge, and a big commitment. Anyway, she must have been thinking about that, and that was it, until it was time to take off.

Brooks: And Fort Lewis is right near the airport too.

Johnson: Fort Lewis is in Washington. We were there only a few days, but I remember seeing the mountain, the snow-covered peak that's up there. You can see it from Fort Lewis almost, and just I remember saying, I loved to get back to this state, it's just a beautiful state. We were there, just being warehoused for a little while, until we got on a plane to go to Vietnam, and that was, I think a nonstop flight. I don't know if it was eighteen to twenty-one hours, or whatever, on a plane, whooh, that was a long ride.

Brooks: Who did you go over with?

Johnson: I don't know any of them.

Brooks: Were you formed into a unit by then?

Johnson: No.

Brooks: Or, just they were sending individuals?

Johnson: Everybody had their individual orders, to report to--the plane flew into Cam Ranh Bay, I think most planes flew in there. Cam Ranh Bay was on the Pacific Coast, and it was a huge installation, fortified and so forth, and so all planes flew in there, and from there you took smaller planes to wherever in Vietnam you were stationed. So, I got into Cam Ranh Bay, probably spent, and just remember getting off the plane and just sucking in the air and going oh my God, is it hot, and it's not so much the temperature as the humidity in Vietnam. I was not prepared. I didn't know what monsoons meant, but there's summer and winter months, and there's a dry and wet season. The wet season was longer than the dry season, but it just seems like it's humid all the time. During the winter months, it's raining every day at some point, and dry monsoons, it might rain now and then.

So, we were in Cam Ranh Bay for just a couple days, and then we were flown to Pleiku, which is the Central Highlands, some of us were. I actually had linked up with a couple guys from Chicago that I remembered from basic, that oh, you turned out to be a mortar also, or are you going to be a forward observer also? Yeah. And we went to Pleiku, which was in the Central Highlands, again, almost a city. Pleiku was a spot of a number of battles in '66 and '67, but those battles were won and now Pleiku was a pretty established place, heavily fortified. Every now and then they'd get rocket attacks and stuff, but we were there until--we went from there, almost to the border, where I spent nine months with units, patrolling along the border.

Brooks: And when was it that you went over? Was it like the summer of '68?

Johnson: August.

Brooks: August, okay.

Johnson: I think it was August, yeah.

Brooks: Right before you left, what was the general thoughts about the war? What was the general, you know, thinking and emotions?

Johnson: Yeah. I was aware that stuff was happening in the Ivy League Schools, the protest movement. All I cared about was Judy, and as long as I had her attention I was comforted, but you know, since I got back and while I was there, I suddenly became--you know, I had a lot of feelings of aloneness because all of a sudden this fraternity that I was in, at Northern, for almost three years, nobody wrote me. They could care less, they weren't there, they didn't have to go, they had their deferment. Even the firemen at the fire department, they gave me a really cool lighter as a going away present, but they didn't write. So, I just was off on my own, and because I was again, an introvert, I'm fine with that. I could take care of things on my own, but still, It was--. You know, I think an introvert loves to hear from people, but sometimes it isn't face-to-face. I didn't think it bothered me then, but I was aware of it.

I was aware that the country was starting to be at odds over the issue of Vietnam, the length of time, whether escalating the war was the right thing. That's about all I knew. I didn't know that the president of South Vietnam had-- that there was all kinds of controversy involved in his leadership, corruptness, murder of rivals and things like that. I wasn't aware of any of that, yet freedom of the press, at the time, allowed reporters and people such as yourself, to be right out in the field with the troops, interviewing and taking pictures, and things like that. They stopped doing that, and it wasn't done in some of our recent conflicts, because of the problems that resulted in Vietnam; the My Lai atrocity, and some other things. But at the time it was there, so I mean, it was there, but yet we were--not everything was coming out way as far as what was really happening in Vietnam. The reports were biased, we close to winning it all the time. So I felt that our weaponry was superior, that the American soldier was the most advanced soldier that had resources at their disposal that the enemy didn't, and so I felt comforted in that.

Brooks: Do you want to take a break right now, before we kind of get into the heavier stuff?

Johnson: Okay.

Brooks: Does that sound good?

Johnson: Sure.

Brooks: All right, let's stop this.

[File 2]

Brooks: This is the second file of the interview with Darryl Johnson, on March 18, 2015, so we'll just pick up where we left off. You were in Pleiku for a few days, it sounded like, and then you moved into your first station maybe?

Johnson: Yes. I was going to be in the 4th Infantry Division, which was in the Central Highlands. It's considered, like II Corps at the time, and Central Highlands are hilly. I was told that it would be a little bit like the Appalachians, in that you know, a very old mountain range that didn't have majestic peaks and snowcapped mountains and things, but just a lot of hills and a lot of high hills. It turned out that there was some places that we stayed at, that were fourteen, eighteen-hundred feet above sea level, and some of the smallest hills were just a hundred feet or two hundred feet above sea level.

So, we're going to Pleiku, and landed in Pleiku, in a large helicopter, a Chinook, got off, and was there, in barracks type situation, still not really knowing. I was there for a couple of days, eating hot chow. Got my first assignment, of having to steer the ship, in large concentrations of, you know, where there was several--a company is about a hundred to 120 men at the time, and if you had a couple companies somewhere, usually we were at a base that was established, well fortified, and going to be there for a while, and Pleiku had been there for a couple years. To take care of normal functions, you would dig holes in the ground and put big barrels in there, and build a wooden platform over it, and you did your business there. And out of the back of the wooden structures, there would be a flap. You would open the flap, pull the barrel out, put a bunch of diesel fuel or gas in there, and then burn it, and then it would be all set for the next guys. Well, did I really come here for that? That was the only time I had to do that though, because in the boonies, in the Central Highlands, you basically didn't have toilets, and you buried whatever you did. So, I mean, that's the thing I remember about Pleiku, other than later in my tour, I went back to Pleiku and was attacked in Pleiku. Up to that point, that's all I remember.

Then I was put on a Huey helicopter, and flown to my unit. I was going to be part of the 1st of the 22nd, and okay, so I got there and it was at a location that was close to the border, the Cambodian border, in a company that was on this hill, so it was pretty well fortified, and I met the fellow that was going to teach me how to be a forward observer. He was the current forward observer. There were five companies in a battalion, and four of them usually were what you called line troops. These are the guys that are going to go out on patrol, and then a Headquarters Company. I was part of Headquarters Company, assigned to one of these four companies, to be a forward observer, and so I was with Charlie Company the first time. Alpha, Beta, Charlie and Delta Company. And so I was Charlie Company for a couple of months. My forward observer that I learned everything from was Tom Davidson, and again, I remember it being--you know, I always tell the people the first day is the toughest, to the extent that you don't know what's going on. You've got to listen to everything, you hope you don't forget anything. It was pretty overwhelming the first day, but we were in a secure area, and I just knew, without any kind of training, I knew that I had to start reading maps that were topographical maps, which were not street maps, and that I was going to have to judge distances and things like that, and so over the first-- Tom was just a wonderful guy, and I hooched with him and Doc Kelly [sp??], who was a medic. Doc Kelly was a wonderful guy too, and it was a great combination of personalities.

Brooks: Can you explain what you mean by hooched?

Johnson: Your hooch out in the boonies, there's a couple of different designs, but sometimes you would just--most every soldier carried a poncho in South Vietnam, it was a very lightweight thing that shed water but yet was light and could block the sun. If you had a poncho and I had a poncho, we'd make a tent, we'd string them up at the middle and make a tent, and just lay under the tent. You could do it that way, more advanced-- and that was your hooch, you called it. Sometimes, I remember, I have pictures, that guys made them into teepees. They did like three guys, and they made them round, and they got poles, and they made a teepee. Most of the time you would dig a hole about three to four-feet deep in the ground, if you could dig, if the ground was workable, and you would dig a hole, three feet deep, and then at the very bottom of the hole, the length of the hole would be four-feet deep, but then you would have like a platform that was just two-feet deep, and that's what you laid on, or you sat on it and had your feet down in the--and that way, you would be in the ground a little bit, like dug in, in case we were attacked or had a rocket attack. You'd put your ponchos over the top of that, to keep the rain or the sun off, and that was your hooch. Most of the year, that's the way we--if we were going to be somewhere for a week or two, that's what we would do, we'd dig in. Sometimes, we were provided sandbags, and you'd dig the dirt out of

there and put it in the sandbags, and you'd have a wall that was way up there, and that was nice and you felt safe and secure.

Other times during the year, I didn't have a hooch, and you just slept on the ground. I'd say about a third of the time I was there, you just stopped and you slept, and that was it. Guys who were in a more secure area, like in Pleiku the city, type thing, you would have a bed or a cot or something. Out here, some guys, if it was pretty secure, they slept on air mattresses. You'd blow them up, and you'd sleep on an air mattress, and hope you don't get a leak. Way out in the boonies, when you traveled with patrols, small patrols, and about a third of the time I was with seven or eight people, just traveling along the border, looking for any kind of activity we could find. There, you didn't use the air mattresses, we didn't even take them with us, because they make too much noise. When you turn or roll on an air mattress, it makes a noise, and you wanted to be absolutely silent. But, there, we had our mattresses and we built our hooch.

Brooks: Tell me more about what it means to be a forward observer. You're attached to a company and what do you do?

Johnson: A forward observer's job is to know where you are, know where indirect supporting fire is. Indirect supporting fire are artillery pieces, mortar pieces, or if there was a base, or if you can get airstrikes, indirect fire. A platoon, company, or just a small patrol, it was one of the huge advantages we had in fighting in Vietnam, is that we had indirect fire almost everywhere we went, the enemy didn't, not all the time. The enemy transported their rockets or things like that, or mortars. They had small mortars that they would just carry on their shoulders; we had bigger pieces. And so in the Central Highlands, they struggled to get control over the Central Highlands, the U.S., the Army, for a couple of years.

The Tet Offensive, in 1968, I missed. I was very lucky, I got there in August, and the Tet Offensive was going on from the beginning of the year up until then. But after the Tet Offensive, the Central Highlands, the 4th Infantry Division, had good control over it, to where we had artillery and mortar on tops of the higher hills, almost everywhere. Any patrol, along the border or back inland more, was in range of artillery, and a forward observer would know where that's at, and would know how to operate a radio, to be able to give directions or locations under code, because you didn't want the enemy to know where you were at, so you gave everything in code. The codes were changed now and then, so I was given codes every week or more, and then I learned to use the code to give locations of where I am and where my target is. I had to be able to visually be able to estimate distance in a jungle very accurately and if you didn't, you could be hitting the wrong people. I did this by using a compass, measuring distance between known hilltops and where I am. If I had two

known hilltops, that on the map said these were the tallest hilltops, there it is, over there, and here's the direction, via compass. I could intersect them, and that's where I was, and I could do that very well, and then I could estimate how far the enemy was, and I could call to a location that had artillery pieces, and if those artillery pieces were over here--if I was here, and the enemy was there, the artillery had to be here or here. They could not, they will not fire over friendly troops.

Brooks: They had to be to the side.

Johnson: So, I could do that and I could get explosive rounds on that target, and generally, I could do it within three minutes. So, if we had guys that got in trouble or were ambushed or whatever, I could get a wall of fire in front of them, so that the enemy couldn't get at them, sometimes. Three minutes was a long time, I could do it that quick, no matter what I was doing. So, I felt that's what I was beginning to learn from Tom. Usually, the forward observer's job, when he was with a company of people, occupying a hilltop, would say this company needs to be protected, so you put pre-planned targets. If there was a trail over here, between a village that passed over here, you'd put a target on that trail, so that if at night you were attacked, that was a known target, you'd plot it. Some day, you'd go out there and you just fire until you hit the trail, and you say okay, mark it there, and at the back of the guns, they would mark that as a target, your target one. And then a target over here, target two, down in the valley, a target over here by the creek, three. And you'd surround yourself with known targets, and so if you were attacked, you'd call the guns and say, "Fire mission, over." Locate target three, from target three, drop five-zero, left five-zero, fifty yards, and you'd start firing there. If it was right on target right away, you'd fire for effect, and that's kind of what we did, is manage indirect fire. If it was-- that's how it went with artillery and mortars.

If it was an airstrike and you had jets, or we had some propeller planes that were very well-armed, you would locate the enemy's position and yours, and you would locate the airstrike to fly this way and that way, so that they weren't, again, flying over your position but over them, and you would tell them whether they needed to bring it in closer, closer, closer. Sometimes we brought it in almost on top of ourselves, but it was very tricky and could get very dangerous if you didn't call it in right. The worst thing a forward observer wanted to do was kill one of your own troops because of a miscalculation on your part. The best thing you wanted to do was be able to have fire at a spot quick. So that's what I did all day long, plotted targets, measured. I kept my radio in working order. It weighed almost thirty pounds. It was a big, honking thing, the batteries were ten pounds each, and you had to carry an extra battery, just like you do.

Brooks: Yeah. Got to be prepared.

Johnson: What else for forward observers? Usually traveled with--some units had an artillery forward observer, who was an officer, like a lieutenant or even a captain, and these guys were supposed to know everything. You would hooch together. I was a little bit apart from the guys who were on the line. The guys on the line were the guys carrying machineguns, M-16s, shotguns, and they were our line troopers. I would be--I'd say in a little bit different location and work on my maps, but yet, I always wanted to be with those line guys, because they were protecting me. If we did the job right, I wouldn't be firing an M-16 at the enemy, I'd be getting the airstrike on them, and they would be firing and keeping the enemy off of me. So that's the way it's supposed to work.

So, there were periods where you were busy with preparation, there were periods where it was incredibly boring and there was periods that just were, the shit was hitting the fan. So, I had time, almost every day, to write letters. About two thirds of the time, I was with a company or larger size. The adrenaline was flowing the third of the time when I was out, just with seven or eight people, on long-range reconnaissance patrols, and that was exciting, but it was hairy. That's when I felt that I was most well-used, and why I felt that I was as good as it got, in terms of being a forward observer, because we never lost a guy.

Brooks: Does a forward observer work by themselves then, it sounds like?

Johnson: You are on your own. You usually have a radio operator with you.

Brooks: Okay that's--yeah.

Johnson: He's right on your hip and you get the radio while you're working your compass and map, keep the radios right there, not to be separated. But a lot of times the radio operators that were sent to me couldn't handle it and had to be sent back for one reason or another. They just couldn't take the pressure, they didn't have good radio communication skills. I don't know why they sent them to me in the first place. But generally, they just, fear was too much of a factor for them and they had to be sent back. So, I'd say most of the time, I had to carry my own radio, which you know, I complained and bitched and moaned about it all the time to headquarters, but in a way, I always felt as though I felt a little bit more macho. The line troopers respected me, I got respect.

So yeah, you are off on your own, but when things were quiet and peaceful, you'd want to be talking and shooting the bull with the guys on the line, and eating with them and things like that. But there were just

times, I mean they're cleaning their weapons, I've got to be cleaning my map.

Brooks: So tell me, is there anything else about Tom Davidson, anything else you learned from him that you can share?

Johnson: A couple of things. He was engaged also. He was a nice guy, willing to do stuff for me. He sent me things after he left. I thought he prepared me as well as anybody could have. I was there for almost three months with Tom, and we talked about his St. Louis and my Chicago. We read books when there was time and we now and then experimented with food, to make things a little bit more lively. He would get things from his fiancé, I'd get things from Judy. I'd get packets of dry Kool-Aid and Kool-Aid and warm, in--you know, in water, a canteen of water, tasted pretty good. Nothing ever got cool. He got chili powder, and so we separated C-Rations, beans, and some other C-Rations, and we put chili powder, and we made like chili one night, and that was exciting, because you ate pretty much one of ten choices, and very often you only had one of two, or three choices, a helicopter would come in. If you were on a small patrol, you carried enough food with you to last a week, and nobody saw you or picked you up until it was time to come back. But when you're with a larger group, helicopters would come in and re-supply you all the time, sometimes with hot food, with hot chow, and that was good, but often it was just C-Rations. You had limited choices, so you found humor in almost everything.

Tom found a way of laughing about almost anything. Leeches on our legs, rot on our faces, would happen, you'd get these little infections, that the medic would come and look and say, "Oh, that scab looks pretty good, leave that one there, that one you've got to scrape off, and re-scab it up, and we'll take a look at it in two days." You had this crotch-rot and foot-rot, and you'd laugh. He taught me how to laugh about anything. Someone's got it worse somewhere. So, he was my age but yet, he had been there, so he gave me everything he learned in his almost six months being a forward observer. One of the things I struggled with after I left was never getting in touch with him, never, trying to--and other people I was with, I just never got back in touch. Maybe some day, maybe when I'm eighty, we'll get in touch, I don't know, but he was, I think, had a lot to do with me making it there, through the year.

Brooks: And did he leave just because his tour was up?

Johnson: Usually, you were a forward observer for six months out of your twelve, and then the next six months, they bring you into a base camp, where the guns are stationed at, and you are part of what's called the Fire Direction Center. The forward observers radio you and you give the instructions to

the guns, as to how the guns should be aimed, and that was all numbers and degrees from whatever stake they were aiming at. So, that was a much more secure, in a bunker type thing towards the rear, and those guns were firing, supporting the forward observer and patrols that were out deep in the jungle. Usually, you were six months out there, and then you'd come in and you'd get an R&R out of country. There were several places to choose from. He went to Hawaii to meet his fiancé and then came back to Fire Direction Control, and spent his next five months there. He was the one I was on the phone with a lot of times, after I was out there. I was forward observer. I couldn't come in to the direction control center ten months, and so I was out there a lot longer than most, because at the time, they needed a good forward observer out there, and some of the other had made mistakes, some of the other got killed, so I was out there longer than usual. Because of that, you might get promotions. I was promoted a specialist and then a sergeant, and usually, for someone in the Army for only one year, to be a sergeant already, that was pretty good. That was your tour. The six to nine months, ten months in my case, out in the field, that was the part that was way different than Chicago.

Brooks: Tell me about some of the first kind of conflicts you found yourself in.

Johnson: Lucky enough to where the first one, I was not with this platoon, and they were a couple of kilometers from us. I just was listening to the radio and hearing that they had come under attack and they needed everything available, because they felt as though they were being outmatched, overrun. And so I just listened to it on the radio, how this forward observer handled it, and that was good, and I could just imagine what they were going through, because the enemy was on top of them almost. He was calling in artillery, and so that memory included a thing called, it was a Gatling gun. Well, I'll think of it. It was this plane that was outfitted with Gatling guns that could fire an incredible amount of fire in a very short period of time. I could see this plane banking, and hearing the guns and seeing the tracers from the guns, and all it sounded like was a purr, "puuuurrrrrrr." You didn't hear individual bullets being fired, it was just a purr, and then listening to him saying that's close, that's close, bring it a little closer. That went on most of the night and it was done in a few hours. Puff the Magic Dragon was what we called, I want to--and there was another term for it, Puff the Magic Dragon, bring him in.

Brooks: Is the name of the plane, that's what you called it?

Johnson: Called it Puff the Magic Dragon, and there was another name for it too, but it was outfitted with these brand new Gatling guns that could fire--if it made a pass over a football field and just passed one, it would put a bullet in every square foot of that football field, so anything that was there was going to get shot. So if you had Puff in the area, and you could draw it in

on the target. That was a problem though, was getting it right on the target, having the ability to estimate the right distance. So, I listened to that, and then it wasn't more than a week later that I was on patrol with Company C. It was a platoon, so it was about twenty guys, and they saw something in the distance, and I saw the movement, and they fired. Nobody was close to it but they knew what it was, just listening, and they were putting fire there and fire came in return. I remember a bullet striking a tree, it was like right there, and whoa, that got my attention, and I just was able to plot a target, get the fire out there, and it was artillery fire that just kind of blew up that whole--and I fired for effect, and it all was quiet. And I felt-- we patrolled down there, we didn't spot anything. There was no blood trails or anything, so it was like oh, darn, we must not have got anything. I was looking for something, you know, that I could hang my hat on, but that was it.

The next mission was closer yet. Again, this time was just with a squad of seven people, and we were traveling in very dense foliage, very hard to see. There was what we called elephant grass. Elephant grass would be as high as this, eight to ten feet tall, and I mean, I would not see him through the elephant grass. I could see the grass moving, if he was moving, and I would not be able to see twenty feet in front of me through this elephant grass. We were moving through the elephant grass and our point person got shot in the foot and was screaming, and everybody was panicking, not really though, I mean they were just so good. They moved right out and spread out and attacked where the fire was coming from, and we were firing. I laid down, with my back to a tree, and I started figuring exactly where we were, and I was calling fire mission, and there was this movement right over here and it was coming right at me. I took my M-16 and shot and it stopped, and I called in, finished the fire mission. It was like so many things that guys could remember about Vietnam, it was over, like in minutes. You had small, small things, in the Central Highlands. The enemy, I think was trying to probe and see where we were at. We were probing, trying to see where they were at, and sometimes it just was unavoidable, you came in contact.

So, after that was over, we were quiet and we were all looking. The guy was--we had his foot under control. He lost his foot, but it was kind of dangling at the time and we stopped the bleeding, he was going to be okay. We have to make sure-- we have to get back to a comfortable landing, an area that we could be extracted. Our position had been compromised; we had to get out of there. There's only seven us, who knows, there could be a hundred of them out there somewhere. So, I'm calling in for an extraction. We knew a place about eight hundred meters over there, that would be a good clearing, but first we had to make sure out here, where we had been attacked from, was secured. To do that, we just all lined up and we moved out, to see if we could draw fire. We went

only about ten feet, nothing, went another ten feet, nothing, and then I like tripped over this thing. I thought it was a log and it was a body. And so I'm pretty sure it was what I had fired at right out here, because everybody else was over there. At first, it was like jubilation, like we got one, I killed a gook, and that we're okay, we're going to be able to get out of here, and let's take him and bring him back to the base, and it's like bringing home our kill.

The chopper said it was going to be about five minutes out, and so we started going through his stuff and took his weapon. I have a picture where I'm holding his AK-47 and comparing it with the M-16. I'm going through his stuff and he has papers I couldn't understand, but he had a wallet, and I realized this wallet looks just like mine, the guy is human. I opened it and he's got--it's just like my wallet. In the meantime, I had dug in his other pocket, and here's his rations, which was a ball of rice wrapped in endless pieces of like plastic wrap, and I'm going, this is what this guy eats? I've done a whole lot better than him. I dig into his wallet, I open it up, and snap open the picture part, and there's a picture of him in like dress uniform. This guy was sharp, and I'm looking and I'm going, he's not as small as I thought all Vietnamese are either. I turned the page, and it was a picture of he and his wife and two kids, and I didn't know what to do. It was like I had to kill him, but why did I have to find this, you know. That bothered me for a long time, the image of, of eliminating a family. Why did it have to be me? And so that bothered me, but I realized that, you know, if I hadn't killed him, he'd have killed me for sure. So I rationalized it, but it just never left me. That was my first kill and it happened pretty quick, pretty soon. Later on, other things weren't as dramatic, but it happened several times, but not like that.

That's the way it went, little patrols like that, for quite some time, and some big patrols. Lots of times you just never saw anything, lots of times you would just travel and then get to your--you always had a predetermined place that you wanted to wind up at. So, once you got there, you would call it in, and so they know where you were at. Lots of times we would see nothing in the Central Highlands. Until the Tet Offensive of '68, it was fairly secure. I mean the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were always moving in and around, but never got any until they mounted the Tet Offensive. Villages always felt fairly safe. Many times, our missions were to surround and inspect villages, or just be in the area of villages.

Brooks: With those villages, did you have any interactions with the local folks there?

Johnson: Yeah. I always liked being near the villages, that were the Montagnard villages. Montagnards were ancient people who had been doing things the

same way for thousands of years, and they were farmers. They would have their village, for part of the monsoons, it would be here, and there would be buildings that would last for a number of years, and then they had villages that were out where they planted rice and other crops, that they would sort of, I suppose, stay for just a few days, and then come back to the main village. I liked being near them. The Montagnards didn't necessarily want to recognize us, because as soon as we left, the Viet Cong would come back and punish them, if they showed any kind of favoritism to us. So, sometimes we stayed near but did not interact with them much, but they knew we were there. Everybody knew where American troops were, we were so noisy. So, I mean, as quiet as we tried--only when I was with a small, small, small patrol, did I feel like we were really quiet and could sneak up on anything. But, so those villages were nice. The Montagnards, also sometimes, if they felt that they were in opposition to communists, we would outfit them. Their troops got training and we felt that they were good to be around, and could fight as good as us.

The ARVN troops, Republic of Vietnam troops, we didn't trust. We didn't think that they had their heart in it. Most of those guys came from the city. I realized that Vietnam was more than just the Central Highlands. There was Saigon and Hue, and the cities, the urban areas were one thing. The Montagnards and the central highlands and the border areas, were completely rural, agricultural. So, I liked being with the Montagnards, they fought well. They were fighting to protect their own village, so they fought with everything they had. And, we interacted with them at times. There was a bridge over a river once, and we had to go over that bridge, and we swapped stuff, and I sent things home; a dress that could never fit my wife, but it was cute and I sent it home. Not a dress, it was the pants and the top that Vietnamese women would wear, and it's just cute. That was good.

Later on, there was a time we were protecting a village and the kids came and played with us all the time, and we'd make a ball and we'd throw the ball around. We never had the typical Vietnam War movie stuff, where the kid would strap himself with a bomb and blow himself up. That never happened, I never saw that. That's kind of Hollywood. It happened but not often enough to make it part of so many movies. These kids played with us and we were with that village for a couple of weeks, and then we had to be taken somewhere else. I was on the phone wondering why. Well, someone else is going to relieve you there, we need your unit over here. Well, why not just keep our unit here and have them go there? Well, I argued but it didn't work, we'd gone, and that village got overrun, completely destroyed, burned, and it's just a huge amount of guilt, because those people showed affection for us and we showed affection for them, and most of them were killed. I wondered about the little kids. So, there

was a lot of guilt with that, but that was the only village, big problem that we ever had.

I remember one time, going into a village, and the village elder, old guy, white hair, coming out to me and being nice. This is maybe the first village that we had surrounded, and now we were going to search, to see if there's any sign of Viet Cong activity in the village, or a cachet of weapons or anything. And so while the guys are searching, we're being respectful, and he's bringing me this bottle and in it is sloshing around, a bunch of stuff on the bottom. My radio operate who, at the time, knew a little bit about it, he said, "Keep a smile on your face and drink it." I said okay, and it was rice wine, and there was stuff on the bottom, and I thanked him, and I took it and I took a shot, and it just burned and the taste was horrible, but I kept the smile on my face and he said, "Now take a second shot." *Nooooo*. I did, and he seemed so pleased that I did, and so I offered him some C-Rations, and he was happy about that good trade. I just remember that as being okay, here's our diplomacy in action. So, but I said to some of these guys, at the time I was a sergeant and I said, "You have to go over there and check that hooch out there, especially under the hooch, it looks like someone could dig, and you, go over there." One of the guys who had been on the line for a long time came up to me and said, "Do you know what you're doing?" I said, "Yeah, I'm telling them to check things out." He says, "No, don't ever point. If you're going to point, you point like this."

Brooks: With your palm up.

Johnson: Palm up. He said, "Don't point your finger, that's like giving them the bird." But I wasn't pointing at one of them, so I was okay with that. If I was pointing at one of the villagers like that, that would be very disrespectful. The same thing with taking pictures. If I wanted to take a picture of the old guy, I would have to ask permission, and in most of the cases, they did not want their picture taken. If somebody who was at all attached or familiar with the Viet Cong, they could report that, and the elders were the most susceptible to be threatened, killed, tortured, than anybody. So those were villages. The beauty of Vietnam is in that Central Highlands, I think, in that there's just so much. Most everything there, for kilometer after kilometer after kilometer, is just foot paths, and beautiful vegetation. In the winter, rivers, streams and waterfalls are everywhere, and in the dry monsoons, there's rivers, but not--the streams dry up, so do the waterfalls a little bit, but the vegetation is just gorgeous. I appreciated it then, but I'd love to see it again. And then there were the areas that we were in that were defoliated, that was difficult. Defoliated areas, I felt more secure in, because you could see, and if you could see them before they see you, you have the advantage. If you could see them and they see you at the same time but they're at a distance, you had the advantage,

because you had indirect fire, to get on top of them. So, we were defoliating a lot of areas, and so I thought it was a big advantage. I didn't know that they were toxic, that Agent Orange--I didn't even know what Agent Orange was.

Soon after coming home from Vietnam, when I heard about Agent Orange, I knew that I was in it. I got tested, but I don't know if it has ever had any effect on me. Who would know? They asked if it had an effect on my sex life. I didn't have a sex life, how would I know? Did it affect my mental cognition? I never was a deep thinker, how would I know, you know? So it was like how do you know. But as it's turned out, I don't have any cancers or things that other people have. Our daughter seemed to be healthy. She has health issues now. I don't know if that's because of Agent Orange. So I don't know, but the areas that were defoliated now, I mean that stays in the soil for so long, that I wish we hadn't done it. I feel a certain guilt in what our country was doing with some of our weaponry and things like defoliants, and napalm and things, that to me, I wish we had never used them.

Brooks: Do you know anything about what the strategy was in terms of what was defoliated and where?

Johnson: There were areas that had been sort of like sanctuaries, you know you could send troops in. In the Central Highlands, they defoliated a lot of areas where the North Vietnamese had come across the border, because they could move along Cambodia and Laos, with impunity, and then come into anywhere they wanted to, and then they would bury caches of materials and supplies. They built underground tunnel systems that were used as hospitals, and headquarters and operating, and they were very hard to spot and detect. So, by defoliating... And so, for a couple of years, there was a lot of battling back and forth in those areas, for control, and meanwhile, all these villages and thousands of people living in villages, were either is it the U.S., or is it the North Vietnamese? Is it the Viet Cong, is it--who? And they're stuck in the middle, and you'd like to have control over that area. So once we did beat back the Tet Offensive of '67, we had control, and I think defoliation was going on then, in about 25 percent of the areas of the Central Highland, and sure enough, we didn't have a whole lot of problems in those areas after that. So, I think that was a strategy, is to eliminate the cover that the NVA could have in taking lots of time to bury and dig tunnel systems.

Brooks: What did a defoliated area look like when you got there?

Johnson: All the leaves off of trees. Sometimes it was areas that were both bombed and defoliated, so some of the pictures I have, the trees are sort of scarred from fire. That's not defoliation. Basically, just a lot of gray trees with

nothing on them, and so now, all of a sudden your vision is so much--you could see so much further into forest, jungle. Much of the Central Highlands and Vietnam has got a triple canopy. You have low-growing bushes and shrubs that are ten feet tall. Then you had short trees that are twenty to a hundred feet tall, and then you had the canopy of trees over the top of that, that were maybe a couple of hundred feet tall. Well, from the air, because we had air superiority, you'd take pictures and stuff and all you see is vegetation. If you got rid of the top and the middle vegetation, there still was this lower vegetation that people can move around in and bury things. So, the defoliation took care of all of it and it was eerie walking through it, eerie, but we felt secure and we didn't know it was toxic. Of course, we weren't eating the ground or anything, but you're inhaling the stuff. It was creepy, yeah. I don't and [inaudible]. You felt more secure walking on trails when the areas were defoliated, so you can get to places quicker, by staying on a trail, whereas when it wasn't defoliated, you wanted to stay off the trails, because that's where ambushes could occur, that's where booby-traps could be placed. So we would much rather take much more time getting from point A to B, and stay off trails, than on trails.

Brooks: Do you want to tell me about a few of these things that you wrote down here? Well, you had mentioned Doc Kelly before. Did you want to talk about him at all any more?

Johnson: He's a black guy and I lived with him, and joked with him and ate with him. He taught me what St. Louis was like, growing up in a similar neighborhood in St. Louis as I lived in, in Chicago. I just thought--I saw Doc Kelly, I never saw him carrying a weapon. He just was so committed to being a medic and a good one, that even in a firefight, he would expose himself, running from one person to another, and as far as I know he made it, but for those three months that I was there, I just thought that he had, he was fearless. Yet, when we would get back to base and we would talk, I could tell he had fears and he had emotions, but he would be fearless and just, he did not hesitate to move out there. You know, he would tend to an enemy trooper too, and he didn't wear a big white helmet with a red cross on it or anything, he looked like a regular troop. I just admired him for that and just, that's, that's my memory of him.

Brooks: Probably not the best segue, but right above that, on your things to include you have race fight.

Johnson: Yeah.

Brooks: Is that a specific incident?

Johnson: You spent a number of months training, then you spend a couple of months in the field with all these guys, black and white. You know what's going on at home, that the Civil Rights Act has been passed now, but there's demonstrations in a lot of cities for voting rights and things like that. We're not really--I mean, our source of news is a small paper called the *Stars and Stripes* that the Army produces. I think it might have had a little bias to it, maybe a big bias, but everything you read in there glowed of how well we were doing, and that there's no problems at home, though they did have articles about demonstrations, and these people on campus that are being brought from one campus to another, just to stir things up. Then, but there was no talk of the race relations in the United States, it was just the protest movement, but you knew it was going on. And here we are, out in the field. I felt as close to Hispanic guys, were becoming fairly large numbers in the service at the time, and black guys, a lot of them, and I had no trouble. Then I go back to base camp, to Pleiku, for just a few days, because I have to get a new rifle, my rifle was destroyed. I'm back in Pleiku, and in these barracks, these redneck guys from Louisiana, started picking on a couple black guys. I thought they were picking on them. The black guys were standing up to them, not backing off, and the Louisiana boys, who had numbers, certainly weren't backing down. Words led to shoves, shoves led to fists, fists led to knives, and I'm going holy shit, I just killed a guy a few weeks earlier, and now my own guys, and there's knives? I just, that, that was very difficult to deal with. I just wanted to get out of there. I'd rather be up along the border, where I knew I had control of my own environment. I had no control.

And so there were fights, and usually it was guys who were in base camp for almost a whole year, and lonely for home probably, and they get together and form little groups with guys like them, and so there was the southern boys and the black boys. The cities, or the base camps, they weren't segregated, but there was some race problems going on there, and I just found it disgusting. What are we doing in Vietnam if we can't take care of our own situation, racial situation? Okay, so it was for the first time in my life, I had to try and break up a fight, which I felt like I had to do, and I'd just see knives flashing here and there. Fortunately, these guys realized I was there trying to break it up, because I could have got stabbed real easy, and help break it up.

Then it happened twice, and then I went to a movie, and outside the movie, I start walking towards the barracks I was in, and this was a couple months later, when I was going to my R&R. I come out of a movie, heading back, and a guy is following me, and there's nobody around, everybody else went that way, and I'm going this way. He's following me and he pulls out a knife, I could see it, and I start running, and he starts running, and he's as close to me as you are, and he's not saying anything, he's just coming after me with this knife. Why me? I just got speed that I

never knew I had, and he could never get any closer than you were, but I mean the knife seemed like it was--and I had dreams about a knife being, you know, it's getting closer, closer. I just outran him. I had dreams where I could fly and get away. But I just found that so... why, you know, after being in the field, am I fighting to survive right in my own base camp? I don't know what he was after, but I just bolted into a barracks breathless, and these guys who didn't know me from Adam, said, "What the hell are you doing here?" And I said, "This guy is chasing me." "Well, stay as long as you want." I went back and I mean, I was tiptoeing, looking everywhere, and I was just very paranoid. But that, that was a crazy, crazy experience.

So, bad things were happening that to me were disgusting. I didn't get an in-country R&R. Most troops, after about six months, would go to Saigon, and you could blow off steam in Saigon. Well, it became just guys acting out whenever they went there, shacking up with prostitutes, gambling, getting in fights and stuff like that. They had to end it in '68, and I'm kind of glad I didn't get to go. But those kind of experiences were, to me, they were sickening, you know, if you're fighting a war. I know atrocities occurred in World War II far worse than Vietnam, but they were never reported because there was no reporters there, or if they were, they weren't right on the frontline. I know rape and things like that occurred far more often in World War II than Vietnam, but it's just that it got me thinking that our mission is not pure, that we're going to lose this thing, and I have no control over it. Now, instead of fighting for victory, I'm fighting just to survive; that's a big difference. You can't win when all your troops are thinking that way. So I felt guilty about that. If someone was going to ask me to go somewhere voluntarily, I'd have to think about it, think it over real strong. I wouldn't just volunteer for the good of the cause, no way.

Brooks: Were you ever able, or did you ever--well, we'll stick with that. Were you ever able to report that man had chased you, or just any of your concerns, to an officer or anybody higher up?

Johnson: Yeah. Where the guy chased me, I was leaving on a helicopter the next morning, so I don't think I reported it, but the racial thing, I wrote a report on it, what I saw, and the guys that I thought were responsible, and so beyond that, I don't know how they were disciplined or anything, because I was out of there and gone. Yeah, it was a tough situation for any army to keep a lid on things like that, especially when you have six hundred thousand people there and the six hundred thousand is changing over so fast. So, it had to be very difficult. So, no, I ah, you know, I think sometimes officers, my impression is that they wouldn't want to be bothered with it anyway.

Brooks: Did you talk amongst the other troops ever? Was there any kind of outlet for you to kind of express your frustration?

Johnson: The other guys, the southern boys that were in the units I was with, all were disgusted by it too, and they couldn't believe it. That's not the way it is down home by us, you know, we're getting along just fine. So in retrospect, you know at the time, I probably thought it was happening all over base camp, in every base camp it was happening, and in retrospect, it might have just been an incident that I was close to, that just affected me for a long time, because it was so surprising. But, you know, I think it was happening a lot, and now today, it's still a problem, race and women in the service today. Those that are dealing with PTSD, women, in many cases, it's because of rape, or abuse of some sort, and so the military has always had a special situation in our culture, of dealing with issues that we don't see in our neighborhoods. So, I both admire, but yet criticize, because people should know what the right thing is to do, and not have to be forced. Those kind of things disgust me, the way we handled ourselves amongst ourselves sometimes, and then sometimes we showed brutality to the Vietnamese people, you know we're in their country and yet, we're throwing things at them and mistreating them. There was an incident where I was on a truck, a convoy. Most of the time, I was on helicopters, going from one--but one time we were on a truck convoy and I'm just fascinated by this, because we're on a dirt--it's called a highway but it's a dirt road, that leads through the Central Highlands. We were going through villages, and I'm seeing permanent concrete block structures and I'm fascinated by this, and village life.

[disconnects microphone] Whoops.

Brooks: I've gotcha.

Johnson: The microphone came off. Thank you.

Brooks: There you go.

Johnson: As soon as people, as soon as villagers, would hear a convoy coming through, they would come out to the roadway and they would either offer something in trade, like cold drinks, and they'd be cold. Very popular, to get a cold Pepsi, and in exchange, you give them some of your C-Rations, or money. You'd be doing that when the convoy would slow at an intersection or something and you could hand it down. Other little ones would be out there begging, just offering their hands, and you'd take a can of peaches in juice, which you might not want to get rid of that, but okay. Or crackers, or something, and you'd just extend your hand over the side and the little kid would grab it. [pause] Guys took this as an opportunity to fling hockey-puck sized cans at little kids, and when you get them, I got a

head shot, and just plink them. You know, I'm doing this and I see a truck ahead of us, these guys started flinging things, and a woman got hit, and a kid, and it's like, "Hey, hey!" I'm hollering at them, for them to stop, and they're just laughing, and then guys on our truck start doing it too, not everybody, but just a few. It was the first time in my life that I stood up to a guy, and this guy was huge, and I stood up to him and said, "Stop it, you have to stop it." *Are you going to stop me?* type of thing, and I said, "I will." He flings it and I wrestle with him. He beat the crap out of me. I wasn't hurt real bad, but it felt like I got the crap beat out of me. But, the other guys on the truck realized what was going on, and we're fighting in the middle of this truck, and both of us are more wrestling and nobody can really get a punch, but I'm punching him in the gut and he's hitting me on the face, from about here, and so nobody's doing much damage, but we were yelling. Meanwhile, these guys pull us off of each other and order is restored, and he wanted to, you know, because he's so big, he wanted to go start flinging things at people again, but the other guys said hey, cut it out, and I felt like I stopped him.

There's a book that was out at the time, called *The Ugly American*, which I don't know if I ever read the whole thing, but it talked about how arrogant we are/were, and I don't think we're much different today. I think we're still pretty arrogant around the world, and that's just an example. You can't win the hearts and minds of people by doing stuff like that. There was the race stuff that we talked about, but that was happening all the time on convoys, and I don't know how officers wouldn't stand up to their men and stop it, like right now. If I saw that happen, I'm afraid I'd have to--I'd shoot a guy, rather than let him do it, because I think he's just as much the enemy. But anyway, that was my experience and it bothered me, I had dreams about it. So, yeah.

Brooks: Obviously, I mean it still affects you to a certain degree, but while you were there, did you have any coping mechanisms for dealing with that, those issues, or for kind of having trauma from combat? Did you have anything that helped you cope?

Johnson: I think I did, without knowing or thinking that I need a coping mechanism. I think I did. You found humor in everything, you laughed about it. There was a saying we used, you know, "It don't mean nothing." We would use it all the time, "It don't mean nothing." That little fight back at Pleiku the other day, that don't mean nothing. We're here now, you and me, and you'll watch me, I'll watch you. It don't mean nothing. And so you'd shrug things off with sarcasm, which I wasn't very good at. In the seventies, people were really cool if they could be ultra-sarcastic, they were really cool, and I could never get it. I wouldn't understand their sarcasm and I didn't try it, and so I always hated sarcastic people, I didn't like it. So, you dealt with things with humor or sarcasm. I would write,

and my coping mechanism was just getting letters. Thank God we had a pretty good turnover time, twelve to fourteen days, in letters, and even out in the boonies, we could get our mail within a few days. I think that was my coping mechanism, because that was my attachment to what we called the world. The world really is back there, this is not the world, this is Nam. So, to be attached to the world and keep your sanity, you had to get mail. I pity the guys that weren't getting mail, or who were getting it and then all of a sudden someone cut them off. You know? They would have a real tough time, because you felt real alone, I mean there was no emails, there was no texting, there was nothing, there was just mail, and if you didn't have that what did you have? So, I coped that way.

I coped knowing that some of the people that I--Neil, the fellow who became my radio operator and who I trained to be a forward observer, and Tom Davidson and Doc. I could always go back to them and know that they were good people, and most of the guys on the line that were good people, and whenever I even what was said, I went with what was called LRRP missions, long range reconnaissance patrols. Most of those guys were Rangers, they were trained to be Airborne Rangers. These were, you know, they weren't Green Berets, but these were guys who could do stuff, and I was with them because they needed eyes and a map, and the indirect fire. These guys, if they knew what I could do and they saw me do what I could, I had respect, and that was my coping mechanism, was when I had some sort of control. But in a race riot or being chased or whatever, no control, and so to cope, I have to have control. To this day, I have to know where things are at, and I have to know--and if we're going to plan an event, I don't have to be the one that plans it, but I have to know. Don't make it a surprise, because I have to know the details. So, it translates into a lot of things. So that's how I coped, I think, is just by feeling like I was in control, and I felt like I was in control when I was out there, not in the secure base camp area supposedly.

Brooks: Yeah, that's interesting.

Johnson: To me that was sin city. Out there, I could be in control.

Brooks: Did you have any other close calls while you were out there on patrol?

Johnson: There's a place called the Death Valley, where towards the end of my forward observing days, we were taken by helicopter, to this area, and it was near Chu Moor Mountain, and there had been a lot of fighting going on in Chu Moor over the years, and now it's happening again, for control. We had four companies, that's four hundred people, in different locations near Chu Moor, and every time, every day, one company would try to advance down into this valley, called Death Valley, which came down from Chu Moor, and a stream flowed down through it. Every day, a

company would advance into the valley and they would get no more than twenty, thirty minutes into the valley and there would be firepower on them that was intense, and it would stop them. We'd call in artillery and airstrikes, and the next day B Company goes down, same thing. C Company goes down the next day, same thing. Tomorrow is our day, we're going. Shit. So we go and I remember that, because A Company, B Company and C Company, it was almost like going through the alphabet, had the three days before us. I called and I said, Is there a way that some-- because we were on this hilltop, and we were having no encounters there. It was all down in the valley. Could I get a chaplain to come out, say mass? The guys had not seen a chaplain, most of them, since they've been in-country. Is there a chance that we could do that? We'll see what we can do, was the response.

And we get a bird and get some mail, and out pops this guy that looks like Santa Claus, he's as wide as he is tall. Well, you know he's not a ground trooper, he's the chaplain, he's got the chaplain bars. Awesome, because you know, tomorrow, we're going down into the valley and it's been bad news, a couple guys have died. It's not like we're losing hundreds of people, but every time we've gone down there someone's got it, and came back, and we're going tomorrow. He said, "I'll try my best to put something together. I have to tell you though, I'm a rabbi. Are there any good Jewish boys in the group?" There was only a couple, but he said, "I do a real good Christian service," and it was just a wonderful thing, what he did, quoting the scripture and things. [voice breaks] [pause] He said he wanted to come with us, and he made it, and he was real agile for a fat guy, real agile. He just had something about him.

So we went into that valley and it started and we said, our mission was to try and just get beyond where everybody else had gone, and so we were and we were making progress, and then all of a sudden the fire got more intense and the guy next to me, his ear was just about blown off, and he's screaming, and I'm telling him to shut up and keep going and stay with me, you're all right. This rabbi, [chokes up] [pause] he's hollering encouragement to everybody and just like a medic would do, he's bouncing from guy to guy and telling them, you'll be okay. I don't know what his message was the night before but he said, "Just remember what we talked about the night before." I think he quoted scripture about, you know, maybe going into the Valley of Death. And he just was so strong. That surprised me. We went as far, until their firepower equaled ours, and we stayed there, we didn't go back, and we felt good about that. We stayed there and they stopped and we stopped, and the next day was--and the rabbi stayed with us, and he made fun of the food we ate. He said, "Is this kosher?" [laughs] I don't think so, rabbi, it's pork and beans, and he said, "Well, I'll eat the beans." He probably violated everything, but he

didn't care. [pause] You're only as strong as your weakest link, and I thought he was going to hold us back, but he didn't, and we stayed there.

The next day we had what was called a "mad minute," where before you advance, you don't know what's out there. The jungle was so thick, this was not a defoliated area, that I just called in artillery and mortar fire, I had both, and just walked it from right to left and left to right as the rounds were falling, and that ended, and then everybody in their position stood and fired a minute, just a mad minute, out there. It seemed like an awful waste of ammunition, but if there was something that was out there, it wasn't, and then we advanced, and we went all day, humping the boonies. It was North Vietnamese, not Viet Cong, but North Vietnamese, and they just left. So, we got a chance to occupy Chu Moor Mountain again for a few days, and then we left it to be reoccupied by the NVA, I suppose, because we were needed somewhere else. But that's kind of how it went a little bit sometimes. You wondered, why are we going up this place if we're just going to leave it? It wasn't like World War II, where you're advancing, you take turf, and you advance and you take turf. Vietnam was too spread out, it was like fighting for California. The border was so long that they could come from almost anywhere, so you were always going from one place to another. That was a hairy situation there. Guys got hurt, some got killed, but it wasn't anybody I knew or anybody in the--I never lost anybody on a patrol that I was on, but this was a large unit thing, and just the memory of that rabbi bouncing around, just is special.

Brooks: Do you know what happened to him?

Johnson: No. He went back, I mean he was only with us a little over a full day, the night, and that day, and then he was back. I'm sure they were telling him to get his ass back there, because he was going to get himself shot, and I'm surprised he wasn't, because things were flying all over the place. I know that towards the end, that I was going to be going on my R&R soon, and seeing Judy in Hawaii, just like Tom Davidson, and that I would be going into Fire Direction Control, a much more secure environment, pretty soon, but this was something that we had to do. The other thing about it is somewhere during the time of day, when I was calling in a fire mission, I have no idea where it came from, but this tree just splintered, that I was leaning against. I always liked to lean against a tree and do this, and I looked up and it was a bullet hole, right there, and it was like--

Brooks: Right above your head.

Johnson: Right above me, and I'm going, that was pretty close. That's the closest a bullet ever got to me. So I mean, other people saw so much more than I did, but when it's that close, you know it could have easily gotten me. That was the last recall that I have, of contact. Contact after that was when

I got back from my R&R, I had to go back in the field again. I thought I was going back in the Fire Direction Control Center, but no, they needed me for a little while, but it really was just some patrols, and we saw nothing, and so that was a nice way to end my in-the-field duty.

But then, when I was in Fire Direction Control, Neil, who had been my radio operator and now the forward observer for that Company, calls in one day and they're getting hit, and he's calling in coordinates and things like that, and we're sending fire out there, and he shot himself up, and a bunch of guys, because he called it in too close and it landed amongst the troops. That was difficult, hearing that over the radio, and feeling that, was it something I did, that caused them to panic and miscalculate, and call it in too close? It didn't have to be that close, you know. You try to get-- if the enemy is out there, you try to get a wall of fire within a hundred yards of yourself, if it has to be that close. It doesn't have to come in much further than that because if it does, then it's shrapnel and stuff is going to be coming in towards you, as well as the enemy. So, they weren't that close, the enemy wasn't that close, but he just miscalculated and he said, "Drop, five-zero," and five-zero meant it dropped on them. That was tough. He was hurt and I never heard from him since. Otherwise, my last two months in Fire Direction Control was, ah, it was pretty easy living really. We did our job of responding to people who had fire missions, but I had it pretty easy after that, ate good.

Brooks: Yeah?

Johnson: Had a nice air mattress to sleep on.

Brooks: Where were you stationed then?

Johnson: Well, we still moved here and there, from one hilltop to another, it seemed, but it was near Dak To, a place called Dak To. On a map of Vietnam, the Central Highlands, we were, you know, Kontum was to the north, Pleiku in the middle, Dak To towards the south, and we were anywhere between those areas and out to the west, where the border was. That pretty well describes the year that I was in Vietnam. What I didn't know, coming at the time, across that border, which was only a couple kilometers from us all the time, I don't know that we were ever in Cambodia. After I left, I know Nixon sent troops into Cambodia, and bombed, inside Cambodia, the Ho Chi Minh trail. What I didn't know, while I was there patrolling the border, was on the other side of the border, in Laos and Cambodia, where the Hmong, were fighting the secret war, and that later on, you know, 25 percent of the students in my classroom were Hmong. So, I was reunited with many of their parents, or grandparents, who had fought along the Ho Chi Minh trail and lost everything. Everything, they lost, and came here, and that was mostly a

good thing for me, to come across them and be able to teach their kids. I would have liked to have known that then. I would have liked to have known what they were doing.

Brooks: At the time.

Johnson: Yeah.

Brooks: Yeah. You wrote something about Christmas and a visit from the Donut Dollies.

Johnson: Yeah. We were on a hilltop, it was pretty secure. The patrols that we had sent from that hilltop were patrols that I was on all the time. It seemed like we were there for several weeks, and those patrols occasionally encountered the enemy, but the hilltop itself was pretty safe, and it was lots of wire and bunkers and things. So, it got to be Christmastime and we said, and we were very close to the border, and we said, is there any way that we can get some hot chow, just a hot meal on Christmas would be nice. Forget about turkey and gravy, just a hot meal, and do you think so? Traditionally, Christmastime was a fairly safe period, the North Vietnamese would back off, and that was true. So, the report came in, we've got some chow for you. All right! We're all wondering what this is going to be, and the birds come in and land, and the food in the heating units coming off, unloading, unloading, and here's these girls on the plane, in kind of blue-gray dresses, "We're Donut Dollies," we're called. Today, I think that would probably be a little disrespectful, but we're Red Cross volunteers. Well, forget the food, we want to talk to the girls, and it turns out the food is bologna sandwiches. We had bologna sandwiches on Christmas, but they brought Monopoly, a game where you guess the capital of the states, and everybody knew their own capital, but they struggled with everybody else's. They sat with us on the bunkers and had us laughing and playing games, and it was sad to see them go when it was getting dark out, you've got to go. They sang songs. One had a guitar and could play songs and it was really nice. Asked them what they did back in--because they were in base camp most of the time. Most of them said they never had been out in the field so far, and so we let them look through our binoculars and things like that, at the countryside, and pointed out things and stuff, and it was just really, really nice. Everything was well supervised, so nobody got out of hand with the girls, because we, I think probably thought that well, maybe they'll come and see us again. [laughs] That was just a nice little Christmas. And you could actually pick up, on our transistor radio, somehow they were re-broadcasting football games from the States, and I think the NFL might have played--if it wasn't on Christmas Day, the NFL might have had a game the day after or something, and so we listened to a football game. It was a nice little interruption, and then it was back to reality right after that. The Donut

Dollies, I just felt that they were brave to come out there, even though we knew it was safe. Still, to leave home and go all the way to--I mean these women, most of them had college degrees, could be working in the States. What are they doing volunteering for the Red Cross? And they looked nice. There was nothing wrong with them, they were nice to look at. It was just a neat experience. That was my first exposure to Red Cross volunteers. I volunteer for the Red Cross now a lot myself.

I'm trying to think of anything else that happened. Oh, they had a translator with them, because they were asking us the capitals of states and stuff, and one of our scout teams was a Vietnamese guy, who stood about this tall.

Brooks: He was short.

Johnson: Oh, he was short, real short, and he looked like he was just out of grade school, and he could translate English to Vietnamese real easy, so he would tell us what this and that meant. He was translating Vietnamese to the women and they found that pretty interesting, and so they went back knowing what *boocoo dinky dau* meant, which means you're crazy. So they could point and say, you *boocoo dinky dau*. I think that's what it means. It means that you're off, you're really, you're crazy, *boocoo dinky dau*. It's sort of French and Vietnamese. French and Vietnamese was kind of a mixture of language at times. So, that was that.

Brooks: You also have a note that says the perfect moustache. That's intriguing.

Johnson: When I went out in the field, I started growing a moustache, and because there was no first sergeant or anybody out there, and the officers that were out there, didn't want to put demands on guys in terms of--I mean, just try to keep clean and healthy. This is not like okay, break out your best uniform. You had one uniform. I had one T-shirt. I abandoned the T-shirt after a few weeks, because we weren't near water to get it clean, so I just, that was the end of that. I had two pair of socks. I only wanted to carry one pair, the pair I wore. The other pair I left, because I wanted to be fast and move, and so underwear, I didn't have any. Oh, so I mean nobody was--officers are in--there wasn't that regimentation in the field, but keep clean when you can and stay healthy, you're no good to us when you're sick. So, I started growing a moustache and I mean, it was bushy and it was out to here and I started twirling it, to where I could get these loops in there, and I was pretty proud of that thing, and it just kept growing. I never trimmed it, and so it became kind of my, go see the guy with the moustache. So, I grew a moustache and I don't ever recall trimming it. I must have, because I wouldn't have been able to eat. That went on for like nine months, and I didn't need wax or anything. I just would twist it and it would be there.

So, I go in for my R&R, after being out there for almost ten months, on the phone with headquarters. They see all the fire missions I had, and the talk, and the first sergeant is back at base camp He's the one that's--

[interruption; phone rings] [01:43:56]

We'll let that go. It won't do that for long. I don't think I can rescue it, sorry.

Brooks: No, it's okay.

Johnson: I should have turned it off.

Brooks: It happens all the time.

Johnson: There. So, I'm excited about going on R&R and getting a hot shower and a hot meal, and two days from now, I'll be on a bird to Hawaii. I'm excited, I'm going to see Judy, and out of respect to her folks and all our traditions and everything, she's got one room and I've got another room in the hotel in Hawaii, but we were going to see each other and I'm excited. I get on the bird to go back to base camp and I'm thinking that captain, whoever he was, is going to be almost saluting me, because of the fine work I've done out there as a forward observer. Everybody, there wasn't one platoon or company that went on patrol, that wasn't asking me to be the forward observer on whatever missions they had, and I didn't mind going. The first sergeant, back in base camp, he's wearing a starched uniform and a clean uniform every day and everything, and I'll see the first sergeant and I'll thank him for all the mail that he's been getting to me, and sorry about the nasty reports. When I didn't get mail, I was angry. That was my coping mechanism, and if I didn't get mail when I was back at a company-size thing, what happened to it? I would get angry and I'd get on my radio, and someone would say, you're not supposed to be reporting this stuff on the radio, and I'd say, "Well, I've got to carry my own fucking radio. I don't have a radio operator, I'm on it, you find my mail, I got to have my mail." Okay. Well, I'm going to thank him for looking into this thing over the ten months. I get off the bird, he looks at me and he says, "Get it off." Not, hello, how are you or whatever, he said, "Get it off." What? My moustache. He said, "The next time I see you, that thing is gone, or you can decide to go back to where you are and not go to Hawaii." What? So, I had to shave it, and I thought that was a little unfair. I don't think he ever, you know. So, base camp was not my favorite place to be. I just didn't get respect. I wanted respect.

Brooks: Do you think Judy would have liked the moustache?

Johnson: She probably thought it would be a little too radical, probably too bushy, too nasty. I would have cut it gladly for her. [laughs]

Brooks: You just didn't want him to tell you.

Johnson: And I still had it, I mean I just trimmed it down, I didn't shave it off. So, I trimmed it down and that was satisfactory with him, and then when I came back from R&R, I started growing it again, and oddly enough, when I came out of country, came back to the States and landed in Chicago, I think it was O'Hare, that's the first thing my dad said, "What are you doing with that thing?" Not, "Hi son, how are you?"

Brooks: No.

Johnson: "What are you doing with that thing?"

Brooks: Comments on your facial hair.

Johnson: I don't know why that was. It must have looked pretty ridiculous, I guess.

Brooks: Do you have pictures of you with it?

Johnson: Yeah. The couple pictures I have, I had been out for almost two weeks, I'd say, and so I was totally unshaven, and dirty and nasty, and the moustache doesn't show up too well, because I was pretty hairy. But, yeah, yeah. I must have trimmed it, because it never got much more than that.

Brooks: They stop growing at a certain point don't they, sometimes?

Johnson: Maybe that's what was happening.

Brooks: Maybe. I don't know.

Johnson: It could have been.

Brooks: I guess I don't know a lot about facial hair.

Johnson: I mean, they'll grow down, but out, maybe you're right. But it was my thing.

Brooks: Yeah, you've got to have a thing. It might have been a coping mechanism as well.

Johnson: Yeah, I think it was.

Brooks: Having memorable facial hair. Well, if you don't mind, we can probably cut it off here for today, so then that way, when we meet up again, we can start talking about your transition back to home, and kind of everything that's happened to you since. Does that make sense?

Johnson: Good.

Brooks: Maybe then, we can think about if there's anything else we didn't cover while you were in country.

Johnson: All right.

Brooks: Does that sound good?

Johnson: Yeah, good.

Brooks: Okay, great. I'm going to turn this off now, thanks.

[File 3] **Second Interview Session**

Brooks: Today is March 23, 2015. This is a second interview with Darryl Johnson, and we are in Green Bay, Wisconsin, today. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks. The interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum Oral History Program. This is our second interview. The first one was pretty painless, I hope.

Johnson: Yeah, it was.

Brooks: Okay, good.

Johnson: It felt good talking to you.

Brooks: All right, great. And so at that point, we had gotten you back stateside. So, you got back to the States in July, is that right?

Johnson: Yeah, right about then, July, yes, the middle of July, I think it was.

Brooks: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your homecoming, and just that initial steps off the plane.

Johnson: Well, I was happy to be heading home, and that I felt real good about the service and the work I did while I was in Vietnam, happy to come home. So excited, because we had been planning our wedding, for Judy and I, and that constituted a lot about what we had written back and forth about. We were going to be getting married August 18th, and so there was just a

couple of weeks. Back at base camp, things went--well, I thought that maybe it might be delayed, because in base camp there was an incident. Again, I talked to--in this case, we woke up the day I was supposed to be leaving to go home, and a fellow at the other end of the--we were in a barracks, for about twenty or thirty people, and a fellow in the end bunk woke up dead, and I think it was a drug overdose. I never did find out, but we were all detained and questioned and things like that, and it was kind of a strange way to leave. Again, it points to the disappointment I had whenever I was in base camp, something bad was happening amongst our own guys. But, I got on the plane, I was told that it would be better if I wore my civilian clothes on the plane, rather than my dress uniform, and I didn't question that, I didn't care. I'd have gone home in pajamas. I just was curious as to, you know, well, I wonder why, but then I heard that in Seattle, there were some incidences of soldiers getting off the plane and being approached by protestors and not treated well, and so we were cautioned to be cool, maybe just keep walking and don't say anything. So, again, I didn't care, I could do that, I was heading to Illinois.

Sure enough, when we got to Seattle, there were protestors there. We were belittled and called names, and that was about it. There wasn't any physical altercations or anything, but it was just kind of a bummer. And then, I had a flight from there to O'Hare, where my folks and Judy were waiting, and when we arrived there, again, as I mentioned, the first thing my dad said, before he gave me a hug or a kiss or anything was, "What's that on your face?" Because I had this big moustache. "What are you doing with that?" That was strange, but it was good to see him. Judy actually wore a wig, I guess just to kind of be goofy a little bit, because she had this pretty red hair, and this wig was sort of dirty-blonde. I didn't think I recognized her at first, and so that was funny.

So, my family was welcoming, I stayed with my folks until we got married, and it was a good family welcoming. My sister called. My brothers and sisters sort of were scattered to different parts of the U.S. by then. The whole focus was the wedding and the reception; there was going to be like three hundred and some people there. Frankly, I couldn't remember a whole lot of them, most of them were Judy's friends. My fraternity brothers, a few were there. I think I mentioned that I was kind of disappointed, when I was gone for the year, that I didn't get any letters. I got a couple from my fraternity brothers, but that was it, and they didn't continue writing to me. A few showed up at the wedding, a lot of old friends showed up, but we had over 350 people there, so it was a pretty big thing. I couldn't see anything besides my folks and Judy. I wasn't, it was fun to see and talk with everybody, but I just, I still--so, that event, we had the wedding, but then there was still another a little over five months to serve, so we had to go back to Fort Benning for the last few months of my service, and I didn't know what that was going to be all about or like.

So we packed up the car and moved down to Fort Benning, and once we got there, we had to get an apartment, our first apartment together, and that was kind of fun, though when we got there, housing in Fort Benning, there was so many people, so many guys coming back from Vietnam and other places, to finish out their enlistment or service, that what you did is you arrived at an apartment complex and you're there Saturday morning, ten o'clock, there's a line halfway down the block. What is that? We were curious, so get in line. We get there and the woman says, "Well, we do have an apartment, a one-bedroom apartment, and it's furnished," which we needed a furnished apartment, "what do you say?" We said, "Can we take a look at it?" And she said, "Nope, take it or leave it." So there you go, you're in your apartment.

Brooks: So you took it.

Johnson: Things are going pretty fast. We got the apartment and it turned out to be a nice apartment, and we were surrounded by, some, all military people. Oddly enough, the people that were our neighbors were all getting ready to go to Vietnam, and so they were interested in my year of service there, and they were all officer candidates, and so we made some friends there.

Brooks: Did you talk with them about your experiences?

Johnson: A little bit. They were officers and they seemed to be--I don't know if any of them were headed for infantry duty, and so I don't recall having long conversations about it. I do remember that the last six months, though, other than those friendships, the service was kind of demeaning in that they didn't know what to do with so many troops coming back. And so our work was to go on bivouac, go into parts of Georgia, set up a location, and the officer candidate fellows were to try and find us. We weren't to make any efforts to try and do anything besides stay there and do nothing, be bored, until they found us, and then we had to play dead, they had to kill us all. And I thought, you know I did that once and I said that I don't care what it takes, I'm not going to do that again, it's just too demeaning, what a waste of time. But luckily, somebody in the headquarters company realized I was a little older than the other guys and had some college, I was a sergeant. So, they brought me into the office, where I was assigning other people to their work orders; let's see, I think, like an operations NCO, and so that was good duty. I was writing everybody else's orders and sending them off to bivouac, play dead, and that was okay. I had a chance to meet Sergeant Cisneros, who was a Vietnam vet, and who had actually spotted my record and called me in to work in his office, and that was nice, but it didn't last long. I got an early out for education, so January, I was back to DeKalb, Illinois, at Northern Illinois University, to go back to school. So, that was that.

I still had some time, you know I guess when you're drafted, you still were part of the Reserve, but I didn't have any Reserve commitments or anything, just if they wanted to call me back they could have, but nobody did. A couple years later, they were winding down in Vietnam, and so there was no need.

Brooks: So, were you ever formally discharged, was there ever like a ceremony or just some papers signed?

Johnson: No, just paperwork, no ceremony.

Brooks: Yeah, I guess they don't usually, typically do a ceremony. So you were formally discharged a few years later then, or do you remember?

Johnson: Formally discharged? I figured I was discharged then, to go back to school, early out for education, but you still were assigned to a Reserve commitment if you were called back. So, everybody kind of crossed our fingers, hoping that, I don't want to get called back again. I know that there was an effort to try and get me to reenlist. I don't recall if this was true or not, but I seem to recall that, you know, if I would have reenlisted to go back to Vietnam, I could have gotten about a five hundred dollar bonus check, which for a lot of guys was very tempting, but no. Too many plans, too many things that I was planning for were ahead of me, so I had no thoughts about going back.

Brooks: So you've been in Vietnam for quite a while, without exposure to kind of the American political climate and the media, what were some of your first reactions when you got back to the States, about people's feelings?

Johnson: I didn't like the welcome at the airport. At Fort Benning, the last few months, we were just getting used to getting married, so we really didn't care what was going on around us in the news, but I do remember listening to television at night, the news at night, and the civil rights problems that were going on down in Georgia. Georgia had a governor named Lester Maddox, who we kind of poked fun of, because he just seemed like such a redneck. But there was still an awful lot going on down South, in terms of the integration of schools. My wife, while I was doing my duty, she was a home economics major and certified to teach. So, she went to the public school system in Columbus, Georgia, to see if there was-- to see if she could sub, and she started getting calls to sub right away, and found out that in order to sub there in Georgia at that time, all you needed was a high school degree. We thought that was kind of funny.

My impression of the South was a little backwards, compared to the North. Today, I don't feel that way. I think in some cases, the South is

more integrated than the North, in some cases. Anyway, but back then, I was sort of amused by the climate down there and the civil rights thing that was going on. One of my regrets is that I never got involved in community stuff when we first got married or when we moved back to DeKalb, Illinois, to go back to school and never got involved. I just wanted to sweep things under the carpet and move on. She worked at a couple schools that were all black. Some of the kids would approach her and say they ain't never had no white woman teaching them before, and they wanted to touch her red hair and things like that, and she loved working down there, but it was a different kind of eye-opening situation.

Then, it was time to go back to school, and so we moved back to DeKalb, Illinois, Northern Illinois University, and the climate there was, there was a lot of protests going on, anti-Vietnam protests. Also, relevancy in education type protests, that was going on in the Ivy League schools, wanting to change curriculum, making it more relevant, and getting student input into the curriculum, things like that. Many schools were operating *in loco parentis* at the time, meaning that they were in the absence of parents. For example, when we went to school, Judy, in her dorm, had hours. She had to be home at eleven o'clock on weeknights, one o'clock on weekends. There were no hours for guys and no restrictions, but women, they had to be back. So, there used to be this big thing about getting back to the dorm on time, big make-out thing, right in front of the doors of the dorm, and then everybody goes in the dorm. Every now and then, some guy would get caught trying to sneak in the dorm and things like that. That was *in loco parentis*. Now, students are saying we don't need that any more. Especially though, in curriculum, it was important. Women's studies, African American studies, Native American studies, all needed to have a place in the curriculum. The right to vote was lowered to eighteen and those were significant changes, and it was all happening about that time, and it was just a buzz of community and political activity. The Democratic National Convention in Chicago was a huge thing, and I never got involved in what was going on. In fact, I went back to Northern, I had a good semester of classes. I wanted to change the world, really, and so I was going to study sociology now and become a social worker, or someone who did research. I had a good semester, two, and then an opportunity for full-time work came up at the university, and I decided to go to work full-time.

But the significant thing about your question was politically and so forth, I just wasn't involved. I don't know that in the five years that I worked at the university, that anybody ever talked to me, or that I ever admitted I was even a Vietnam vet. I didn't come right out and say it to anybody, nobody asked, and there wasn't many Vietnam vets around that I knew of, maybe because they were all hiding it themselves. And as the Vietnam era ended, and you know it was called a loss, we lost the war, it was

something that caused me a certain amount of shame and guilt, and so I just never talked about it. So, when the protests were going on at Northern, I was a manager of the student union, and so my biggest concern was the security of the union. My military background there was, you know, I was suited for the job. I was calm, collected type, and things happened over the years at the union, that I handled them all real well. But, there was just this always, on one side of my mind I was changing as an individual, from one where, while I was in Vietnam, I couldn't understand how people could not support our men and women in the service, how they could go to Canada or how they could protest or call us baby killers and things like that. I couldn't understand that. It seemed like such a betrayal. But then, when I got on campus and was working on campus, I was moved by the issues that they were pursuing. I thought that education did need to get changed, that lowering the voting age was the right thing to do, and that the protest movement, there actually was heroes in the protest movement. And so I really was starting to think differently in terms of my view on that, but it was all being done kind of internally and just through observation and things like that.

Brooks: Before I forget, Judy was showing me a picture. I think you might have brought it into the museum as well, of you, when you have a peace sign around your neck, from when you were over in Vietnam. Do you remember where you got that and/or why you wore it?

Johnson: I can't remember where I got it. I wore a rosary around my neck that I still have, and I still have the peace sign. The things, I wore them the whole time I was there. I don't think I got the peace symbol--I might have got that while I was in Vietnam, from maybe one of the villages, in the villages, but I can't remember exactly. I wore it because it didn't take me long, once getting to Vietnam, to realize that peace was a better solution, that in terms of diplomacy, it's better to seek peace first, rather than acting out of strength, military strength, which, when you study our history a little bit, sometimes previously, it was might makes right. You impose your will physically, and then you start asking, can we negotiate about this and that. I was coming to the conclusion, after being in Vietnam a very short time, that no, I wasn't going to be part of the solution or we were going to win because I was there. No. I felt like we were going to lose this thing, that it was getting away from us, not only in the field, where the enemy could come across the border almost untouched anywhere the enemy wanted to, but at home, where the country wanted us out. So, I wore the peace symbol as a sign that I was for diplomacy and peaceful resolution. I was part of the killing but yet, torn between that and the fact that I didn't think anything in life should be killed. It's a tough situation. So that, and the rosary I still have, which was a bright green when I got it and a muddy brown when I got back. So, I mean religion was huge, or my

faith was huge, and then when I got back, politically, religiously, in so many regards, I started to recreate myself, I think.

Brooks: Did you keep up on the news in terms of what was happening in Vietnam, when you came back?

Johnson: Yeah, and realized that people will go crazy trying to figure everything out. Everything seemed to be so confusing. The confusions over what we should be doing diplomatically, the confusions over where our society was going, the confusions over just affected us right down to our everyday lives. Parenting was changing. So, I didn't feel--it was a whole identity crisis all over again. Where do we stand politically? Should we-- but I think we started voting right away, and I don't think I've ever missed-- maybe once or twice, I've missed a chance to vote in any level of elections. So I've always felt strong about that, but yet, the sense of confusion or knowing what the one right way of going in any particular situation seemed to be muddled, and to a certain extent, a feeling of betrayal in that our leaders aren't exactly forthright. Had we been lied to? It seemed apparent that we had been, that information was denied people. I felt bad about the--the people that were involved were so dedicated that you had to admire them, but yet there were so many people. Nixon called them the silent majority, that seemed so apathetic, that they didn't do anything unless it involved them themselves, or their families. So I was pretty confused by politics, but yet felt comfortable in our surroundings at the college, in our neighborhood, and in my starting a family.

Brooks: Do you remember hearing that the war was over, like that instance?

Johnson: Nah. No. I guess troops were being withdrawn and coming back home. I remember that at the peace table, well first it seemed like you would bomb North Vietnam and then later on, bomb inside of Cambodia and Laos, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, supply routes, to try and negotiate something at the peace table. And then finally, it became apparent that the U.S. was going to be leaving Vietnam. South Vietnam and North Vietnam were to be separated, and free elections were to be held in South Vietnam. Then, when North Vietnam invaded South Vietnam, and Saigon was about to be overrun, how that felt like one side of me was saying, well we need to go back. I thought the deal was, that there was going to be a North and South Vietnam, like North and South Korea, and South Vietnam would have a chance for self-determination, to develop their democracy, which would have been a difficult task but yet, you know, we had our history of developing a democracy, which was a difficult task. Now all of a sudden they're being overrun and we're not there. And then the feelings of, well that's not going according to the agreements they had in Geneva.

On the other hand, I didn't feel as though South Vietnam had the wherewithal militarily, to stand up to the North Vietnamese. The South Vietnamese always gave me a feeling of there's some committed people in their troops, but then there's some that didn't seem to be embracing the fight, that democracy was worth it. So, therein lies some confusion there. I never felt that where I was at in the Central Highlands, that the Montagnards, to me they could care less whether the government was communist or democratic. All they understood was their leadership from their elders and the things that they experienced throughout the ages, through the millenniums. So, when the North Vietnamese overran Saigon and took over, I thought a sense of loss, a sense of unfulfillment. But on the other hand, there was part of me that could easily rationalize that the country needed to be unified, that it needed to be one country, and if it was communist, so be it. Over time, they will see the benefits of free enterprise, and people having opportunities to develop themselves. But yet, that wasn't the way we had envisioned it in 1966 or '67 or '68. So, I mean, you couldn't help but feel like you have lost something, that your effort wasn't worth it, but where do you go from here?

Brooks: Were there any aspects of the military that you missed when you were transitioning back to being a civilian?

Johnson: I liked the regimentation. I liked knowing that there were clear-cut orders, that assuming that those who are leading you, were, had good experience and good decision-making abilities, that you'd just follow orders and execute orders, and that you were a good soldier if you became very well at the execution of things. I miss that regimentation. I miss the fact that I had rank, you know, I was promoted to sergeant and so there were people that counted on me. I missed the adrenaline flow of certain aspects of the combat, and the fact that I took all these guys, throughout the year, on patrols, and never--a lot of guys got hurt, but nobody in my small groups ever got killed. So, that part of the military I missed.

When you're with a group of seven or eight on patrol, you become very close as a unit, and so back in the world, back in DeKalb, back in the university setting, you're surrounded by thousands. That was hard for me to deal with, the fact that now, I don't have the power to tell people what to do, except you know, I had a nice job at the university and I could tell people what to do there, but I mean, it didn't seem to have any kind of lifesaving ramifications. So that part of the military, I missed. I always, still to this day, think in terms of like some organizations, whether it's the military or other organizations, there's a reason for every one of their rules, there's a reason behind it. Just find the reason and the reason is a good one usually. You're only as strong as your weakest link, and you're only as fast as your slowest person, was something that I always felt

strongly about, in no matter what kind of work situation I was in. So those are things that yeah, initially, that I missed.

Brooks: Did you ever think about going back to become a firefighter again?

Johnson: Yeah. At the time, they had passed some sort of resolution where you were guaranteed your job back, and with time in the service. So, while I had been a fireman for almost two years before I was drafted, I'd have come back as a fireman with four years, and my pay would have been appropriate and so forth, so it was very tempting to do that. Being a firefighter was the second best thing I ever felt that I did in my life, besides being a teacher, was first, because I love the camaraderie and the regimentation of being a firefighter. And the fact that there was reasons for everything and procedures for everything. You just became very good at doing all those things, and I was very tempted to go back to do it. My wife and I talk about, I wonder what life would have been if we would have gone back as a firefighter, and I don't know. In a way, I kind of regret not going back, but I've never admitted to really regretting it, because life has worked out very well. [telephone rings] Sorry.

Brooks: It's okay. Do you want to get that?

Johnson: I'm going to turn my phone off. Sorry, I should have done that. What was I saying?

Brooks: That you wouldn't regret it.

Johnson: I don't regret it. I'll always wonder what it was like, what it would have been like. I don't think I would have wanted to actually been a firefighter for thirty, forty years. The paramed thing today is, to me, a wonderful job within the firefighting, ambulance work, that, and I think probably, I would have wanted to become part of the--like an assistant or a fire chief, but at the time, I was thinking I need to finish my education. It's funny, how you can go away to war and come back, and you're still remembering the things that your folks want you to do, to get a degree like everybody else in the family had degrees. To graduate, to be involved in business, or something like that, to my folks' way of looking at things, that would have been given a great deal more favor than going back as a fireman. So I went back to school, and the GI Bill paid for my expenses, and so I opted for that. We were in DeKalb, where there was the fire department and the university.

There was something about the university life, the ivory tower thing that was also attractive for me. It became easy. I went back to the fire department and didn't recognize a whole lot of people. A couple of guys were on a different shift now, and so I didn't make much of an effort to do

that. Something inside of me, maybe it was that introvert inside of me, was just shying away and saying don't get aggressive, don't go back, and say you want this back. You've got to start over. So, I felt that going back to school was a way of starting over.

Brooks: So you were in school for a few years, a couple years, before you and Judy relocated?

Johnson: I was back in school for a semester. School for me has been an ongoing thing forever. It took me twenty years to get my bachelors degree. I went back as a semester as a sociology major, totally enjoyed the coursework that I took for first semester. Then, during my second semester back, an opening at the student union, where I was working part-time, a full-time manager's job opened up and my wife was teaching. She became, we became pregnant, and I thought it was time to reverse roles and I've got to go to work and she has to be home. So, I got that job as the night manager and she was at home, and that started almost five years of really good work at the university. It was wonderful, overseeing all the student activities that went on at the student union, but yet, the one who had a workforce of part-time and full-time people, to make sure that things ran smoothly. That was a really wonderful environment to work in, because every night was different activities. A lot of them were educational, but a lot of them were entertainment. I got kind of lost in that. I thought that's what I would be doing the rest of my life, was student activity type work. I should say, while I was there, I felt as though I really had a good operation. I hired an awful lot of students, and many of those student supervisors that I had went on to get really good jobs after they graduated, and that was a great source of pride for me, but yet, the university itself, I had received an award from the DeKalb Chamber of Commerce, for fair hiring practices, because my workforce was so diverse. I was feeling pretty good about myself, but the director of the student union took the award, claimed it as his own, and again, a little bit of one of the--one of those things with post traumatic stress disorder is the feeling of betrayal, and boom, I think I got pretty depressed because of that, and so I thought it's time for me to leave this university and go on and work at another university, but because I didn't have my degree, I couldn't get work, the type of work, student activities, student affairs, without having a bachelors or a masters degree. That's what led us to moving to Green Bay.

Brooks: You said that you were kind of--well, I'll go through some of the kind of more standard questions first. You used the GI Bill. Did you ever think about joining any veterans organizations?

Johnson: Yeah. My father in-law--Judy is an only child, and as it turns out, our daughter Kristen is an only child also. Her mom and dad were very, very close, so were mine, but her mom and dad were visiting all the time. He

was a World War II veteran, that I was just so proud of, because of his service. What was the question again?

Brooks: If you joined any veterans organizations.

Johnson: Oh, yeah. And he was involved in his VFW stuff in Chicago, but mostly as a social and a source of good meals. I went and joined the--when we moved to Green Bay, I joined the Ashwaubenon VFW and right away was a little turned off. Every year, I've participated in some of the activities; selling poppies to raise funds for the VFW and disabled vets, but the actual going and socializing at the VFW, I couldn't do it. I couldn't tell the stories about my experience in Vietnam, I guess for a couple of reasons. I didn't feel as though my stories were as good as their stories. I felt their stories were fishtails, exaggerations. I'm sure many of them were true, but that's all they did was tell the same stories over and over again, and I didn't want that atmosphere, so I didn't, I never got involved with that. So, just sort of my experiences, my stories, were again, internalized and you left it like that.

Brooks: Did you talk with your father in-law at all, or even your brother, seeing as they were both?

Johnson: My brother is gone now. I would like to talk to him about it now, because I felt as though I could never talk to him about it, because he was an officer and a pilot. He had two tours of duty in Vietnam; both of them were non-combat. Mine was, but I was not an officer, and so I never felt that I could stand in his shadow, and maybe he felt like he couldn't stand in my shadow because I was a combat veteran, but he never really asked me about it. Whenever I did talk about being a forward observer, it seemed like he wasn't all that interested. But that's just the way I felt. I always felt as though, as the youngest in the family, it didn't matter what I did, or the importance of anything that I might have done, that it could never be as important as anything they could have done, because I was the youngest. That's a problem I've always dealt with, and so we didn't talk about that.

My father in-law, never talked much about his service in World War II, until later, until he was almost eighty, until we started recording him at Thanksgiving dinner, we recorded him, and got--he opened up. But before that, all our talks were about family and work. Yeah, I think that's probably true of a lot of World War II guys. They just don't come right out and talk about it. Some do and the ones that do probably don't--they talk too much.

Brooks: So, when you did go to the VFW, was it mostly World War II veterans?

Johnson: It was. I don't know where the Vietnam vets were. Now, VFWs, a lot of Vietnam vets are there, and it seems like they're always looking for newer guys and women to join. There's a tendency amongst veterans to just get with their lives, and they don't spend a whole lot of time in the VFW scene until maybe later.

Brooks: What do you think it was that finally kind of encouraged you to open up more and start talking?

Johnson: I was almost fifty years old and decided to go back to school again, this time here, at St. Norbert College, because I wanted to get a teacher certification and start teaching. I'd been in sales for twenty years and supported the family and did a good job in sales, but there never was really, a great deal of fulfillment or a sense of satisfaction, and now at fifty, I wanted to go back to school. My wife had her financial planning business and it was really starting to do well and taking off, so it could offer us another opportunity to do a little role reversal and me to back to school.

When I went back at St. Norbert, I wanted to be a teacher of social studies, and so it was suggested that I enter as a broad field social studies major. That way I could teach social studies, history, a variety of that, plus language arts, from anywhere from six to grade twelve. I really liked the idea of studying history, so I took some history classes. In them, I met a Dr. Larry McAndrews at St. Norbert, whose class wasn't just a sit down and listen to him lecture class, and then spit it out on a test thing. He involved the students. He appreciated interaction and opinion and comments. In fact, he had debates as part of his class, and so when you got into a certain particular era, he would put--there was these cool books that really helped me with my-- the confusion I alluded to earlier. They're called oppositional thinking, and so you take a topic like the death penalty, and that part, there will be an oppositional thinking which will have six of the world's best authorities on why the death penalty is essential, and six people, world authorities, as to why the death penalty should be abolished. Their articles are put together, and we would read these articles, and then you would be on the side that says abolish the death penalty, and I'd be on the side that said--and it was based on a form, in which I wouldn't say--I would not try to defeat you in the debate. I called it a debate, but it was really a forum. You presented all the issues on your side of the argument, I presented all the ones on my side of the argument, and that way the class sees both. I really enjoyed doing that. It got me to think that oppositional thinking, you know, if we're having an argument, whether it be a husband and wife or whether it be two people talking about political things, and you're trying to present your argument, I should be able to explain your side, even though I disagree with it. I should be able to say, so what you're really saying is this, and you say, yes that's right. Too many arguments

don't go that way. It becomes oh, you stupid idiot, and name-calling, and oppositional thinking. So we were doing that in the classroom and it got to be the era of the sixties and so forth, and because I was a nontraditional student, everybody else in class was eighteen, nineteen, twenty, and there was only a few of us that were older, all of a sudden they were wanting our opinion on this or that.

I took issue with something that was written in the text, whatever reading material we had, about Vietnam, basically argued on my own, just from my gut, why I thought what they were saying in this issue was just one side of the story, they should present the other side. Whoa, I mean this got attention. And so that's how that went, and Dr. McAndrews then approached me and said, "You know when I have my classes, I'd love to have you in to speak." I said, "Well, I'm not a lecturer, but if it was a question and answer thing and you felt a need to have a veteran come into your classes and talk about what it was like being someone who served in Vietnam, good. In fact, I have like three hundred letters that I could bring in, and the class could read the letters and see what people were thinking of it at that time, and my pictures." So that's what opened me up and got me talking about it, and when it is a question and answer, you can answer the questions that are sometimes difficult to answer. It was good for me, to work through, to work through that, and so I opened up about Vietnam.

Brooks: What was the first few times that you talked to a class, how did that go?

Johnson: Nervous. During the question and answer, I was guarded as far as my chosen words. You know, I didn't want to upset anybody by swearing in class or talking the talk, using the language that we used. But then, I became more comfortable with it. The first few times was nervous. Even today, when I do it though, when I'm done, I have to go to sleep, I have to just, I'm exhausted, even though it's a one-hour class. I'm just exhausted, thinking about that, because they'll ask, "Did you kill anybody?" And they wanted to know how. "Did you go into villages and slaughter people?" And these kinds of things. I said, any questions are aboveboard and it's okay, and those questions sometimes took a long time to answer. But it was really good, because today, Vietnam is fifty years almost since. So, there seems to be a certain--people in their late teens, early twenties, have--are they, I don't know if the word is fascinated, but when it gets to be the sixties and the Vietnam era, they're interested. Maybe it's because of war movies or whatever, or the fact that they expect somebody to come out in front of them that's got a body full of tattoos and the long beard, using the F-word all the time, and recovering from drugs and alcohol. I don't know what they expect, but there's a certain fascination with the topic. Obviously, our country changed a great deal from that era.

Brooks: What do you think one of the best questions you've ever been asked by the students has been?

Johnson: Wow. Well, I always thought the good question was, "How was it when you got home?" Every class asked that question and it's such a transition from being a combat soldier, the intensity and the vigilance required in order to survive and come back home, that we're trained to--well, we're sort of trained to deal with that, but you have to experience that on your own and figure out what the best course of action is, and then survive it, and then you come home and it's like you have to be retrained to be successful in civilian life again, and many veterans struggle with that today. Huge struggle with that; how do I become successful as a civilian now. I don't need that vigilance; I don't need that constant alertness. So I try to describe that when they ask me the question, and I'm not sure that--and I think I do describe it pretty well, but you're never quite sure if they completely understand because they haven't been through it. I try to tell them that, you know, war should be a last resort. I never would want my children to have to be, or get, their backs against the wall to where they have to either pull a trigger or not. That is such a--and you don't have to do that in civilian life. Those are the kind of things that you do and the memories that you never can quite shake, even though you were there for only a year. That would be the question that I always have, I'm waiting for it, and I'm always not quite sure how I'm going to respond to it.

Other questions that were--I think people have the impression that military life is, can be, drudgery, always hardships and things like that, so people will ask questions about what did you do to keep happy or whatever. I thought those are some of the best questions too, because it speaks to our resilience, that not just my situation as a combat veteran in Vietnam, but other people, who had to hide during World War II, from the Nazis, or who fought in World War II, Korea, or anywhere else, those that are in the--were in the Civil Rights Movement here, those situations which were so, ah... Those kind of situations cause people to be resilient, or not. We found resilience in humor. Tomorrow we might not make it, but we might as well find a joke today. We found humor in almost everything, and the appreciation for the little things. Little things mean a lot, my mom used to say that all the time, "Little things mean a lot." And that came so true for me in Vietnam, where you appreciate the little things, to where later on, when you're in a more secure environment or safely back at home, you always have the appreciation. You want to make sure the little things are there and available, because those are the things that make us comfortable in life. To me, anyway, I'd much rather have the little comforting things, than something big. That's been my excuse for never being someone who really went after the material things in the world, but I think it's true. I think now, you can have lots of material things that you would like out of life, but also, you have to have the little things.

Brooks: Are you still talking to school groups, do you still do that?

Johnson: Yeah, although Dr. McAndrews has left St. Norbert and moved on, and so I need to find another connection for next year. But yeah, I've been doing that. I did at some of the high schools around town, word got around, and so they invited me in and that worked out. It's similar, similar. In some regards, I appreciated my eighth graders sometimes better than the college kids, because the college kids were always looking for, what's he got to say that I have to remember, that I could spit out on a test, whereas eighth graders are more, you know, just pure curiosity, and not afraid to ask questions, whereas sometimes college kids are afraid to ask the questions.

Brooks: After you went back to school, you ended up teaching yourself?

Johnson: Yeah. I graduated from St. Norbert, or I got my certification, and I had to go find a job. I was hoping to get a high school--I wanted to teach high school kids, older high school kids. I had an interview with Ashwaubenon High School, and actually, one of the kids that got his teachers certification with me, from St. Norbert, nineteen year-old punk, got the job, and I didn't, and I often wondered was I too old? Is this really true, that when you're past fifty, it's hard to find a job because you're too old? What's the deal? I realized he's just a brilliant kid, and so that's what they were looking for. In the meantime, I got an interview with a principal at St. Jude School in Green Bay, which was a K-8 school. I visited with her and realized that this was the place I really wanted to be, because she offered me autonomy. She said, "I need someone to teach social studies, language arts, maybe religion now and then, and if you want to teach religion any way you want it, go ahead." Because I wasn't going to teach Catholicism out of a catechism, I was going to--so, something told me that this could be a good fit, and there was no money almost, but again, I could do it because my wife was doing so well. So, I said yeah, and that was the beginning of a beautiful thing, because it just so happens that that school, she did exactly that. I visited with her almost every day after school, because she would stay late, I'd stay late, and we'd talk about our day and things like that.

I did so many things in those ten years, with the kids, besides classroom teaching, that it was wonderful for me. Plus, about 25 percent of my students were Hmong, and the Hmong lost everything in--the Hmong that I taught were almost all from Laos, and became refugees in camps in Thailand after they were driven from their land by the communists. Once we gave up our efforts, we left the Hmong hung out to dry, and they either had to be brought back into the communist society or flee, and many of them fled. And so, I was reunited with Vietnam to a certain extent, through my Hmong students, and that was a good thing.

Brooks: You'd said before, that you didn't really know what was going on in terms of the secret war in Laos, and the Hmong. When did you first hear about what had happened there?

Johnson: Eighth grader.

Brooks: Oh, really?

Johnson: An eighth grader came up to me and said my--because they found out I was a Vietnam vet. It just came out. He came to me a little while later and said that his grandpa had come across the Mekong River, to Thailand, and he was born in Thailand and came to the U.S. And I asked him where his parents were and his parents didn't make it, they were killed. But grandpa, he loved coming to my room, because I had my, my classroom had to look a little like a museum, I mean there was maps and periods of history stuff. I used all the walls, all the way down the hallway, to as far as the other teachers would let me go, until they said, "Wait a minute, I've got to use that wall." But I had stuff on women's history, Native American, whatever, heroes of this and that, and I had maps. His dad wanted to show me--his grandpa wanted to show me where he had been, and because it turns out that he was not far from where I was, that he was just on the other side of the border, in Laos, and for a little bit of time I was near there.

So anyway, it started a nice--I became involved with the Hmong community a little bit. Our principal and the priest, the parish priest, were very involved with the Hmong community, and there was a real sense of closeness in that they were always welcome to come in the classroom and look at my stuff, and see things, and they enjoyed it. So it was an eighth grade kid, and he brought a book in called *Secret Mountain*. I'd have to Google it right now. I think it was called *Secret Mountain*.

Brooks: *The Lonely Mountain*, was it that one?

Johnson: Yeah.

Brooks: There's a book, I'm pretty sure it's called *The Lonely Mountain: The Secret War in Laos*.

Johnson: It talks about the secret war in Vietnam. I almost read the whole thing but I read enough of it to know that, that as an account, it would be considered a real good account of what happened to the Hmong. Certainly, it has a bias, because it's written by them, and shows--one of the points of it is that the U.S. abandoned them. There's a lot of people who would say no, it's more complicated, see it's confusing and complicated, the whole thing.

But, you know, I think we did abandon them. So I mean that was my first awareness of who the Hmong were and what they did.

Brooks: Just to kind of shift gears a little bit. When did you first hear about, when did you first hear the term PTSD, or when were you first introduced to the concept?

Johnson: Maybe ten years ago, maybe even less than that. I had heard from a friend, a good friend of mine said that there is a therapist by the name of George Kamps, who works with a lot of veterans, and that it might be good for me to speak with him, because while I wasn't exhibiting any kind of scary behavior or anything like that, I just--my friend knew that I was a Vietnam vet, and that there was a certain amount of confusion and things. He just sort of matched me up and said, "You ought to go see him." Well, I'm not crazy, I don't need to see a therapist, a shrink. Well, it could be good to see him.

My wife thought so too, and so I went and started seeing George, and I found it to be very comforting, to bounce things off of him, and that he was starting to give me some tools to work with in my tool chest, as to how to deal with people in my life. George mentioned the term to me, when I first started seeing him, and oh yeah, I'd heard about that, oh yeah, shellshock, yeah I know about that, but not really, I didn't know about it. So, he did, and it fascinated me a little bit, because I thought that I had been feeling some guilt about not being so scarred like some other veterans had been, by their experience. Why is it that I have a good life, why is it that I have a good income, when some of the others people, veterans, did not. And so it was good to, once a month, see George, as sort of a good way of staying away from problems, but bouncing off a third party. And so that was my first experience with therapy, or seeing an unrelated person, and it made a big difference in my life, I think, because too many times, when we have problems, we want to see somebody we know, and that isn't necessarily the best person that can help us. An unrelated professional is the way to go, I think.

Brooks: So, aside from those kind of guilt feelings, were there any other manifestations, maybe when you started learning about PTSD, and you were like, oh that.

Johnson: Yeah. Without reading anything, at first George was giving me explanations as to why I might be so quiet, so introverted, in social situations, why I always had to feel guarded about the things coming up that I needed to be prepared, that I needed to have the right things to say, you know this sort of thing, that it was related to experiences as a soldier. Then, I started reading the book that had the biggest impact on me, was, *Tears of a Warrior*, because it outlines those things, those manifestations

of PTSD that are most common, and so you do, you look at those and you say, yeah that's me, no that's not me. I had nightmares early on, but I hadn't had them for quite a while, but nightmares, feelings of being abandoned, and nightmares about being abandoned, alone. Whenever, for example, the experience of the director of the student union taking all the credit for that award I got from the Chamber in DeKalb, the anger I felt was scary. I wanted to hit the guy, or worse. I had ten years of good teaching in at St. Jude, when they decided that they should have all young people there, and who would be teaching religion according to the dogma of the church. And so every now and then in my life, everybody has a time where they feel as though they've been abandoned, or betrayed, I think maybe a lot of people experience that, but bouncing it off him and knowing that I was having--I'm very cautious of that happening again. So there's that.

Hypervigilance. Yeah, I always do need to face the door or have an eye on the door, the way out. I always like to view everybody in front of me and watching them, and I am the last one to bed, after I do the perimeter of the house, and I mean that's my job. I never thought about that too much, you know, I just thought it's what I do. Those kind of things, when we have arguments, I exhibited the characteristics of yes, this is an argument we have to have but I'm not going to have it right now, I'm going to flee. Are you going to fight or are you going to flee? I'll flee for the time being, I'll fight later. This was causing occasional problems with my daughter and my wife and I, because you know, you have to talk about it now. No, I don't and I won't. I would become sullen and quiet, and you could not get me to say anything, talking, and why, why is that? I was accused of making the person I was arguing with feeling bad, by me not saying anything, when really, all I wanted to do was not say anything, because I was afraid I was going to say the wrong thing. Those are things that if you're not ready to talk.

People who have someone who is challenged by PTSD, those are things they need to be aware of, that yeah, these are things we need to talk about, and when would be a good time to talk about them, would be the question, not you've got to talk about this now. How do you want to talk about it? How long do you want to talk about it? And we'll get it, we'll get it resolved, and the fact of, if I--for me, if I ever feel as though someone is not getting respect of if I'm not getting respect, that's one of the things that has bugged me the most, that will bother me more than almost anything. Go and hit me or do something physically to hurt me, but don't show disrespect. I'd much rather it be the other way. Those are just some things that got in the way a lot of times for me.

I'm just trying to think of some of the other aspects. I think for me, it was mostly silence and quietness. It's funny, in front of a classroom, in which I

had an agenda, an itinerary, I could appear totally in charge, totally outgoing, I could create humor, I could do this and that, but in other aspects, I just want to be alone. For me, a good weekend is when I'm home alone, I don't need to go out. I call it the--since we've talked about it a lot more, there's the old Darryl and the new Darryl. The new Darryl isn't significantly different than the old Darryl, but there's a lot of things that the new Darryl does, or doesn't do, that the old Darryl would, and so we joke about that a little bit, my wife and I, about is this new Darryl or old Darryl talking right now?

So I think PTSD has caused me, until I went back to school and taught, and taught caused me to go from job to job, I didn't have any more than five years at a time at any one particular job, but I thought that that was normal, a lot of people are doing that now. You don't go to work for the neighborhood foundry and stay there for forty years like mom and dad might have done. People do shift, move. Do you hear that?

Brooks: Yeah.

Johnson: So, I never left a job on bad terms. I never got dismissed, but there just always was something that caused me to change jobs. I think, had my wife and daughter not realized that there was some things that might have been created because of my experience in Vietnam, that if they had not been as understanding, that I would have been another Vietnam statistic for divorce. Divorce, drugs, alcohol, a big part, a big hurdle that men and women today have to get over successfully when they reenter society, and a lot of them aren't doing it successfully. I was lucky that whatever aspects of PTSD I faced, I was able to realize it and actually... PTSD is one thing. Lately, I've been reading about a thing called post traumatic growth, and that basically says that you have all these aspects of PTSD that can tear a person and bring them down, but how is it that recent, since the 1990s, research has shown that out of a hundred people, almost 50 percent experience a negative--because of trauma, their life situation experiences a negative or downturn, that they either can't recover from, or they recover very slowly. How is it that there's almost 43 percent, it's what that book says, experience growth, that they have a traumatic experience, not just combat veterans, but people's accidents, actually get--and sometimes it's in a very short time, sometimes it takes a long time, that their life experience becomes better. I read that and a lot of things from that aspect work out well. People like myself, have to reauthorize themselves, or reauthor their experience. I've had to realize that if combat experiences-- that I can't rely upon somebody prescribing me a medication, giving me an outline and saying this is what you need to do in order to become healthier. No, I have to do that on my own. They can be helpful, they can advise, but I have to adapt that on my own and realize that I am going to make me better. It seems so simple, but it's something

that as far as veterans, men and women today, really struggle with, because they're waiting for somebody to show them a way out, and that someone is right within themselves. You know, even if it's just taking-- and it's discovering the little things in life that I have to do, and then doing them, and then analyzing the situation a week from now, a month from now, a year from now, how am I better, and that's how you grow. Everybody else is helpful and an advisor, but what I need is someone who says, when I say I've got a problem, my daughter, she is not seeing things clearly and we don't see eye-to-eye on money. Instead of someone saying well, this is what you should do, and it's, they ask the question, how are you going to deal with that? Tell me three things you're going to do to make it a situation where she feels good and you feel good. So, I mean those are things that produce growth and it's just the way we--it's the way we--our approach to things.

Brooks: Tell me about being involved with the Artists for the Humanities. How did you get involved?

Johnson: Again, George Kamps, one day said, "Hey, I just came in touch with a person out of Appleton, that is an artist, and he's got me thinking that this right brain stuff..." And I'm going right brain, left brain, what's? I know there's a difference, but don't ask me what it is. He said what it is, is that the creative side, the right brain, is your creativity side, that is mostly associated with writing, artistry and things like that, and that people who-- there's an organization out of Appleton, that are doing art therapy, and that by sitting down and doing a little bit of artwork, you could feel better about yourself, bottom line, is what it amounts to. And I said, "Shoot, I have no experience with art, don't want to do it." He said, "You ought to try it some time," it really feels... You know, he didn't feel like he could do anything worthwhile artistically either, and he still doesn't feel that way, and I don't too much either, but somehow, because it is locally, in town, at the Abbey, which donates a large room area for free, that they meet and you ought to go. So I said, "Okay, I'll do it." And I went once and ah, and the experience was very good. I felt better when I left, than when I got there, to where I go every time. I don't miss many. It's a once a month thing for me and what I found was that it was nice to sit down with other veterans, again, though I was afraid that I'd be totally turned off, because we're all sitting in a lounge area. The idea is to create a very comfortable setting. You don't have to say anything if you don't want to, or you could say a lot of stuff if you want. People say hi, how are you, I'm Darryl Johnson. I served in Vietnam, '68 to '69, as a forward observer, in the Infantry, and then basically that's it, and then okay, everybody says hi, and then we're going to work on something today. I didn't know what I was going to work on, I didn't know what I could draw. I needed a little direction, so they have two artists there, and they have all the materials, that you could work from just pencil, to colored markers, to acrylics, to

oil, watercolors, whatever, it's all there. What do you feel like doing, I'm questioning myself, and I thought, you know, I think I could do something today that shows my confusion with the whole Vietnam experience. So, on a piece of paper, I drew, I used words as my medium, and at the top, I put peace. At the bottom, I did war. Love at the top, hate at the bottom, action at the top, apathy at the bottom. These were extremes. These were the things that I was caught in the middle of all the time, especially then, and at the bottom, where there was war, hate, and apathy, I didn't paint, I just used markers, and made it very ugly colors, dark, nasty colors. Then, towards the top, where it was peace, love and action, I started drawing in earth tones and sunlight and things like that, and it turned out great. Then, you're challenged to write a little narrative about it, and so I wrote about how I was caught in the middle of these things, and I had to work my way through them in order to be okay in civilian life. That was my first piece, and that was how I got exposed to Artists for the Humanities, and the Road to Recovery Program. Basically it's art therapy, and I've been convinced ever since, that art therapy--

You know, a big thing in my life that has helped me, has been physical therapy, because I can go--I mean, yesterday, I was pretty much dawn to dusk, outside, working, gardening, creating, but that's creative also. I discovered the benefits of that, physical therapy, and I always knew that writing, I was good at it, but I had never tried art. The beauty of art therapy is that it's permanent. I could listen to somebody on stage, at a microphone or just sitting across the table, telling me things that are good for me, or talking about a topic in which they're an expert and I could listen, listen, listen, and a week later you could say how did that meeting go last week, and you know, you retain only so much and sometimes it's very little. But when you sit for the same length of time and do something and create something on your own, it's still there a week from now, it's permanent. I showed this war and peace thing to my wife and kid and grandkids, and I think they understood me a little bit better. So that was a good starting off spot with me, and it's caused me, because I am retired, I have no trouble with my schedule, every month I go. Other men and women have come and gone. It seems like therapy almost, of any kind, art, physical, whatever, you almost sometimes have to drag people into it, you have to force them to do it. You will do this. Otherwise, they don't realize how good it is and beneficial it can be for them, until they do it regularly. We've had a lot of people come and go, but there are now several people that come, I mean it's like part of their life every month, I see them every month, and we know what it's doing for us.

Brooks: That first time that you went, was George there as well?

Johnson: Yeah.

Brooks: Did you know anyone else besides George?

Johnson: No, he was the only one. Tim Mayer is the director of the Artists for the Humanities, and a very dedicated person, and I got to know him. So I see him a lot now, because I'm trying to help with the organization.

Brooks: And what's some of the other pieces of work that you've done?

Johnson: Almost everything I did the first two years had to do with words. I tried to recall all the--one piece was recalling all the slang and things that we spoke then; It don't mean nothing. What are you going to do, send me to Vietnam? Better dead than red. If I put my mind to it, I could think of a whole list of slang and stuff that we used almost exclusively in the sixties, and so I wrote that down, and each little phrase I did in a different colored pen, and that looks, a lot of different colors, and people will focus on, look at that. That was a good piece.

I recounted the benefits of being a soldier, the things that it taught me that were good in my life, like trusting the person next to you, good communication, things like that. A lot of those things had been violated at times, but for the most part... so I did a piece on that. I never felt like if I did a piece, the only negative--one of the negative things that gave me a problem with, in the Vietnam experience, was when I was embarrassed by the actions of my fellow soldiers, my comrades. One of them was, and I think I told you about that earlier, when we were going through villages and guys were throwing C-Rations at the people. I tried to draw that and I was so bad at the figures, but it got the impression. It's a piece that I will work on again, because it was so meaningful to me, that memory, I can't get it out of my mind.

Another piece I did was--and it looks really bad, but it's a dream I had, of, there's combat going on between, it seemed like about a platoon size, is the way I drew it, about twenty, and an equal number of North Vietnamese, and I am invisible, I am without a weapon, I'm naked, and I'm running around between all of them, and I'm trying to tell everybody what to do but they can't hear me, and it's just complete, like nobody's listening, and this is a problem I have with PTSD also, is that at times, I really feel as though nobody's listening to me. And so that piece is good, but it needs work because the figures and everything, again, drawing the human figure is difficult for me, but it speaks to a very big issue with me, of people aren't really not listening to me, it's just that I haven't said the right thing, or I'm going on too long, and so they're--I've gone on too long. Keep it short. Work your language in such a way that people will listen. Anyway, there was that.

Brooks: How do you know when a piece is finished?

Johnson: I think when you say, the message is said, I'm happy with the work that I've done on it, if I mess around with it any more I'll screw it up, I'm done. For me, the message usually is contained, it's focused on one thing. I just did one on Agent Orange. I have no idea whether I was infested by Agent Orange or not. I was in areas where Agent Orange was used extensively, for long periods of time, but I seem to be healthy, so I don't know. But anyway, I wanted to do something about Agent Orange, because I've always felt as though, that the world hates us for using it. The same thing with like, napalm, that I always felt guilty that we used it, that the people we used it on hate us for using it. I don't know if that's true or not, but to me that's it. So, I did a thing on Agent Orange and ah, I knew it was done, and I had some pictures of myself in areas that had been treated by Agent Orange, so they're on there, and the symbols for Agent Orange, and the words that are part of the symbol, would get people thinking. Then I wrote kind of a neat narrative saying that when I was in Vietnam, I thought Agent Orange was pretty cool stuff, because man, you could see into the--what--I mean, prior to its use, there were times the jungle was so thick, I couldn't see more than ten feet, I could just see movement. But now, with Agent Orange, you know, you could see from hilltop to hilltop I didn't realize it was toxic and that it had dioxins, and so you didn't realize that until you got back home, and then it started to become apparent, again, largely through student movements, protesting Monsanto and Dow Chemical, for their making of these things, that you suddenly realized there needs to be checks and balance with the use of weaponry. There has to be somebody there that says this is okay and this is not okay, in war. So, I knew that piece was done, because I did a little bit of a narrative on that. It was long enough, it got the message across, it's done.

Brooks: And do you typically share? Because I know you get the chance to talk about your pieces in the meetings. Do you usually talk?

Johnson: Yeah. When you're finished, we worked from like one-thirty to three, three-fifteen, and then we gather around the lounge area again, with what we've been working on, and everybody's given the chance to speak about what they did. Some people complete something in the hour and a half, some people are not finished, and usually everybody talks about the work they've done, why they did it. There have been times where people say, I can't talk about it, and you have to respect that. You have to respect that. But most people are willing and comfortable with each other, because we're veterans, that there's enough trust level there to say, this was an experience that was good or bad. Very often, the things that I, the topics I choose are on the growth aspects, versus the nightmare aspects, of trauma. So I have no trouble, usually, just talking about it, and that's how it finishes, and that I think is the therapeutic aspect of it, is you go home with your work and you can continue working on it at home, or you can

leave it there and work on it next time, or you just give it to Tim, with your authorization that it can become part of the Artists for the Humanities art therapy. He's got hundreds, hundred and hundreds, of stuff, pieces that people have done.

Brooks: Do you tend to keep yours or do you usually leave them with Tim?

Johnson: I've left most of them. The ones that I keep are the ones that--because again, I'm retired, so I will find some time between sessions to work on them, because now, I feel as though there's not just--it's not a thing where oh, today is art therapy session day, what am I going to work on? No, I'm thinking that there's two or three things that I want to do. Ahead, I'm kind of thinking ahead. So I will take them home, but then they wind up in his hands eventually. You know, this Agent Orange thing, for example, that I just did, I'm not going to want to slap that on my living room wall. It's really a kind of a disturbing piece. No, not going to go in the living room.

Brooks: Yeah.

Johnson: But it's something that will get people thinking.

Brooks: So, we talk a lot at the museum, about how the veteran experience is universal, regardless of what conflict you were in. Almost everyone who experienced it went through the same type of things, but there's some differences, and I'm wondering if you notice differences between the veterans from different conflicts in the meetings.

Johnson: Yes. I think one of the biggest differences for me, would be the communication. When I was there, it took nine to fourteen days to get--from what I wrote, and only my writing. I couldn't call. I was in the boonies, I wasn't in a base camp. Some people in base camp could call the States at the time, maybe once a week. I never got a call out, so writing was all I could do. The turnaround time was okay, it got to whoever I wrote it to in about nine days, they wrote something, so it was at least two weeks before someone's responding to what I wrote about two weeks ago. To me, that was pretty fascinating, the way we could adapt to that type of thing, but also, it led to a lot of anxiety, especially if you were writing to someone who you thought you loved, and they were thinking maybe I don't love you any more, and it's the back and forth and the not knowing. Obviously, today, you've got cell phones, texting, which I don't know that that gives complete messages of how we feel, but it's more instantaneous, and that's a big difference. Hearing a person's voice is huge, and even Skypeing today. I think that's one difference.

I think there's a huge difference between jungle warfare and urban warfare. There were casualties of war in Vietnam and World War II, that

were civilian casualties, but most of the battles were, most of the conflict was not--I can't really agree with myself there. I was going to say in World War II, a lot of that was in the cities, but I mean, the urban warfare today seems to be something that would be a lot harder to deal with, knowing who your enemy was. We thought we had a problem in Vietnam, with knowing who the Viet Cong were. They didn't wear uniforms. That exists today, but I think it's even become more intense. The IEDs that are used today are a lot more terrorizing than any Punji sticks or things that we might have come across.

So I think there's things, and I think the biggest difference in trying to understand current veterans versus my era, are the role that women play in combat and in the military, and the problems that they experienced with abuse. So, you know, I think those are the things that--but yet, when we gather, young and old, we can appreciate the things that we do share, in terms of the combat and trauma that we've seen. A lot of it is similar, but those are the things that I think are unique today.

Brooks: Any differences in how people do react in those meetings, in terms of just differences you see between the eras and how they're reacting to the art therapy? It's okay if the answer is no too.

Johnson: Hmm?

Brooks: It's okay if the answer is no. I don't want to lead you into answering that.

Johnson: No, when someone gets emotional, you always wonder, how am I going to--you know, how do you react. They're getting emotional about something that they experienced, and I don't quite understand it or I didn't quite get all the details, my hearing aides aren't all that great. Why are they getting so emotional? Sometimes, you're always wondering whether the person is being totally honest about their experience. Are they exaggerating? All I can say is that you take from it what could be instructed to yourself, and if it turns out that as far as whatever, anybody's had to corroborate something, that they're being as honest as they can. That's the beauty of the sessions, is that people feel comfortable.

There have been times when the local news--and this has not helped the organization try to get out in the community as something that's doing--an organization that's trying to do some good, when you tell the newspaper, no you can't come in and view us, because we don't want to be recorded, because it could lead to some people feeling a little too uncomfortable with sharing whatever they're talking about. So it's not totally private. There was one time when we had some UWGB students come in to observe, and everybody was fine with it, it worked out just fine, but I

don't think we hit upon any really, really deep things that day. Well, that's, yeah, I think that's all I can say about that.

Brooks: Okay. Do you have any advice for people who are maybe in the same, or a similar situation, who are just kind of realizing that they might be suffering from PTSD, aside from maybe coming to do art? Any other advice?

Johnson: I think anybody who feels as though their life is a little too full of stress, needs to realize that I need to take a little time for myself, and how am I going to use that time. And I think they just have to promise themselves they'll take that time, even if it's just a little bit.

[File 4]

Johnson: It probably would be the best that it would be just a teeny part of their day, that they're going to take time for themselves and ask themselves some pretty serious questions about what am I doing, how is it benefiting me, and where am I going to? Where do I see myself being somewhere down the road, and how to measure, and there's books that can help a person organize that kind of thought process. But it starts with just taking time for yourself. I think the creative--we get too distracted just saying, I'll take some time, I'll go on a park bench and sit and be quiet. Even there, there's too many distractions. I think the writing or the creative stuff is if we want to really grow, I think that writing and using the creative side of our brain is important. I like to write along with what I draw. I think they're almost inseparable now, but at first I would have thought just writing.

When I retired, my wife still works, I'm retired. In our relationship that means that I almost have to justify my retirement all the time. Am I really doing stuff that makes my life worthwhile, compared to what she does in work, in creating an income. I justify it by asking myself if my day is a full day, and am I involved in the right things, but I journal. Journaling can be real easy, just taking notes. Every day, I'm writing down, in notation form, some of the things I do, and that way I can look back and see that well, last week, I got quite a bit done. Those are just little things but I'm writing, and at times, I will take some time to write in-depth about certain things. A lot of people who say, well I've got to make a living and I don't have time at work, my boss won't let me take time to write. Fine, then write at home. Well, I've got kids. Fine. Find time to write at home, somewhere, somehow, even if it's just a few sentences, just something to keep you on track. To me that's ah, get the book, *What Doesn't Kill Us*. What doesn't kill us, was a phrase that Nietzsche used, "What doesn't kill us makes us strong," and he's talking about PTSD, and how to grow from trauma. Not Nietzsche, but the author of this book, *What Doesn't Kill Us*.

He's got all kinds of--you know, there's all kinds of things that we could do daily, that could keep us on the growth aspect, rather than the downward swirl part.

So, I think the more we can self-direct ourselves, the more we can share that with others and ask others to talk with us about certain things, that that's what I would recommend. There's a saying I used with my eighth-graders that I think is real important for adults too, is that, "We are who we hang with." There used to be a phrase in the sixties, seventies, "You are what you eat." That's somewhat, that's pretty true. And then I don't know if I coined it, but with my kids I said, "You are what you view." If you watch ten-thousand murders on the TV by the time you're a teenager, I got a feel that it's going to cheapen your view of life.

Brooks: Yeah.

Johnson: But you are who you hang with, and if we're surrounded by people who are woe is me people, it's hard to get out of that. But if we find a way to get involved in this and that, just at a small level, of people that are in a positive direction. So it's who we hang with, and taking things upon yourself, and measuring them. Yeah, so those would be the two things that I think would be very important for people with PTSD today, to get on a growth journey.

Brooks: I don't have anything else written down or anything. Is there anything else we didn't touch on that you want to mention?

Johnson: No. [pause] No, I think just the last couple things I mentioned were so significant, to me. I guess I would like to say one thing. It seems like the people that we visit in Tomah, the hospital in Tomah, many of the veterans in Milwaukee that we're seeing now, not so much in Green Bay, but have had such huge problems with drugs and alcohol. They probably would think that my view, especially what I was just talking about, would be a bit naïve, or that they tried it and it didn't work. I guess I would say, you've got to try it again. But I'm really concerned about--there's those veterans that have turned to drugs and alcohol as escapes or whatever, and once they're addicted, to be able to see your way, to rationalize a better way, as opposed to rationalize a reason for falling down again. That's just huge, and those that do escape those addictions and become growth oriented, are really significant and awesome people. But there's not, there's not enough of them. There's too many that are still struggling with those and that worries me.

Also, there's just so many men and women veterans, and men and women who've experienced trauma, who were like myself for twenty, thirty years, who just don't talk about it. That's a coping mechanism really, to just not

talk about it. You can cope pretty well that way for a while, but usually, as a coping mechanism it's not very successful long-term. So those that choose not to write, not to draw, use art as therapy, not to use, to avoid therapy at all, to even just talking to a therapist, I would encourage them to find a third person that's neutral, that's not related, to talk to. That's about all I could think of.

Brooks: So the Road to Recovery Program, you would take it elsewhere then, is that what you were saying?

Johnson: Yes. I participate locally, in the one at St. Norbert College, I mean at Saint Norbert Abbey, but Tim, twice a month goes to Tomah, under the view of therapists there, who will have their patients come in, and have art therapy sessions. Now, those are prescribed. When it's prescribed, you have to do, so it's not really voluntary. It takes a special work on his part, to get them to see how it can benefit them, and those that have seem to have produced some terrific pieces that will be in the exhibit. That's going on in Tomah, and you might have heard that Tomah has been under the scrutiny lately, of--but that's neither here nor there. The art therapy is a wonderful program there. Many of those people are under, are medicated and that's been an area of controversy lately, that they're using opiates and too much medication. But the art therapy has made a difference for a lot of men and women there.

Milwaukee, there's a vet center that men and women go to, and we started going there just recently. Mostly it's just Tim that goes there, and again, under their guidance. He does it always with a therapist in the room. He's an artist, but he's not a qualified therapist, so. And there, veterans are having an outlet in Milwaukee. He was doing something in Stevens Point, I'm sorry, Lacrosse, at a vet center there. So, he's got those programs going on during the course of the month right now. The new clinic in Green Bay, we'd like to start seeing veterans that doctors there might want to lead our way that could see the benefits of it. So it's growing.

Most of the therapists and doctors that see what the program is doing are real encouraging and wanting us to do it, for free, and so that's part of the problem, is that he's living on a shoestring, Tim is. He's paying for his hotel rooms, paying for his gas and food, and just contributions that come to the organization, but we don't have a big contributor. So he's doing just fine, but on a shoestring, and that's how the program is spreading, and I expect that there will be a bigger and bigger need for it as more and more men and women come back from Afghanistan and Iraq. And as people see the need for using expressive art in some manner.

Brooks: Okay, great. Well, I think you do great work and it sounds like it's been a big benefit to you, so I'm glad I had the opportunity to talk to you about it.

Johnson: Yes, me too.

Brooks: Great. All right, well I'm going to go ahead and turn this off.

Johnson: Okay.

[end of interview]