

Interviewer:

Good afternoon. Today is the 29th of September, 2017, and I'm here in the West Point Center for Oral History with Lieutenant General (Retired) James H. Johnson, Junior, USMA class of 1960. Sir, I'm so glad you came in today. Welcome home.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Honored to be invited to be here.

Interviewer:

Good to see you. Sir, could you please spell your last name for the transcriber?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Johnson, J-O-H-N-S-O-N.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir. Tell me about your childhood. When were you born?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

December 1937, Tuscaloosa, Alabama, home of the Crimson Tide.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And what did your parents do?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

My dad played football at the University of Alabama - played in their first two Rose Bowls in 1926-27, scored the only touchdown in a 7-7 tie with Stanford.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

In 1927, so he was kind of a hometown hero. When he graduated, he worked for the state as an engineer. He also worked for the University coaching track, coaching football. But more importantly to him, he joined the Army National Guard in the State of Alabama, and spent 10, 12, however many years it was before World War II started, when he was activated.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And my mother came to the University of Alabama after two years at Northwestern, and met my dad sometime in 1935-37 or so, and I grew up there in Tuscaloosa. When the war came along, my dad's unit was sent to Texas to train with the 75th Infantry Division, and from there he, in 1944, deployed to England, and then on to France.

Meantime, my mother, my brother, and I moved from Tuscaloosa to Atlanta, Georgia, and she worked for the government in a housing department of some kind there in Atlanta, Georgia, and we lived in Decatur during the war years. My dad's battalion - he was a Battalion S3, Infantry Battalion, when they got into France, about the time the Bulge -

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Was occurring. For some unknown reason, I don't know why, but his Battalion Commander was relieved of command, taken out, and they put my dad in the night before they went into combat, and he fought that Battalion through the entire Bulge until they were taken off the line 33 days later. He was evacuated to France with various wounds and frostbite.

By the time he got back to Germany, the war was over, but he stayed on with the Constabulary, and as a result, in 1947 my brother, and I, and my mother got on a troop ship and sailed over and joined him. So that's when you asked me what I did in my childhood, well, for two and a half years right after World War II I lived in Germany in three different locations - first in southern Germany near Karlsruhe, then we moved to by Heldrunen up near a castle in the north, and finally in Erlangen, further to the west in center Germany. And I got to see the effects of the war. I went to school in the back end of

a two and a half ton truck, all of us kids just piled in. I was in the fifth grade, sixth grade in those days. School was really a one-room. You had a row of chairs for the first grade, for the second grade, third, up to sixth - we were all, one through six, all in one room.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And my teacher's name was Miss Lulu. I don't know what her real name was, but that's what we called her, and you know, what as a kid really it was a heck of an experience. Learned the language, and interacted with Germans, also learned a little bit about the Army. After the war, or after we came back from that, we settled in northern Virginia, in Arlington, and both my mom and dad worked real estate, and I went to middle school and high school there, and from there, on to West Point.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Sir, do you remember the battalion your father commanded?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I haven't really -

Interviewer:

If it comes to you -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Hmm?

Interviewer:

If it comes to you, shout it out.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Oh geez. I do have - it's something like the 129th Battalion. It's a Regiment to which I'm not familiar.

Interviewer:

Okay.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And I know he was with the 75th Infantry Division. And I have it - you know, one of the things, he died at a very early age, age of 59, and I was - I had only been on duty for maybe a year and a half, having graduated from here, so I really never had a chance to learn all about it. It's all I know is what he told me, showed us when we were really small, you know, and I didn't know enough to ask all the right questions.

Interviewer:

Right. Now, is it just you and a brother?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. And what do you remember about the war years when you were back in the States as a young child?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, I remember rationing gas, whatever, you know - just what you've heard from others. To me, it kind of came natural. The butter looked funny, 'cause it wasn't really butter. The milk wasn't really milk. You know, there was a lot of hardship. There were blackouts, and things of that sort, but for kids when you're growing up, you're sort of impervious to all of that. You go to school, you have fun, you go home, play.

Interviewer:

And did you and your friends do scrap drives or anything like that?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Do what?

Interviewer:

Scrap drives, where you collect old metal and things like that, or?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I don't remember contributing anything to the war effort, to be honest with you.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

But surely that was going on all around, and there was great support from the American people. My mother's brother was a reporter with the Chicago Tribune. He signed up, wanted to be Infantry Capt, Infantry, killed in action in Italy. My grandfather, his father was a doctor, 50-something years old. He tried to get in, they wouldn't take him. But in those days, everybody joined. Everybody did something, and committed to the effort.

Interviewer:

Right. What was it like being on the troop ship going over to Europe?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

It was a rough ride, but, you know, we got there.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

In the middle of the winter, with the North Sea being frozen. I don't know how long we sat outside of Bremerhaven trying to get ashore - it was something I remembered.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. What was your first impression of Germany, once you got off the ship?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, almost everything was in ruins, so you'd drive through a town and it was all rubble, and you'd see crosses in there, and everything was in rubble. You didn't see any men of working age - you saw old men - but mostly women, children. We had bikes. There were no vehicles - that's how they got around. But you know, the Germans are very industrious people, and they turned it around fast. I had the opportunity over the years to be back there many times, and a second tour of duty in the Army was in Baumholder, Germany, in 1963-64 - came back in the summer of '65. Then the '80s, I had a chance during Forager to get back to Germany again and spend a lot of time there, and it's just amazing what they had done, and what that country has become from what I saw.

As kids, fourth, fifth grade, sixth grade, we were interested in looking at castles, and they were still there. But as you walk down any kind of a city, an urban area, it was really kind of startling - something you'd never seen before and never see it again, most likely.

Interviewer:

Where did the family live?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

We lived on the economy in all three cases, and we always had a home. My dad was a Major. I figured being an officer's son, maybe that meant something, that we had pretty decent quarters, and I remember the first - in Karlsruhe, our first house, we had help working for us, a lady. One was from Poland, the other was East German. One cleaned, and the other cooked, and we had a houseboy, who was about, I don't know, 18-19 years old, who had been in the Hitler Youth. He spoke no English. My brother and I taught him English, he taught us German. But he was just a handyman around the house. But it was that kind of - it was a very different Army, of course, and the war years tend to bring out the best and worst in people.

But this was a recovery period for Europe, to be sure, and our mission was to help them, and that was my dad's mission with the Constabulary.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. How did you hear about the Military Academy? How did you get interested?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

When we came back from Germany and lived in northern Virginia, in Arlington, at that time I had two cousins on my father's side, brothers, one of whom was a West Point Cadet. The other was a Midshipman. And we had this house that my folks built in Arlington that

would be frequented by those two guys from time to time, when they would get off leave or something, particularly Jack, the one at Annapolis. He would come over a lot, and he became a role model, I think, for me, more than anything. And my dad's influence - he always, I think, aspired for us to not necessarily seek an Army career - I guess that was in his mind.

But he really respected West Point and everything it was, and he was real close to Joe, Jack's brother, who was at West Point at the time. So yeah, you know, I just, you gravitate to West - or watching Army-Navy games, it didn't take long to convince me what I wanted to do.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Did you apply to both?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I could only - no, actually, I applied the first time, I was graduating from high school, I couldn't get a Military Academy appointment. Those days, you had to get a Congressman to appoint you. And I could get an appointment to the Air Force Academy, their first year, class of '59, so I knew I wasn't going to qualify 'cause my eyes weren't good enough. I knew I wasn't going to qualify, but I went through all the tests anyway, just for the experience, and then the next year I got my appointment to West Point, and the rest is history.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. So tell me about your West Point experience. What's your most vivid memory of your first day at the Academy? And so this must've been 1956?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

This would be, yes, July, 1956, and I don't have, you know, a lot of memories. I can remember the first day was busy, to be sure, but nothing that surprised me, nothing I couldn't handle. It was the intensity and the ability to sustain yourself during those early days - during the entirety of Beast Barracks, that was tough, 'cause you didn't get a lot of sleep, you didn't get anything to eat, you know. In those days, hazing was prevalent, obviously. My problem was keeping a straight face on most of that stuff. But you know, if you want to talk about Cadet life, I was average, academically. I was in the middle of the class. Some things I was good at - I was good at math, I was not good at English. Militarily, I had really very little exposure to the Army. I didn't know what I was getting into. I'd seen my father go off to work, but I never lived on a post. I really was sort of a semi-Army brat, I guess you would say, but. So militarily, I was average, I'd say. But in the area of physical fitness, I like to think I was a superstar, and in fact, I ended up number eight in the class - the second-fastest time on the obstacle course in our class in the four years. And then, having never run track - in high school, I played basketball and football, baseball, I never ran track - here, I didn't make the basketball team, but I was just sort of messing around with the hurdles down at the Fieldhouse, 'cause my brother was a academics - I mean a athletic scholarship at the University of Maryland on the hurdles. And so I'd mess around with them a little bit, and I was down there, and Coach Crowell comes up to me. And he spends a little time giving me some hints, said, "Son, you work on this stuff, and when the Christmas holidays are over, I want you to come on down." And then that led to my career with the track team as a high hurdler, 60 yards indoors, 120 outdoor. And it took me - I pulled a hamstring real bad, I think in Yearling year, took me out, started to come back Cow year. First Class year, though, you couldn't beat me, and I got the - at the time, I tied the Academy record for the indoors high hurdles, and beat Navy - that's the most important thing. The other thing I'm proud of, walking away from here after four years, the thing I was most proud about was putting on a Major A with a Gold Star on it, having taken out three Midshipmen in the high hurdles. I know that's egocentric, but that's the way I felt at the time.

Interviewer:

Yes sir, right, and that's important. That's what we're here for.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

You know, there is actually a lesson there. If you want something bad enough, and you're willing to work for it - and I worked hard. I mean, I spent - when others were doing other things, which I won't get into, I'm down there trying to work on my knee lift, I'm working on my speed, I'm working on my starts to finish, you know, over and over, for four years. But I achieved my goal and left here a happy camper.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

On the other parts, though, the academic and the military part, when I left here, I felt like I should probably start over, because I wasn't walking away with everything I should have.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I just didn't get it quick enough.

Interviewer:

Now, Superintendent Davidson was here when you were here.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Gar Davidson.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. What do you remember about him?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Make quality a habit. Tremendous soldier, tremendous gentleman, compassionate man, thoughtful man, a man who really cared about Cadet Corps. I mean, that came through, even though I'm nobody, and he's wearing three stars. Famously, he had a heck of a history. I think he coached the Army team here at one time, and played. Combat hero. Terrific guy.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. When it came time to Branch, what did you choose?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Infantry, and you know, that wasn't a hard choice for me. It was my dad's Branch. I always felt like - when I'm talking to youngsters about Branch, it kind of depends on what turns you on. I was not - I wanted to be a leader of men, let me put it this way. I'll just tell you. I wasn't interested in being around airplanes. I wasn't interested in being around tanks, or artillery pieces, or other technical equipment. I wanted the challenge of inspiring and motivating soldiers at the small unit level, to take a hill, to clear a trench, take on a bunker. To me - and I wanted to be ultimately on the objective. That objective is going to be occupied by Infantrymen. Now, we're going to have a lot of support getting there, but that's in the final analysis kind of the ultimate.

That was my view of it. Now, that's a very biased view, I know, and I have enormous respect for all of the other Branches, especially the Combat Arms, but that's just the way I was wired, and we're all - as a matter of fact, I asked you about John McCormick, my grandson, who graduated last year. What Branch do you think he chose?

Interviewer:

Infantry?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

No.

Interviewer:

It was a leading question.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Right. He chose Armor.

Interviewer:

Okay, yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And for good reasons, and I respect him for doing that. He's down there at Fort Benning now in that Armored Basic Course, BOL - ABOLC, just charging hard, and I love it.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

Interviewer:

Now, your first assignment after your Basic Course and Ranger School and all that, was at Fort Bragg, where you served in a variety of positions, from Platoon Leader to Executive Officer, Company Commander, and finally, you were the Adjutant, and this was all in the Second Airborne Battle Group, Five Oh First Infantry, right?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Correct. In those days, they were called Pentomic Divisions, in the late '50s, early '60s, designed to survive and succeed in nuclear warfare - tactical nukes, not necessarily steep nuclear warfare - so it was a really strange organization. I started out in B Company, 2-501 Geronimo. There's some history to that Regiment which - it's actually a 101 Regiment, in World War II, and also in Vietnam. But for a period of time during the Pentomic Division years, the 501, the Second 501, was in the 82nd in Fort Bragg. Later, they left when the Pentomic Division went away.

It went away, and the colors went up to Campbell at 101, and also in Alaska, but now they are back at Fort Bragg in the 82nd, believe it or not, which is tremendous. I'm a strong believer in the Regimental system, and just does my heart good to see the 501 back there at Fort Bragg. But anyway, I digress. There's a young Lieutenant, and I supposed this interview wouldn't be complete without telling about my first Platoon Sergeant.

Everybody can tell you about their first Platoon Sergeant, but this guy was special.

Sergeant First Class Phil Fink - World War II, wounded in action. Korea, wounded in action. He's just a soldier. He has no family except for his elderly mother.

Lived in the barracks, and once a month he might disappear for a couple of days. I know where he is. He'll be back, not to worry. But he taught me everything I needed to know, so talk about that later. He taught me the Division responsibilities between Non-Commissioned Officers and Officers, how that best works, and for me, it was, you know, 'Lieutenant, when you're in the field, you're in charge, and you're going to be great. And you're going to tell these - you're going to fire these guys up.

They're going to be confident in what you're doing, and we're going to go from there.' And he just pushed me out front whether I was ready or not, and that's the way it was. But he taught me how important it is to set the example, lead from the front.

He taught me the value of teamwork, building cohesion at the small unit level as the essential element to success in combat. And guys are not - you might think they're fighting for their country, for their flag. No, no, no - they're fighting for the guy on their right and left. And then finally, and maybe most important, he taught me about taking care of soldiers, and that does not mean coddling soldiers. Sometimes it means training their ass off, training as if their life depended on it, because it does. Communicating with soldiers. Never pass up an opportunity to speak to soldiers, and when I say speak to soldiers, I really mean listen.

Cause you got to - it really doesn't matter what you say. What matters is what they say, because they're going to tell you the truth and the whole truth about what's going on in your organization. Now, if you got some rough edges, some broken pieces and parts in places, you'll never know about it. If you know about it, you can fix it, but if you don't know about it, you'll never fix it. Meanwhile, J.S. Ragman out there is wondering what the, what's wrong with this Lieutenant? He doesn't know what he's doing. So the moral of this whole story is, listen to your Sergeant. Now, that doesn't mean you have to do everything he tells you to do. You're still the leader. you're still the commander, at whatever level you're at. But listen to your Sergeant. He's been there, he's done it. He can tell you what's going to happen and

almost whatever course of action you have to choose.

But you know, Fink had a real big impact on me. He went on - by the way, Vietnam picked up a year or so after I left. He went on to Vietnam, spent seven straight years in Vietnam, until he was finally killed in action.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I never saw or heard from him again. Only other thing I'd say about my 2-501 days is that's where I had the opportunity the first time to command a Company. I'd been in the Army 18 months. I had another classmate of mine likewise - that was a different Army in those days, a draft Army. My classmate, Dick McInerny, and I were pretty tight, and we both ended up with Rifle Companies, side by side. He was killed in action in Vietnam, one of our 25 guys killed in Vietnam, which is a real shame, because Dick McInerny would've worn four stars - a terrific guy.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So were they all. I mean, this - it probably be a waste of your time to talk about the Pentomic Division in the Airborne Battle Group, because it was a one-of-a-kind, and we're never going to see that again, and that's good. I think we had - we had - I'll go ahead and share it with you.

Interviewer:

Sure.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

You had five Rifle Companies. Now, a Rifle Company had 222 guys in it. This was a big Company - that's half a Battalion today. But in the Company, I had four Rifle Platoons and a Weapons Platoon, and every one of my Platoon Sergeants was a combat veteran, and I was surrounded. I had two First Sergeants, a Field First Sergeant and one in Garrison.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

The one in Garrison lived, he lived in the unit. He went home once a month. He lived in Raleigh, his family. But these were real soldiers - a different Army. And not - you know, there was good and bad, and I went through, in B Company, four or five Company Commanders.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I'd come into work one morning, and I would go into the CO's office to report, and he's in there packing up all his stuff. "Sir, what's going on?" He's gone. Different Army. I don't want to get into all of that. It's irrelevant.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

But you know, these are things you file away.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Sometimes you learn more from seeing it go down the way it shouldn't be going down than you do from seeing perfect. You can learn from both.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

It was a terrific first experience for me to go to Fort Bragg to be with the best. If you can do it there, you can do it anywhere, and having that first Company Command is what convinced me that I'm staying in this Army as long as they'll keep me, as long as they'll have me.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Once - it's just it gets in your blood, and you get an affiliation with soldiers, there isn't anything else I ever wanted to do after that.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Sir, after your time at Bragg, your next assignment was in Europe - you mentioned that before - and you served in both the 13th and the 16th Infantry in various Staff and Company-level positions. What was Cold War Germany like from the end of '62 to the middle of '65?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, to correct the record, it's the same unit.

Interviewer:

Okay.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

They just changed colors. They went from the 16th Infantry to the 13th because of reorganization going on in the Army, getting rid of the Pentomic Divisions, for whatever reason. I'm in the same outfit. I started out as a Company Commander of a Mechanized Rifle Company there, in Baumholder, Germany. But you asked about what was the, what was Europe like. The U.S., the Army in Europe was where the action was in those days, in the - this is pre-Vietnam. They were first class. They were the professionals. They were ready. The Cold War was at its height, and alerts and call-outs and movement into GDP, your General Defense Planned Positions, that was a real thing.

My Company, my MECH Company, had its armored personnel carriers parked outside the barracks - everybody lived in the barracks - already uploaded with ammunition, water rations, wire, barrier material - whatever you might need for combat. Only thing that required do is for a guy to get up, go down and draw his weapon, get his protective mask, and fall in in his vehicle, and we're off to our Tactical Assembly Area, usually two hours away from the Garrison at some unspecified location. And from there, you know, whatever tactical mission we might get, we must be prepared to execute. But it was a very proficient Army, in my opinion, in Europe in those days. There was heavy - it was heavy Divisions, so I was in the Eighth Infantry Division, a Mechanized Division in Armor.

But also, the First Brigade of the Eighth Infantry Division was Airborne. Originally, actually, I was on orders to go to that Brigade, but you know, everybody wanted to be in that Brigade. I know what happened. Somebody changed the orders and put me down in Baumholder, and they went to Mainz. But for me, it was better. I ended up - my Company was for war-playing purposes, cross-attached with 268 Armor, so I had a habitual relationship with this Tank Battalion, trained with them, deployed with them, and if we had ever been called upon to defend the Fulda Gap or whatever, I'd have gone to war with them. Out of, after Company Command, I was Battalion S3, which was, had a lot of responsibility. But you know, what I learned about - it was two and a half years I was in Germany. Summer of '65, I came back to go to the Armor Career Course.

But what I saw in my first two tours' assignment. Light, Heavy, five miles an hour, thirty-five miles an hour. Now, there's a difference in that. Do five miles an hour, you know, you get a map, you put it in your packet, and that's going to do you for the next three weeks. Over here, the stack of maps you need for three weeks, you got to have a trailer to carry all of that stuff. A totally different mindset, a totally different way of fighting, or let's say, getting to the fight. In the last hundred meters, it's all the same, but, you know. It convinced me that for an Infantry Officer to be a full-service Infantry Officer, you

need to do both Heavy and Light, and you should do it while youâ€™re a Company-grade Officer. And then you want to be a Ranger, you can go do that.

Or you want to go to Fort Hood and command a Bradley Squadron, go to it. Whatever turns you on, thatâ€™s what you should do at the Field grade and above levels, but at the Junior grade level, I think all young Officers should be forced to experience both, Heavy-Light. I believe thereâ€™s merit in that, because later on when they move up the food chain, theyâ€™re going to find out that thereâ€™s a need to put that mix of forces together, and what better way to be proficient in doing that than having served in both.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, could you describe a typical - you briefly touched on what an alert was like, but this is a very finely trained Army, honed to a razorâ€™s edge. Can you talk about what an alert was like for your Company from the time you got the word to go to getting on the road?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

It was mainly the objective was to get out of the Garrison area, because you were a target, and generally, it was two hoursâ€™ road march distant from the Garrison, and it was an assembly area. And you occupied that assembly area in a tactical way, as you would to provide force protection and to give you a chance to prepare for the next mission, and if necessary, rehearse whatever task might be required. You know, all that would take place - your planning, preparation, rehearsals - in this assembly area, and from there, you would move to whatever your mission may be. Now, I donâ€™t remember - you know, we had different assembly areas, river crossings, some were - we didnâ€™t have a full-scale exercises without notice, as we do in 82nd. Iâ€™ll describe that later if youâ€™re interested in it -

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

That I recall. We had major - in Europe, their major exercises were planned, because youâ€™re dealing with more, you know, road, the network and the disruption of the entire population. You canâ€™t just drive out in the woods and plant a stake. You have to plan and prepare, especially for a river crossing operation, and we had a couple rivers between us and the Fulda Gap, and that was something that we trained to do. But my experience was that this was a very professional Army. As Vietnam came along, though, I donâ€™t think those who came after can say the same thing, in the mid to late â€™60s, early â€™70s.

Interviewer:

Right. Yes sir. Were you in Germany when the Berlin Wall went up, or about the same time?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I did make - while I was in Germany, I did make a trip to Berlin, and to get there, you know, you had to go through a Soviet-occupied portion of Germany, and you had Soviet guards on the train. It was not an easy deal to get there, and if we didnâ€™t have the full Wall there, they had something there that blocked you at Checkpoint Charlie, â€™cause we didnâ€™t go to Checkpoint Charlie. And they were forced to let us go into the East side, if youâ€™re military. They canâ€™t deny you access. So they put you on a bus and they take you over, and you can look around, but thereâ€™s nothing to see. There arenâ€™t people. If anyone was to approach us, theyâ€™d probably blow them away.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm, wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

It was desolate. It was like - I donâ€™t know how to describe it. Itâ€™s just everything is dreary, dark, thereâ€™s nothing. Thereâ€™s nothing to see.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, can you describe a time when, as a Junior Officer, either at Fort Bragg or in

Europe, when you struggled with a mission where things didn't go exactly as you planned and you really had to dig deep to overcome adversity, and the lessons you would've learned from that experience.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, I think, you know, we could be here for a long time if I were to describe all those. Nothing ever goes down perfect. You sort of after actually everything you do, you learn from everything you do, even if you don't do it right. Next time you won't make - you know, innumerable chances when it comes to - but there's some unique challenges. One of my unique challenges as a Company Commander in the 13th Infantry, Charlie Company 113, my First Sergeant was an alcoholic.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And I had to learn to deal with that. Not only that, he was a Senior, okay, a Senior Non-Commissioned Officer, he was an African-American, and I liked the guy, but he was an alcoholic, and dealing with that was difficult. I wanted to help him, but I definitely wasn't going to let the Unit pay a price. So I ended up, you know, doing a lot of his duties, which is not what you should be doing, you know. You want people to perform their own functions. But that was a challenge. But I think we all have those. Nothing's ever perfect. You're not going to - I had my one time I had my Phil Fink. You're not going to get one of those every time you show up. But I try to learn from mistakes, and I think that's something I've learned from the Army to do as a professional soldier. You just sort of - you get better at it as you go along.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So I don't really dwell on it, think about it. I see everything as a positive experience, even the challenging times. You learn from it.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Sir, after you returned from Europe, you mentioned already you attended the Armor Officer Advanced Course.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Right.

Interviewer:

Could you describe that course from the perspective of an Infantry Officer?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. There were 200 guys in that class. About 40 or 50 of them were from other Combat Arms - you know, they were Infantry, Artillery, Engineers, some other Branches. But it was really, I think, special to be asked to go to one of those other - I learned a lot there. I learned, first of all, the comparison. Later, I was instructed at the Infantry School, so I can say that the Armor School had, I thought, a much better approach. It was a hands-on approach to learning. You fired everything they had on the range. You got a taste of Tank gunnery. You learned Tank Infantry tactics that basically, you went through every aspect of planning and preparing for Combat Arms operations, and Combat Arms is their keynote phrase.

Their patch is combined Arms - blue, yellow, red - Armor, Infantry, Artillery, you know, and that's just symbolic of - but we're really talking about integrating all the battlefield operating systems, and I think they do that better than anybody. I learned an awful lot. Remember, now, coming off of two and a half years in Europe, which was I think the finest Army in the world at the time, the Army in Europe, so to me, this course was a breeze. It was a lot of fun. I finished number two in the class.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Again, a little egocentric to think of that, but that's the way it was. I enjoyed it. Probably more important than that - the ego part - was the fact that I also had in that class 20 or 30 Vietnam vets.

Interviewer:

Really. Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Just back, the first back going to an Advanced Course.

Interviewer:

All right, so this is in -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So -

Interviewer:

Sixty-five, right, or sixty-six.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah, '65, graduated in '66 - '65, 173rd, 101, they just - and so all of us who hadn't been there - included - are eager to learn everything we can. And let's face it, when you're in an Advanced Course like nine months, what you get from the platform is not anywhere near as valuable as what you get from the guy on your right and left, in my opinion. So you know, that was another very unique experience. Of course, I wanted to - I thought I was qualified. I wanted to command a Rifle Company somewhere in Vietnam next, and I felt like I'm qualified to do that. I've commanded two Companies, I've been a Battalion S3. I want my Company in combat. They said, "No, no, no. You're going to be an Advisor."

Interviewer:

So that's a great segue.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. "We're going to take, we're sending you to MACV." Oh, man, that just destroyed me, 'cause all my friends, colleagues - not all of them, but a lot of them - going off to where I wanted to be, thought I should've been. But the fact is, as life is, I probably - the best thing that could ever happen to me was send me to Vietnam, down there in the Delta, to teach myself the language, to learn the people and the culture, and what the war was all about. American Units going in, landing on the beach, going ashore, and starting to pull triggers - that's not what it was about, and our mistakes over there are well-chronicled, and I don't want to get into that. I'm only going to talk about my lane, you know, what I saw.

What I saw down at - I was, again, down at the farthest-most part of the Delta in Ba Xuyen province. Bac Lieu was the next one down there, where the 21st Armor Division - I want to be specific, because that was a great outfit, very highly trained South Vietnamese Army Division, in Bac Lieu. Just south of there is the U Minh Forest, and then we're there, kind of in the middle of it. I'm at a district called Thuan Hoa district, My Thuan hamlet, at the intersection of two canals, with a four, five-man team. You got a Senior Advisor, maybe another Officer, maybe you don't, an OPS Sergeant, a Medical Sergeant, and a Comms Specialist - that's it, and interpreter, and the only way in and out of there is by helicopter - safe way - is by helicopter.

There weren't any roads. I mean, there were bike paths, and you could go on the canals, but that's very risky. So I went through the province. The next level above district is the province - Ba Xuyen province in Soc Trang, which is a big city, had an Aviation Battalion there, U.S. Aviation Unit. And remember, there are no American Units, just Advisors, in the Delta - American Units are in First to III Corps. This is in '66. Our enemy was the Vietcong, and our mission was to provide security and military assistance, and to help in their rural development, economic development, and the pacification of all the hamlets, the villages, in that district. Kind of a challenging task.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

When you know, they didn't send me to any school for any of this. I didn't get any language. I didn't get anything. But that's okay, we, you know, taught ourselves. We adopted a - the District Chief, my counterpart, is 43 years old, I'm maybe 27 by then, something like that, he's at least 43. He's been fighting for 20 years, speaks seven languages.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

A hell of a soldier, tactically competent, great leader, but he trusted me and he liked to talk to me, and we had a very good relationship. I just tried to laser in on what he was trying to get done and make it happen. From the team perspective, we lived in - he gave us a room in where his District Headquarters was, which wasn't much, but. And the water we had was captured in a cistern from the rain - we didn't have any water. We didn't really have any food, either, other than rice. Once a month, one of us from the team would go into the province capital, Soc Trang, to get a piece of meat that would have to last us for a month. Otherwise, we ate ration, you know, the regular C-rations, whatever it was - it wasn't much.

But that's okay, it was enough, and we went on combat operations where we would basically go down the canal areas, hunting VC. We had a RF or Regional Force Company there that lived at the District Headquarters, and District Chief had a Popular Force Platoon that was essentially his security, and that's what we had to operate with. And where I came in handy was Artillery support, Air support, AC-130, that kind of stuff. The rest of the time, our routine was to get up in the morning, I'd go check, the first thing I did was check security on our side of the canals, where the RF Company was and the District Headquarters.

And one hour out of every morning, we sat in there and taught ourselves the Vietnamese language, every day. And after that, you know, after doing my rounds on the military side, in the afternoon I'd go over across the bridge into My Thau hamlet, where there's a market square that we know the VC also used, and I'd just go around talking to people, drinking tea, telling stories, listening to them, trying to see where we could help. And where we focused was on medical help, their clinics, roads and bridges, engineer work, schools. We had two priests and about sixteen monks, I think, within our district, located around. And so we'd go around in a sampan to these outposts once a month, paying the troops, and you'd visit each one of these villages, and I just got to know them, and where I could help them out with military assistance or anything, that's what we did. And I felt real good about that. In fact, the policy was, you go out there for six months, we bring you in, we put somebody else out there. My six months came, I told them, "Thank you very much. I'll stay here."

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Which I did.

Interviewer:

So you did a whole year in that area.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. And that was one of the problems with the way Vietnam was run. We were constantly rotating people around for professional development purposes. Instead of putting the qualified guys in to command our Companies, we were putting guys to command our Companies never seen a Company before. That really rubbed me the wrong way. I believe in professional development, but not at the expense of soldiers or at the expense of their lives in combat. So yeah, I chose to stay out there, and so did the team,

the guys I had with me.

Interviewer:

How well could you speak Vietnamese by the time you were done?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Pretty good. I made some good friends. I meant to bring - this is another story deviating from your script, but I went back to Vietnam about seven, eight years ago. I took my son and I went back to that same district, and that same hamlet, and I pulled out my pictures with all my friends in that RF Company - they were Second Lieutenants, First Lieutenants - to find out what happened to them. Dae Hui Shau, my counterpart, had lived to be 85. Now, he didn't stay in that district, he moved on somewhere else. They all went through reeducation. My best friend, Sing, was tortured. Some - another one sent to repatriation camp. Two others - Lieutenant Luong, actually made it to the United States, so it varies, what happened to them.

And the interesting part about where I was in the Delta, the leadership positions were all occupied by Vietnamese, but the troops were Cambodian, so it was 90% Cambodian. When you asked the - you started this discussion what was my impression of, I'll give you an overall impression. The overall impression is, down at the lower level, where they had nothing, that's a pretty apt description, actually. All they wanted to do was grow their rice, have a meal, and end this war. They didn't really care who was fighting, they didn't care what side - VC, ARVN, you know - just leave me alone to live my life, 'cause they'd been doing this with the French 20 years before that. And of course, the French occupied them for a hundred years.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So that's at that level. But as you move up the chain, what you find is corruption to the Nth degree, which is one reason why I had no interest in going to the provincial level or anything above that and trying to accomplish anything, 'cause I know what they're like. Corruption. The higher you go, the worse it gets. That's just my impression. Now, that may be an unfair statement, but you asked me what I thought, so that's your!

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Did you feel that you were having successes at your level?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. Oh, absolutely. I didn't have any problem going around anywhere in that district. I knew the people, they knew me. Now, the team, I don't - you know, this was before Tet, and at some point after I left, and maybe this was in the build-up to Tet, the team that came in after us was totally wiped out on one of the canals.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. I assume that in some of your trips to the marketplace, you probably spoke to some Vietcong at some point, right?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Could be.

Interviewer:

I mean -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

It could be.

Interviewer:

And they're blending in, you're probably having conversations with them.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And I suspect - you know, I just in the back of my mind trying to figure this out, suspected there was a live and let live type environment. But the District Chief, you know, he was very professional, and when he found that there were Vietcong in the area and they were doing things to terrorize the people, and he went after them big-time, and that's when we saddled up and moved out. But there wasn't a lot of that in my time there.

Interviewer:

Right. Yes sir. Now, when you came back, you were an Instructor at the -
LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

The Team Chief teaching Company tactics.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. I asked to go, I wanted to go to Fort - I wanted to go to the Infantry School. I ended up teaching Company Operations. Basically, I was ultimately in charge of the Armor MECH team, so I was teaching young - this was the time now, weâ€™re talking â€™67, â€™68, the time of where the build-up in-country is getting up to 400, 500,000. I mean, the war is going in Korean overdrive. I mean, itâ€™s really all weâ€™re doing is preparing guys to go to Vietnam, and thatâ€™s what I was doing in Fort Benning, for Junior NCOs and Junior Officers. I enjoyed that assignment. I got a lot out of that assignment in terms of training doctrine, and also our war fighting doctrine. But most important thing I got out of it was the reason I went there, was I wanted to improve my communication skills as Instructor.

They had a three-week MIT I think Military Instruction Course, something like that - forget the name of it. But they taught me to get up on a stage and keep a hundred troops entertained, or paying attention, learning, walking out of there with something they can hang their hat on. Thatâ€™s a challenge.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And you got to be pretty good at doing it. And I did get - you know, I worked hard at that, and I think in terms of my overall career, it was very helpful in developing those communication skills that enable you to persuade people to do the right thing.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. What were some of the lessons that you had learned in Vietnam on your first tour that you tried to share with the soldiers you were preparing?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I tried to make them understand the importance of the culture. You know, we learned the same lesson in Iraq and Afghanistan, and we tend to relearn this lesson over and over. We never appreciate the perspective of the people who weâ€™re trying to help, and you got to learn the culture, learn all about them. Until you do that, I donâ€™t know how you can help them. So I think thatâ€™s - but remember that Iâ€™m teaching tactics. Thatâ€™s not exactly in my lane. But you try to make sure that the guys donâ€™t walk out of your classroom with the wrong impression about what it is theyâ€™re going to be doing.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

But I enjoyed that tour - it was 18 months, and I headed back again. I knew it was going to be 18 months, and this time it was to the 101.

Interviewer:

Okay.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

In fact, I - how did I get - I got to the - this time, I was going to get to the Unit because Iâ€™m going to make it happen. Somebody at one of my - the Director of the Directorate that I was in, a Colonel, was going to command the Brigade, you know, the one I wanted, so I said, â€œSir, Iâ€™m coming your way. Pick me.â€ So I donâ€™t know if he actually did it, but thatâ€™s where I ended up going.

Interviewer:

Yes sir, and you ended up at - first as the S3, the Operations Officer for Battalion 327.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Right.

Interviewer:

In the First Brigade of the 101st.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Right.

Interviewer:

And you were in the Ruonr Ruong VALLEY?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Did I pronounce that correctly?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah, Ruonr Ruong. The Ruonr Ruong is an extension of the A Shau. The 101, at the time, was operating in Thua Tien province, which is the second province from the DMZ. Quang Tri, up in Quang Tri you had the Third Marine Division Brigade of Fifth MECH, and then down in our province, Thua Tien province, is the 101, operating principally out of Phu Bai. Now, we had the coastal lowlands right there, we operated, there were fire bases along there, and then very quickly you were up into the highlands, in the triple canopy jungle and the valleys associated with that. And in the summer months, weâ€™d operate in the valleys. In the monsoon season, weâ€™d get on this side of the mountains, because you didnâ€™t want to get stuck. Helicopters couldnâ€™t get over that. Youâ€™d get in a fight over there and youâ€™d get in trouble. Youâ€™re history.

So you got to really be careful. But thatâ€™s what we did. I ended up as a Battalion S3 for a terrific guy, Jerry Brophy. My Brigade Commander, was a World War II legend, Frank Dietrich, who had commanded the First Brigade, the 101, when they first went to Vietnam. This was two years earlier, and now heâ€™s on his second tour of the 101, commanding a Brigade. And essentially, weâ€™re patrolling, looking for NVA, and when we get them, pile on them and try to, and destroy them. We moved our fire base every week to ten days. Other times, we would just move through the jungle, and we went out - thereâ€™s only one occasion that we came back to our base camp at Camp Eagle in the six months I was the S3.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

One occasion. We came back to prepare for a coastal lowland operation that involved coming in from the sea, but. So I didnâ€™t do a lot of training. It was mostly operations. Youâ€™re constantly - force protectionâ€™s a big issue, and making sure youâ€™ve got Air support and Artillery support. I would get a - I became an expert Air Assault Operations - because thatâ€™s what I did. Iâ€™d get a package of ten slicks, two guns, and a C&C, and Iâ€™d start moving them around. All day long, Iâ€™d spend - the only down time is when weâ€™d go to refuel, come back and get going, doing it again. Iâ€™m up there one day, and the Tank Commander comes on the radio, tells me to go and find the best Lieutenant in this Battalion and put him in there on a Recon Platoon, because heâ€™d just got hit.

Blew his foot off. Battalion Commander was taking him out to a hospital ship. I went and picked out Buck Kernan, who you may or may not have heard of. He went on to command a Ranger Regiment, Retired Four Star now. He was then a Lieutenant in one of the Rifle Companies. I put him in with that Scout Platoon, and the rest is history, as far as he is concerned. Great, great soldier. But, you know. When I came out of that Battalion - I loved the Battalion Commander - it was the last time I actually cried, that I can remember crying. And I didnâ€™t really care what theyâ€™re going to do with me after this.

I did what I could, and I should still be down there - but you canâ€™t do that, you know?

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Army, you have to move along, do other jobs that are just as boring, and I ended up in a G-2, and I figured, "Oh, gee. This is the worst thing." It turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened.

Interviewer:

So this is February to August of '70.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. I came out of the Battalion and went in a G-2 shop as a Plans Officer, and my responsibility - and I had a whole crew of guys under me. They were Warrants and Specialty, and there was a ten-kilometer folder for every piece of terrain in Thua Thien province. And what we did, we tracked everything going on, presently and in the past, over years, trying to analyze and predict the future. That's what we did. And once a week, I went into the SCIF, the secure communications facility, with the Division Commander, Assistant Division Commander, the G3, and me, and the Chief was there, and we looked at the whole AO, and I told them, I tried to tell them what's going on, and what I think. Here's what the enemy's capabilities are, and here's what I think his intentions are.

And based on that, they would plan future operations. And I did that for six months, and that was - I learned the importance of intelligence at every level - tactical intelligence, strategic intelligence - how you put it all together, analyze it, and where it can be a combat multiplier. Otherwise, you know, you're wasting resources. You're just - just to show you how silly we were back in the day, in my Battalion in Germany, the Intelligence Officer, generally speaking, was the worst Infantry Lieutenant we had in the Battalion. He can't do that, so we make him the S2. He can protect those documents. That's the only thing he did. Now, how silly is that? We've come a long way from that. Now, when I get an Intel Officer, put him in a G2 or S2 slot, first thing I do is send him to Ranger School, and then he can come back, and then he can really be an S2 in a Battalion. But I mean, that's - we digress.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. So how had things changed from the end of your first tour in Vietnam to the end of your second tour in Vietnam.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Okay, that's a good question. You know, you're asking me kind of in perspective, looking back. At the time, you don't really think about that. Like I said, I tend to look forward, not back, but there was a difference. We were starting to - in the second tour, it was after Tet, and you know what Tet happened. We won a tremendous battle, and in the process lost the war by losing the American people, and it was having effects, in my opinion, on the Army, as I began to leave Vietnam off my second tour, and getting back to Fort Bragg and seeing what it was like. I mean, it's - I'll just say it's the lowest point I have seen our Army in our 33 years.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Right then, when I got back. And what followed were the fraggings and a lot of other stuff. You had drugs, and civil rights demonstrations, and anti-war. It was not a good time, and a time when it took the really tough people to stay around and make the Army what it became in the '80s and '90s. And I salute people like all those guys that did that, Colonel Vuono and John Wickham, Gordy Sullivan, They went through Vietnam and came out. The Officer Corps also took a big hit in Vietnam, in terms of integrity, and honesty, and professionalism, and a hard look needed to be taken at that.

We're probably going astray here now, but what really turned things around, in the mid to late '70s, we went to a volunteer Army, and Affirmative Action, a lot of other good programs, but we adopted the six imperatives of the Army, that were going to - quality

people, personnel. Capable, competent leaders and leader development programs for both Officers and Non-Commissioned Officers throughout your career - not a one-time thing, but throughout every level. War fighting doctrine, modernization - can't remember what the others were.

But that refocusing paid off in the '80s, when we started to get the money, and by the end of the - I thought the Army was never in better shape than it was in the end of the '80s, beginning of the '90s.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now sir, to jump track just a little bit, you were married both times you were in Vietnam.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Right.

Interviewer:

Tell me about what it was like going on R&R both times and trying to reconnect with your family.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. Well, first tour, my wife went back to New York, stayed at Fort Hamilton, but we did meet in Hawaii, R&R. And the second tour, I was at Fort Benning on the way back to Vietnam, and they came out with a policy, you can move your family anywhere you wanted, so we said, "Let's go to Hawaii." And so that's where we went, and we also was there for R&R, was there before I deployed, there for R&R, and then when I got home. My wife and my family, obviously very important to me. We've been married 56 years. She's been everything to me. I wouldn't be sitting here, wouldn't have spent 33 years, wouldn't have accomplished anything.

She's the one that provided me with the strength, cared for our family, raised the family.

The one thing I did do, though, when I - actually, some of them were separate, we were separated. You know, I'd go off for days or weeks at a time, but I was never gone for years at a time, and never more than six months, until Persian Gulf I think was the first time. We always seemed to stay connected. In Vietnam, when I was a Battalion S3, we did the same thing in the Delta. First thing I did when I'd get up in the morning, before the sun comes up - I slept in the TOC as a Battalion S3, with the radio, 24/7 for six months. But before light, on long yellow, tu-tu-tu-tu-tu, every day I wrote her a letter.

Every day. Now, she'd get maybe six or eight or ten of them at a time - that's okay, I numbered them. Family is truly important to a soldier, and if you don't take care of his family, you're not taking care of soldiers.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

You know, that's the way it was for me personally, and I'm sure that's the way it is for every soldier.

Interviewer:

Right. Now sir, you mentioned culture earlier, when you talked about one of the lessons you wanted to impart. You also talked about culture, the importance of learning language and getting out and talking to the Vietnamese people. Tell me a little bit about what you thought about the Vietnamese culture.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, it goes back, not hundreds of years - we're talking thousands of years, five thousand years, before Christ - and they're very proud of it. In Hue alone, they have seven universities that teach that culture, and they teach - I think tourism is something like 70% of their economy, and they're very proud of their culture. When I went back to Vietnam six, eight years ago, how long ago it was, I would go in a restaurant and I'd ask them, "What is the profile of the people from other countries coming here to your country?" Most of them are from China, from Japan, Korea. Very few French.

But maybe no more than 5 to 10% Americans, not that many. Australia and New Zealand -

to them, itâ€™s like going on an exotic vacation, â€™cause it is a beautiful country. The people are beautiful. You fall in love with the people - at least I did. I mean, I just - itâ€™s hard to describe. Theyâ€™re wonderful people, and all they really want to do is be left to live their life. They donâ€™t want anything else. But I think theyâ€™re worming their way to do it. Thereâ€™s a free market there now. Even though Communism is still there, theyâ€™re on their way, I think, to a free market economy, so people are doing well.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, you already said that when you returned to Fort Bragg, you felt that that was the lowest point youâ€™d seen in the Army in 33 years, and you were assigned as the Operations Officer in the G-3 Section at 18th Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg. What was the Corps focus during this period?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, during that time, I think they were still recovering from Vietnam, sending people over there, Advisory Teams are becoming big. But we were focused at 18th Airborne Headquarters in the Operations Division on military support to civil authorities - response to hurricanes, big snow events in the Mideast or on the East Coast - humanitarian-type relief and support that the Army can do on a [snaps fingers] quick basis, and we were experts at that, you know, in moving quickly to get somewhere to help people out. We did a lot of that. Did some work with - our exercises were more in the Command Post type variety, with Army Reserve or Army Guard Units.

Various Units of the 18th Airborne Corps. Basically, I was sitting there waiting to go to the Armed Forces Staff College, I think - I think that came next - â€™cause I -

Interviewer:

Yes sir. You were at Fort Bragg, you had a year at the War College, from â€™78 to â€™79.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

That was later.

Interviewer:

Okay. And then you were a Test and Evaluation Staff Officer, Plans and Policy Branch, from July â€™75, or until July â€™75.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. I went from Corps Headquarters in 1972 to the Armed Forces Staff College at Norfolk, a six-month course, great course. Seminars were made up of all the Branches, and a CIA rep, somebody from the State Department, and a German Officer. It was terrific. And from there, I went back to the Pentagon for - actually, it was DESRATA, the Research and Development agency there, but it broke up - the Division I was in became the nucleus of the Armyâ€™s Operational Test and Evaluation Agency, and thatâ€™s where the Test and Evaluation stuff -

Interviewer:

Okay.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And what that did for my professional development was - besides finding what the Pentagon was all about - I learned a lot about the materiel acquisition process - line and verse, and you know, from there, I came out on the Command List for Colonel, and also for - no, wait a minute. I went to - yeah, I came out on Battalion Command List and went back to Bragg.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Back to Bragg to command the 2-504.

Interviewer:

How was that experience for you, sir?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

2-504?

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And that was April '76 to December '77?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Correct. Correct.

Interviewer:

What was the climate like in the Unit after the Vietnam war? This is about a year after?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

This is in '76-'78. Now, we're starting to refocus in the 82nd Airborne Division. The Arab-Israeli war had taken place in '73, and we're trying to learn a lesson from that. The 82nd was transformed from just a light, from a Infantry Division. It became an Infantry Division with a lot of firepower. We picked up a Light Armor Battalion. We put an extra TOW Company in every Brigade. We got an Apache Attack Helicopter Battalion. So that we were capable of fighting in the desert, and that was our focus. It was on Iran and Iraq at the time, and you know, we were developing a new doctrine called the Anti-Armor Defense, which allowed us to create kill zones using all these anti-tank weapons and deal with the enemy in that way, so.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

We were busy with the normal alert, marshal, deploy, Airborne operations. Occasionally, we'd do an airfield seizure, not that frequently. And you know, the Army was starting to come back in terms of its training management procedures as well as the doctrine and the war fighting doctrine that I was talking about. We started the NCO Development Education System that paralleled the Officer Education System, so you had it each level, so we started really working on some of those things that we'd learned out of Vietnam, and you could see the Army coming back. That was a good Battalion I had. I enjoyed my time in command.

And we spent one summer, in fact, up here at West Point.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Part of the -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

We were at Camp Natural Bridge, training Cadets.

Interviewer:

How was that?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Oh, it was terrific. You know, I gave - every young Sergeant I had, had a chance to be in charge, and it was terrific. We would maintain our Airborne proficiency by - Jump Master proficiency by jumping back and forth, the Wallkill drop zone and back at Fort Bragg. No, but that was good. Spent a whole summer here.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Were you seeing any changes in your Battalion that were brought on by the transition to the volunteer Army?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, to be honest, I didn't really - I don't know. I'm not that familiar with the volunteer Army actions. But what was going on, you know, as I just described, it was built around those imperatives, and I can't think of anything that - you know, at the Battalion level, it's the last level you really connected with soldiers, right? And the focus down there was on the physical fitness, on the teamwork and bonding. You want to, at the Fire Team Squad and Platoon level, build experts. I considered every Platoon Leader like a son of mine.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

He was my responsibility, as a Battalion Commander, and I wanted to develop Company

Commanders out. Now, we didn't have the strongest Company Commanders I've ever seen, but I'll tell you about one of them who was strong. My B Company Commander in the 2-504, he walks in at the end of his tour. I had him come in to counsel him, talk, you know, "Jack, here's what you need to do. Can I help you? What can I do to help you get on to your next assignment?" "Sir, don't worry about it. I know what I'm going to do. I'm getting out of the Army. I'm going to law school, 'cause I want to be a Congressman." So I look at him, I said, "Jack, you know, that's thinking big, but God bless you, I wish you well. Let me know if I can ever do anything for you."

The next time I hear from him, I'm in the Persian Gulf, in the Euphrates River valley, and I get a letter addressed to the Division Commander from a Congressman. I said, "Oh, geez, what have I done now? I'm in big trouble." And I open it up, and it's from Jack Reed.

Interviewer:

How about that?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

My B Company Commander, class of '71, I think, who's now Senator Jack Reed, from the great State of Rhode Island.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And his message to me was, "Sir, we're with you over there. Take care of business. When you get back, we're going to get together and tell some stories. And have a drink." And he did, he had us over to the Hill. Terrific guy, great American -

Interviewer:

Well, that's outstanding.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And this academy is lucky to have him as one of its benefactors. He's a tremendous role model. And I might add, a terrific B Company Commander. That I can attest to for sure.

Interviewer:

What made him stand out, sir?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

He was thorough. He cared about soldiers. That's a good question. He was precise, he didn't run around with his hair on fire or anything. He was very calm, 'cause that's just the way his nature. You know, we're all leaders. We have to adapt our own personality to our leadership styling, and he had a - he wasn't one of these flamboyant type of guys. Those the type of guys you really got to be careful of them, I'll bet you, but nah, he was a solid, solid Company Commander. Did everything I ever asked of him and was a terrific role model for soldiers.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Sir, if we could, let's jump forward to June of 1980, when you assumed command of Third Brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Okay.

Interviewer:

And you commanded the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment longer than anyone else in the history of the Regiment, giving up command finally in May of 1983. Why were you able to command the Regiment so long?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, if you let me, I'd still be down there. At the time, Brigade Command assignments were for two and a half years. That's one of the things the Army tried to do, you know, and extend out Platoon time, Company command time, Battalion and Brigade command time, so we don't abuse soldiers with a guy who doesn't know what he's

doing. So it was two and a half years, but you could either minus six or plus six. I asked for the plus six, so six years. I didn't argue. What else you going to do as a Colonel? And it's better than commanding a Brigade.

Interviewer:

What was your focus for training your Brigade?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Once again, it's you got to be able to alert, marshal, deploy. Everything was based on a battle-focused training model, determined by what your mission is, and then what the mission-essential tasks are at every level of command, down to Platoon, Squad, and individual tasks. You know, that determined what we were going to train on, and you know, I insisted on doing that, and certifying Platoon Leaders and Company Commanders at every level. But the focus was being ready, and being ready means you got to be able to alert, marshal, and then deploy, prepared to conduct a parachute assault, fight, and win. It usually involves an airfield seizure - we got very expert at doing that. Evacuating noncombatants - whatever it might be. So during my time at Brigade, we were on the move quite a bit. I had Alaska, two trips to Panama -

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Sinai, Turkey, display of determination, and Germany on Reforger 83. In addition to that, we deployed here in CONUS habitually, typically the pattern, you know, you do a drop, a night drop, full equipment, and then several seize objectives, and then go off and do something to whatever the focus might be on that particular mission. We went to Fort Bliss, Texas, twice to Dugway Proving Ground in Utah, for desert warfare.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Cause, you know, we're all - we're constantly doing war plans for the Middle East.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Fort Indiantown Gap, refugee - Pennsylvania - refugees down at AP Hill for Virginia. Fort Stewart, three times at least we jumped at Stewart, twice at Eglin Air Force Base, on either in conjunction with an emergency deployment readiness exercise, or a routine off-post training exercise that had a larger focus. At the time, the Joint Readiness Training Centers and the National Training Center at Fort Irwin and at Chaffee were just getting started, and they were the focal point for the standards for the type of training that we wanted to do throughout the Army, against a world-class opposition force. And training done to standards, using drills and lane training, whatever the technique might be.

And that was enough to keep us busy for three years, believe me.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now sir, from November of '85 to May of '87, you were the Deputy Director for Operations Readiness and Mobilization, and one of the things that you were working on is you were working with Special Forces in counter-terrorism units. What sort of things were you working on in that Staff assignment?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Okay. From Brigade command, I went to Corps G3, and then back down to be the Division Chief, and when I left the Division, I went to Washington, and I was in DesOps. General Vuono was then the DesOps, Carl Vuono. And I worked on a special activity, reporting directly to him on analyses, and at the time when I was selected for promotion to General, when I was selected for promotion, he called me in and said, "Jim, I'm sending you down to the basement, to the Army Operations Center. I need somebody down there that I know and trust,"

â€˜cause they have just been through Yellow Fruit and some other stuff that really made the military look bad. And unbeknownst to me - I mean, I didnâ€™t know anything about what was going on down there, but I showed up. I was a Deputy Director to a terrific DesOps director by the name of Bill Moore, Major General Bill Moore. And he got me involved in everything, but my specific area of responsibility was the Special Ops division. We were then creating a Special Ops Branch, and I had the responsibility for all the special mission units in the Army - Delta, the 160 out at Campbell, and then we had several other black organizations. Iâ€™m not sure I can even still yet speak of them, but one was Aviation, another was Intel, and they have operators all over the world.

But all that stuff, I was the guy that had to keep track of it on the Army Staff. My counterpart in the Joint Staff was Wayne Downing, a really good friend of mine. Another terrific graduate, distinguished graduate of this Academy, class of â€™62. I would brief then-General Schwarzkopf, who was Assistant DesOps, at least on a monthly basis, if not more frequently than that, just me and him. And on at least a quarterly basis, I would go in to the Vice Chief, General Max Thurman, sometimes with Wayne, the two of us would go in. But thatâ€™s what I did, and all I can say, it was very enlightening. One task I got was to look at the - just an example of a task. There was concern about the Delta selection assessment - the attrition was excessive.

They put twenty-five guys through a course and two of them would make it. You know, can we really afford to be doing that? â€œJohnson, you get up there and find out.â€ And I took a retired Army Three Star by the name of Ed Trefry with me. He used to be the Army IG, a great American, another distinguished graduate of West Point, and he and I did an assessment of what they were doing. It turned to find out that they were right on the mark. Itâ€™s just the way you interpret the numbers. But I can only - all I can say about it is, it was an enlightening experience for me. I donâ€™t know that I added anything to the nationâ€™s defense while I was in that position, but I learned a lot.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Well, then in May of â€™87, you returned to Fort Bragg, and you served as the Assistant Division Commander until October of â€™88, then you assumed command of the Division in October 1988 to May 1991, and you deployed several times during that period. So first, as Assistant Division Commander, can you tell me a little bit about Operation Golden Pheasant, and the show of force in the Honduras, in May of â€™88?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. Thatâ€™s -

Interviewer:

Or Iâ€™m sorry, March of â€™88.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Thatâ€™s right, itâ€™s March of â€™88, and I appreciate you bringing that up, because that was a classic example of the efficiency, the proficiency, of 18th Airborne Corps as a contingent corps. The plan - first of all, it was a show of force as a consequence of Sandinistas going into the Bocay region of Honduras. Show of force in Honduras, at Soto Cano Airbase in Honduras, employing forces simultaneously from the East Coast and the West Coast of the United States, 18th Airborne Corps units.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

A concept for this operation developed on a napkin at Fort Campbell by General John Foss, then the Corps Commander. Weâ€™re going to take two Battalions from the Seventh Infantry Division, two Battalions in Brigade Headquarters from the 82nd, and thatâ€™s who weâ€™re sending. And the guidance was, nobody above the grade of One Star can go on this operation, so my boss, General Steiner of the Division Command, is looking around, â€œJohnson, you got it.â€ And I was on the very first Airplane, left 18 hours after the alert.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Eighteen hours, I'm on the first aircraft, came from Andrews Air Force Base on our way to Soto Cano. The First Battalion and the Brigade Headquarters from Bragg all went by airplane, the Second Battalion airdropped the following day. Same time, we had two Battalions coming from Fort Ord.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Both Battalion Commanders I knew personally, Joe Trez, Joe Hunt, you know, they've been in the 82nd. All good Light Infantry guys, some of them had been in the 82nd, so we had a great team. As they arrived, we are salting them out into the country to co-locate with Honduran Battalions, to engage in joint combined training over the next several weeks. But the fact is, 24-48 hours after we started, after we were there, Sandinistas are gone.

Interviewer:

Okay.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So we never had to pull a trigger. Now, they had all - the ammunition was issued down to Battalion level, but I didn't have it issued to the troops because, you know, I didn't want to start something prematurely, and you know, as it worked out, it was a complete Combined Arms effort. You never know what it is you're going to run into, so you take everybody - Infantry, Armor, took some tanks, the Sheridans. We took Engineers, Artillery. Artillery located at the Artillery School did some joint training with them, Engineers, the whole nine yards. But it's a classic example of you talk about a no notice [snaps fingers] like that? 18 hours ahead of time, if you'd asked me, "Where is Soto Cano Airbase?" I don't know what you're talking about.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

But you have to - in the 82nd, you've got to develop this mentality of, "Send me. I'll fix it when I get there - if it's broke. I'm ready." And you have to stay ready. You got to be ready.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, about a year, year and a half, later, you were the Division Commander, and you led the night jump into Panama during Operation Just Cause. Now, was that different? Did you have more time to prepare for that mission?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah, and that one - this had been going on for some time, the problem with Noriega and what he was doing in Panama, and the Special Operations forces had an operation called Blue Spoon. When General Thurman got down there as the Theater Commander, though, he wasn't satisfied with it, and he designated General Steiner, the 18th Airborne Corps Commander, his JTF Commander for that operation. They wanted to come up with a new plan, and this was in October, and the new plan included a Brigade from the 82nd. And so in October, the Brigade Commander and I, Glenn Hale of the Third Brigade, went down there and did a reconnaissance. We had our mission and came back, did a mission analysis, and developed a plan.

The Third Brigade developed the tactical plan, the ground tactical plan for an Airborne assault on Torrijos International Airport, and subsequent seizure of three other assault objectives, Battalion-size assault objectives, by air assault. When we came back, I directed that our next EDRE we're going to rehearse this sucker, and so in November, we called an EDRE - nobody knew - Emergency Deployment Readiness Exercise - and nobody knew it was coming. But we had the air package, and this is a monstrous air package. We came as close as possible to replicate that. And instead of Torrijos we dropped on Sicily, but you know, we did all the rehearsal, learned some things from that,

further developed the plan. Went down in November and briefed it to General Thurman, and now I had a Second Brigade Commander involved, the Second Brigade. Dave Hale did the planning, Jack Hamilton did the rehearsal, and it turns out that the First Brigade, Jack Nix, gets the mission in December. We have a rotational system in the 82nd where each Brigade rotates every six weeks from Support to Training to Mission, and if the alert comes and you're on Mission, you go, and the second Brigade in line, you go, and that's just the way it is. And so we're always prepared with a Brigade that is ready to go. In addition to the rehearsal, we put together three packages that we infiltrated in advance, in November, early December -

An Aviation package that provided some additional Pilots, Crews, and Door Gunners. We also sent an Armor package that had a Platoon of Sheridans and a recovery vehicle that were used effectively at the La Comandancia, at H-Hour, and we sent a Signal package to make sure we had the comms to link everywhere once we hit the ground, and then we had Liaison Parties that once the alert came, we sent those Liaison Parties off. Now, I got the alert - I'm at a Winter Formal for one of the Units, a Brigade Formal, and my Aide comes in and he says, "Sir, they want to see - we need to go into the kitchen - so somebody from Corps set the time - You need to get up and get briefed."

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So I immediately left there, went up, and we ran our normal sequence, it just played out. We ended up loading up all the heavy equipment in the first 24 hours, and sending the aircraft on to Charleston Air Force Base. Twenty-eight C-141s, and three C-141s with CDS, Container Delivery System, ammunition, water, and that kind of stuff. But 28 heavy equipment aircraft. They loaded up [whistles], moved, and the next 24 hours was spent with Personnel. We had 20 aircraft, and the intent was to go airborne at the same time from Charleston and Bragg, marry en route, and do the Airborne assault, and that's the way it played out.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. So you went from wearing, from dress mess to battle dress, right?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, yeah, but that's what we wore all the time.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. I mean, but you went from a Formal to getting ready to do a combat jump.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. I did stop by the Chief, my Chief of Staff, George Crocker. I knew he was going on leave the next morning, and he was out there - this was about 10-11:00 at night - he's out there packing a car with his wife, Vonda. I drove by and said, "George, I need you." "Sir, I'm with you. Vonda, have fun, wherever they were going. Yeah, the - it's just unbelievable - the troops in the 82nd, to include the leaders, are so highly motivated, it's just unbelievable.

Interviewer:

Right. Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Unbelievable. Makes you proud.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. What was the jump like? From the process of loading the aircraft to flying to actually making that jump into Panama.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

This was not a perfect situation, because at the same time, we were having a ice storm of biblical proportions at Fort Bragg, so the wings of the aircraft were being iced, and it became obvious that we weren't going to be able to all lift off together. So we had to lift off in three different increments, because we didn't have enough ice machines to

clear them off. That was one problem. I went around to every aircraft, climbed in the door, and talked to them. When doing a pre-jump, too, I went in every pre-jump -

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Talked to them. That's all I did. I mean, I didn't have anything else to do. Everybody knows what they have to do, so I just went around and talked to soldiers, telling them, "Hey, guys, this is going to be great. We're ready for this one. We're ready for any, but this was history. On the approach to - we're coming over the Pacific.

Torrijos is right on the, I guess it's the Pacific side, and you're coming over water, and I was standing in the door, still a red light, and I'm looking out and I can see the airfield. There's still some lights. I can see the heavy equipment aircraft pulling pitch - you know, they're starting to lift. Look down, I can see some sporadic small arms fire coming up. And we're down at jump altitude, which is under 500 feet, about 475 is what it's supposed to be, and most of the -

You know, you're in the door for maybe 30-40 seconds, so most of the time, I'm over water, couldn't see a lot. But once I got over land, I could see this is, we're a little further right than I wanted to be. I wanted to be, I want them to fly the drops, fly the runway. They wanted to be on the edge of the runway, 'cause they didn't want chutes on the runway, the Air Force guys. The last thing I told them was, "Put us in the center." Well, they didn't do it, so that was a little disappointing, because most of us ended up in a 12-foot-high elephant grass, fighting our way to get out to the airfield. But as I looked out the door - you asked what was it like - it was a moonlit night, beautiful night, a few clouds, perfect weather. I said to myself, I'd done this a hundred or more times. Might be a little lower than usual, but when the time comes.

And everybody, you're automatically, your body is conditioned to make a good exit, good PLF. It's just 'cause you've done it so many times.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Not much more to say.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And how'd the Division do in Panama?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

We - let me start by refreshing what the campaign objectives were.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

They were to neutralize the PDF, the Panamanian Defense Force. Not much to it, but it was enough to be a harassment to the Panamanian people, for sure. Secondly, to capture Noriega. We wanted to protect U.S. lives, sites, and facilities, and eventually restructure the PDF and put the duly elected government in charge, that was in exile. And all of those campaign objectives were accomplished. The rules of engagement were also kind of significant, because it called for a measured application of force, in order to reduce the collateral damage to non-combatants and civilians.

You did not want to destroy the economy of Panama. You did not want to completely destroy the PDF, because that was going to be the essence of the force that you stand up to help provide security and law and order in the country once you've taken down Noriega.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So with that in mind, you know, our mission was take that airfield, establish enlodgement, link up with the Ranger Battalion that was in the neighboring airfield, Tocumen airfield, 1-

75 Bob Wagner, terrific guy, and he immediately came under my operational control. The next morning as light came up, we launched three air assault operations, Battalion One to Panama, Viejo, 2-504, where they had a counterinsurgency Battalion, second was to Tinajitas, a kind of a mountaintop fortress, 1-504, and then the 4-325 out at Fort Cimmaron, further to the east. By the time the sun went down, 24 hours after the operation began, all of our objectives were secure. We also ended up going down to Marriot Hotel, rescuing about 30-40 U.S. non-combatants that were trapped there.

At Paitilla Airfield were two SEAL teams, theyâ€™d gone in - it was an airfield that we thought Noriega would try to escape from - ran into more than they could handle. They had 17 killed, and so I was asked to -

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Go bail them out. So I took 4-325, put them in there. But within 48 hours or so, 48-72 hours, we were beginning the transition into stability and security operations through our area of responsibility, which was about 37 square kilometers of Panama City. And we did that by occupying sites and facilities that were given to us by the Theater Commander, doing both roving patrols moving on foot, and also mobile patrols. And eventually, we worked the restructured PDF into going with us.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And after 30 days of that, helping them get back on their feet, we were on our way back to Fort Bragg.

Interviewer:

Amazing. That sounds like a successful deployment.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yep. The only bad part is we lost four killed in action.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Which I never forget. And I learned, you know, you just donâ€™t forget those guys.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Two were lost going into Tinajitas, in that air assault, and the other two both were results of an ambush in the mounted move that we made to link up with those assault objectives. We had a ground convoy go out to each of the three of them, and there were a lot of snipers. Jerry Daves, Alejandro Manrique, James Taber, and I forgot the other one. I should never forget. I havenâ€™t forgot them. They live.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Forever.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Sir, your next operation, your next big operation after that was once Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Wait a minute.

Interviewer:

Okay.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I thought of the fourth.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Martin Denson.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Daves, Denson, Manrique, Taber.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

That's bad if I can't, if I ever - if I ever forget one of those names, come get me.

It's time for me to -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Okay. Now, what was that question?

Interviewer:

Sir, take a drink, sir. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yep.

Interviewer:

How much time did you have to prepare for that deployment?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, as I said, we'd been orienting toward the Middle East for 20 years. You could say we'd been preparing for this for 20 years.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. It had been a lot of the time while you were on the Pentagon Staff and Corps Staff?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah, I mean - yeah, the focus never changed for our Division. We're the first to go, and you know, we weren't going to go to Europe, the Middle East is where it - so. But in his wisdom, General Norm Schwarzkopf, the Central Command Commander, held a Command Post exercise called Internal Look in July of that year, 1990. He was located at Hurlburt Air Force Base, and all of the participants were at their, you know, wherever their stations are. I took my Command Post out to the most desert-looking place I could find on Fort Bragg, and we dug it in, and that's where we played from.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I don't know where Corps was - they were somewhere. But you know, all the players were there, Joint and mine. This is a major exercise. And we ended up employing forces in much the same area that we ended up finding ourselves a month later, in around Dhahran and Abqaiq, so that was a big, big help, doing that CPX, in terms of prep.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, once you began to deploy, did everything run smoothly, or were there any difficulties or unanticipated issues?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah, this is also probably worth noting, the way it happened. This is a true no-notice. Where's the Division Commander when the word came down on this one? I was at Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. I jumped in with the Third Brigade that was going through JRTC at the time. I was all the way at the other end of the drop zone, at night, in the middle of the night, it was 1 or 2:00, and I get this call. "You need to get in here now," and it was Jack Keane, who was commanding JRTC at the time. He already had a C-21. "Sir, you

need to get on that thing and get back to Bragg. By the time I got back, we were already six hours into the eighteen-hour -

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Notification. It's, you know, in that 18 hours, you do everything that enables you to be taking off at the end of that, to include the planning, preparation, the guidance, moving the ammunition out of the depots, contingency items out of the warehouse, all the stuff, and the troops into a marshalling area. Do all the briefings, rehearsals. It's a time-consuming process, but they're already six hours into it by the time I got there, which feigns, you know, they don't need me.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

But we started the airflow right away, because this was truly a no-notice.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

With the DRB-1, the Lead Ready Brigade, that happened to be the Second Brigade, Ron Rokus, 325 Airborne Infantry Regiment. They arrived in Dhahran Airport, and over a period of the next three weeks we deployed the entire Division - five hundred eighty-one C-141 equivalents to move twelve thousand six hundred troops. There were a hundred eighty-eight Humvee mounted TOWs, fifty-four Sheridans, an Aviation Task Force that included another eighteen Apaches, attack helicopters. As I said, our initial mission, of course, was enlodgement in and around the airfield at Dhahran in the port city of Ad-Dammam.

Our first task was to move about 150 kilometers north along the coast to Al Jubail, which was to be the arrival point for the Marine Corps, by both air and by sea. The Second Brigade moved up there, with the rest of the Division, I arrayed them along the high speed avenues approach in depth coming from Kuwait down to Dhahran, Ad-Dammam, Jubail halfway down. In depth, with a security screening force along the tap line road, using that anti-armor defense that I told you we started working on 20 years ago, when we got beefed up with TOES tanks.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Using those same - there's nothing new here. This has been developed by many great Americans over time, the SANDY MALLOYS and Jim Lindsays, John Foss, Fritz Kroesen - these are some great Americans - all American sixes. We had those kill zones, and in the desert, those high-speed approaches are pretty prominent. When you get off in a desert, you're down to going from 30 miles an hour to 2 miles an hour, 3 miles - you know, you don't move very - our concept was to force them to deploy, and once they deploy, we've got Artillery, we've got - in addition to direct-fire weapons, we've got attack helicopter and close air support from Air Force, Army, all available to do damage.

Now, there were six heavy Divisions sitting in Kuwait -

While they watched us move over there, move into position. They never moved south. Now, some critics will say, "82nd was nothing more than a speed bump." I think we were more than a speed bump. I personally believe, you know, that we were ready to fight.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

The point is that the President drew a line in the sand in Desert Shield, and he did it with a bayonet of an American Paratrooper.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Wow. How long was it before reinforcements began to arrive?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Thirty days. I mean, they're coming by ship.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. So for 30 days, you were -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And when they get off the ship, all those guns need to be boresighted. They've got to - you know, it takes another couple of weeks to crank them up and get them moving, and move them into position. But the 101 really, in mid-September, relieved us along the tap line road, of that security force, and eventually, the 24th MECH, of course, and the 101 occupied the bulk of that area. And I was asked to send a Brigade down to Abqaiq, where the strategic oil reserves were, the largest oil reserves in the world.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

So put a Brigade, the Second Brigade went down there in October, and then in early December, late November-early December, I was asked to send another Brigade to the capital city of Riyadh to protect, again, sites, facilities from a terrorist threat that they were facing there. But I stayed with the rest of the Division, and the First Brigade, and the bulk of our combat power, there in the Dhahran area, until during Desert Shield. Now, during this time, what we were doing, I mean, it's we were training - training our butts off, at every level. We built, we had ten ranges running at once, of every type you can imagine.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Doing live fire drills at Fire Team Squad Platoon level, breaching wire, clearing trench lines, clearing a house, rooms, all live fire, day and night. Eventually we also built a model Iraqi strong point in the desert, to their specifications, with 1,500 meters of barbed wire, and other trenches, and mines, that became a target objective for each of our Infantry Battalions, to go through as a Combined Arms exercise. And that's what we did, day and night, for September, October, November, going into December, when the air campaign started. The intent being to make our soldiers desert-tough.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I did not have any fratricide.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I didn't want to lose another Manrique. By the way, let me tell you a story about Alejandro Manrique.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

He was in the, I think it was the 2-504. We're in the marshalling area before the drop in Panama, and he's not an American citizen. He's from a South American country. I can't remember. I think he's from Venezuela, and his entire goal in life was to become an American citizen, and he knew that by jumping into combat, he automatically became a citizen that day, and he was running around telling everybody about that.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And 24 hours later, he fulfilled his dream, and also gave his life for his new country.

Interviewer:

Wow.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

That's Alejandro Manrique. Anyway, we're in Desert Storm.

Interviewer:

Right, sir. So when you're doing this training, you probably have very little restrictions on the amount of or the type of training you can do. This is probably a wonderful opportunity for a Division.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Oh yeah. There's nobody out there but Bedouins.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

There's nothing. We cleared it with the, you have to clear what you're going to do if you're shooting the place up, which we did, but we had large areas to - yeah, that's one thing about the desert, is it doesn't matter.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, as other units came in, what did the 82nd do once other units came in to reinforce? What did your Division do?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, that, like I said, we trained, 'cause they occupied all of the forward positions, and we were down in Abqaiq, we were in Riyadh and Dhahran, but we weren't up in the front, in the defense.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Now, as we transitioned to Desert Storm, we played a more prominent role there. It's - they started the air campaign, and under the cover of that air campaign, we moved the entire Division 750 miles to a tactical assembly area on the far western flank of the Coalition Forces. Far west, with the Sixth French Division. That move, 750 miles, by now it's over 16,000 troops, 'cause we kept picking up additional troops - other units, Guard units, Reserve units. Three thousand vehicles, over a hundred helicopters. And the Tank Battalion we moved by C-130, roll them on, roll them off, through the airfield up there. And once again, we got up there and hunkered down, and prepared for Desert Storm, and at this point, you know, people are starting to get serious. 'Cause up to now, all my troops keep coming up to me and saying, 'Sir, if we're not going to go to Baghdad, send us to Fort Bragg. This is getting old.' And it was getting old - four months in the desert - I can understand their - but anyway, now we're getting real, and with the Sixth French, we actually did the intelligence preparation of the battlefield in the zone of action. We were going to move north, which meant sending attack helicopters and Little Birds 100 miles deep to attack logistical sites to comms in the Artillery, heavy units. And we also did a lot of armed reconnaissance in the border area, both aerial and ground reconnaissance. And what we found is, as a result of that, that this is going to be a piece of cake, because they don't appear to have anything up there. It's, they've all left, and that's in fact what happened. The leaders left. They left some people there who provided token resistance. So once the ground war began, we moved north with the Sixth French to Al Salam, then turned east. The intent was to link up with Seventh Corps, but the Twenty-Fourth instead headed toward Basra, and we were sent in the Euphrates River valley to seize two air bases, Tallil and Jalibah, and that's where the war ended for us.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And how did you get there? Did you -

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

How'd we get there?

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

That's a good question. It all started with my ADC going to the Saudi Arabians and telling them, "I need 500 trucks," and that's what we got. I moved one Brigade by helicopter, and the other two were by truck and whatever organic vehicles we had.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yeah. No, they were civilian contractor trucks. Yeah, they weren't, they didn't belong to anybody's army, they were just trucks to move people.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Which they did, and they were brand new, and we paid a pretty price for it, I'm sure, but yeah, we found - and that's, in addition, that's I think or something like 375-400 miles, by the time we ended up in the Euphrates River valley. We moved quite a bit in that 100 hours. WE were on the move almost the whole time.

Interviewer:

Right.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And when the 100 hours was up, cease fire, we engaged in denial operations to destroy our remaining equipment, arms, munitions. Were also dealing with a lot of refugees and displaced persons coming out of Al-Nasiriyah and other places. It was really very sad, very pathetic, what we saw, but.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. How was the process of redeploying once the war was over?

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

You know, we went back to Dhahran, got on airplanes, and flew home, in an orderly fashion. I don't know who commanded for the order, but when our time came, there was no hesitation to get on that airplane.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Yep.

Interviewer:

Well sir, I apologize about skipping over your time as Commanding General of the First U.S. Army, and the stuff you did after leaving the military, but if you could, look back on your service and tell me what your service means to you.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Well, even after retiring, I have felt an obligation to try to help, and one of the things I decided in retirement is I did not want to hang around Fort Bragg as some kind of an icon that's going to be telling people how to suck eggs.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I did not want to be guilty of that. I saw too much of that. So I got as far away as I could get, where I wouldn't be tempted. But as time went along, you know, I spent some time in Croatia helping, and also over in the "Stans for the Secretary of Defense, Bill Perry, which is very enlightening, and some of the good that came out of that helped us get started in Afghanistan when that came along. 'Cause I was basically his personal - he had, Bill Perry had gone out there and, "I'm coming back. I'll be - " you know, he promised them everything. But then they said, "But sir, are you coming back?" He said, "No, but I'll send you a retired General Officer." Well, I don't know how he got to me, but that's what I did for about two and a half years. Every quarter or so, I'd fly over to one of those two, trying to do the same things we did for our Army.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

Build leadership development and non-commissioned officer - they don't have a Non-Commissioned Officer Corps, none of them do. You know, training, training management, command arms, but the other thing that I've been doing that's been important to me is continuing to maintain my connectivity with the 82nd as Honorary Colonel of the Regiment 505. If I get asked to speak, I'm there in a heartbeat. If I don't get asked, no problem.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I'm fine on the golf course at Fort Bragg. But I love to go up there and be with soldiers. And then coming up here, Fred Franks had asked us all back when he started the program for graduating Cadets to transition them into being Lieutenants. About 30 days out, he ran a Mission Command Seminar, and I came to 10 or 12. I had to come up till he got old, I guess. I got old. But I enjoy trying to pass on whatever experiences I've had that I think might be beneficial, and I was asked in this process by Franks, by Fred Franks, to - "Jim, before you start doing this, I want you to think back to your time as a Cadet, and tell me, what was it that was the biggest take-away from West Point that allowed you to have a successful career?"

No one ever asked me that. I never thought about that. You just asked me again, or words to that effect, so I did think about that. And the conclusion I came to, the biggest take-away is simple. It's duty, honor, country - the values, the value set, that can easily be extrapolated to Army values - duty, honor, integrity, loyalty, respect, courage, selfless service. Apply that to your personality, and you've got the basis for a leadership style and a command philosophy that I believe needs to be - every job I went into, I redid it because I learned, and every assignment I've had. Now, we've been through a bunch of stuff. I learned something every step along the way - every one.

And try to apply that to myself personally, which I hope will benefit those that are working for me, because I feel an obligation to them, first of all. Yeah, I want to please my boss, but my obligation's to the people that are working directly for me.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

And those values give us a moral compass, an ethical standard, and that makes decision-making so easy, if you apply those standards between right and wrong. And I think that's how a professional Officer should dedicate his career. I think he owes that not only to himself, but I think he owes it to his soldiers to inspire confidence in them in him, if nothing else, so.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Sir, this has been a fascinating interview, and thank you so much.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I don't know about that.

Interviewer:

Sir, it was wonderful. Thank you for sharing all your experiences with us.

LTG James Johnson, USA, Retired:

I think we finished on time, too.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.