

**David J. Kissick**  
**Veteran**

**Wayne Clarke**  
**NYS Military Museum**  
**Interviewer**

**Interviewed on**  
**March 25, 2015**  
**Knickerbocker Middle School**  
**Lansingburgh New York.**

**WC:** Today is the twenty-fifth of March 2015, we are at the Knickerbocker Middle School in Lansingburgh New York. I am the videographer, my name is Wayne Clark and I'm with the former Senator McDonald, Roy McDonald from Saratoga, New York.

**WC:** Sir for the record would you please state your full name and date and place of birth please.

**JK:** J. Kissick, born and raised Philadelphia, March 4<sup>th</sup> 1943.

**WC:** Welcome J. and thank you for your service to our country.

**JK:** You're welcome.

**WC:** Our program is designed to interview folks like yourself who have served our country in various wars. We're highlighting Vietnam right now, it's to show future generations that people who have served in these wars and protected their freedoms were just average people from across our great country and we're especially emphasizing our great state, New York. Can you tell us where you're from, where you were raised and where you live now, and what you've been doing with yourself?

**JK:** Born and raised Philadelphia, Catholic education at West Catholic High School 61, ran cross country, had a wonderful high school career, worked for the Philadelphia Inquirer for two years but then went back to college in 63, remained in college through 65-early 66 and I wasn't quite sure where I was headed. And I was actually sitting in the Horn and Hard Ice on Market Street in Philadelphia and there was a picture on the front page of the Philadelphia Inquirer of an army guy and his family, and he was getting the Medal of Honor from the president, and it connected me to the Vietnam War. Wasn't sure where I was going and decided to join the Marine Corps and I did that for three years. I didn't want to go too easy, I didn't want to go for 4 because I wasn't sure, so I went for 3 and before at Paris May of 1966-that's how it started.

**WC:** So you came to New York after your service right?

**JK:** I did and I was discharged in '69 and I called my folks when I came home, and these are pretty much quotes I told my dad I wanted to spend the rest of my life around 18 year old kids. During my service in Vietnam as a 25 year old sergeant, everybody else in my unit almost to a man was either 18 or 19 years old and I know it was quality about the war. I was 25, they were 18, they were 19, and I connected with them and we had a

great relationship and all those trials and tribulations we went through. We learned about each other and I decided literally I was going to spend the rest of my life around 18 year old kids. I pulled it off for 35 years. Now 15 years as a coach and teacher at LaSalle, and 20 years as a school administrator relation for Facebook.

**WC:** And that's in troy-

**JK:** It's in troy

**WC:** And you live up in Saratoga County?

**JK:** Now we live in, Janice and I, we met in that summer of '69 that I was talking about and we have been together now for some 46 years. We married 42 years ago, we have a son Adam who is now 34 years old, has got a wonderful wife Christy, and I've been a blessed man ever since I was born.

**WC:** Kind of interesting, your career afterwards, you've obviously become a community leader and a success. I think a lot of the young people who don't know a lot about Vietnam would be interested you know? They think of the marines, you guys sit in the beach right off the bat, that's got a tremendous reputation and the public is very proud. Tell us about your experience: how you got there, and what's your military occupational status, or what your MOS was, and you know maybe the first times that you got involved with the North Vietnamese Army, or the VC, and some of the geographic locations you were in Vietnam.

**JK:** I went through that from the beginning to the end of what you just talked about, I could talk probably three or four hours but to make it more concise, out of boot camp September '67 I received an assignment to go to San Diego California for a year to be a radio relay technician and that's what I did in San Diego for a year. I was taught how to set up radio relay sites for different units in a field. October 19<sup>th</sup> 1967 off to Vietnam. I have a diary at home that no one has seen but myself- page one says 'I hope my experiences here at Vietnam and I perform well and I'm not responsible for any marine getting killed on my watch.' That was September, we stayed at a place called Camp Evans about 15 miles below the DMZ for about three months. September, October, November, basically we set up sites for troops going into the field. We take units out to the field, track 27 units, line of sight communication between those in a bush and whether it be denying, or what have you. December we were told we were going to go up through a place called Camp Carroll. Christmas Eve of '67 Colonel Dick invited us into his bunker, so to speak, and we had juice and cookies and it was a wonderful experience and then a couple weeks later we took one of the choppers up to Carrol and we spent January, February, March, April, May at Carol and everybody knows by now that an offensive blew a hole from the DMZ down to Saigon and every place in between. I have paper here that's a daily log of our whole unit from the time we got off the plane in October 19<sup>th</sup> to the time we left in October. I can give you the daily log of everyday events and some bad, some good, and what I recall mostly.

**WC:** Tell us: the first time in combat some of the people you were with, go through that whole process but tell us the whole image in your mind of what was occurring.

**JK:** The whole image in my mind is focused on the guys I was with and whether it was Spivey from Tennessee, or Knowles from Binghamton, New York, or Viola from DC, or Derfy (?) from Binghamton, New York, or Carl is Seattle. I've connected with these guys because of the internet. Carl, one the guys in our unit, his wife convinced him to put together a website. We have a great, great website for our unit and it's got a whole role call and you hit on every name and there's hundreds and hundreds of pictures of each of us during our tours through Vietnam.

**WC:** Now these guys were with you in the combat?

**JK:** They were with me for 8-10 months, like I said earlier we left Evans late December up to Camp Carroll. January 20<sup>th</sup> was the Tet offensive started and we found out later- we didn't know this during January, February, March in connection with Tet offensive whose Khe Sanh, and we were about 12 miles from Khe Sanh and we found out later in May and June that there were approximately 50,000 NVA troops between the DMZ, Khe Sanh, and our unit and we got hit every night, not so much like on Khe Sanh, on Khe Sanh I was probably getting 800, 900 rounds a night- if we got 50 or 60 or 70 we thought that was a lot and as anyone that served in the military or in combat knows, there's nothing like the sound of a 122 coming in. It's with me today.

**WC:** Now explain what a 122 is

**JK:** Ok a 122 is a rocket, Russian made, and it's about six and a half feet tall, it's about that round and when it impacts on the ground it's like a freight train going over your head or through your head and you just prayed every time that they were- you had about three seconds, it went off across the DMZ because we were that close and you had maybe two seconds, three seconds to either get as low as you can or you were going to die. And in some cases- I mean the worst case scenario was February 1968 we were filling sandbags because we had been getting hit the past 3 or 4 weeks and we wanted to get deeper, we wanted to get higher, we wanted to get more secure, were filling sandbags, filling sandbags. Richard Roberts, 19 years old came over he said I know where to get more sandbags. I said 'stay right here.' He said 'I know where to go, I'll be ok Sarge' and to this day I'll never forget the fact that I grabbed him by the collar and I said 'Richard come here and get your ass over there and do your thing, get back here I'm going to count to ten. You get back here right away.' He left, and within five seconds we got hit really badly with 122. Richard was severed.

**WC:** What do you mean by severed?

**JK:** His body got cut in two with the 12. I was best man and Bob knows his writing when we came back. I still see Bob, and I talked to Bob, and I cooked when we had a reunion down in DC, but Bob had to go over and identify through the dog tags Richard's body. He actually had one dog tag attached to his boot which our Colonel Miller- great guy, Colonel Miller, we all had to put a dog tag on our boot in case you got hit just like Richard did and it probably took me 25 years to be able to say Richard's name without breaking down- he was 19 years old. And I thought for 40 years that I was the last guy to talk to Richard and as I found out through the computer through talking to these guys that I wasn't. Richard went to one of the guys over here and wanted him to go with him

and the guy said he wasn't going anywhere because we were safe right here we thought, and he wasn't going to go so that guy has been in and out of the VA hospital for 40 some-odd years because he declined to go with Richard, and Richard of course got hit five seconds later by the 122 but all these guys were connected. We talk to each other via the internet. February 19<sup>th</sup>, like I said 25 years I was crying inside. I've talked to the kid- the kid he's 65 years old now and he said he didn't sleep for about 2 or 3 years, 2 or 3 hours straight a night because of that experience in February 19<sup>th</sup>. And all through February, all through March, all through April until temp was basically subsided a little bit. We got hit every night and it was, it was the end of the world every time a rocket came in, whether it was one rocket or 100 rockets on February 19<sup>th</sup> and February 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> it was terrible and then July we moved to Kowloon. I was washing my clothes in rover in Callao, swatting mosquitoes all over the place, and three days later I got the chills and Sergeant Boyd looked at me and he says 'you got malaria' and I did you see my temperature got to 104. Cortman called the chopper I'm at home, not home, I went down to Phu Bai, I stayed there for 3 hours, a plane came in and took me into Denang and I stayed in Denang getting ice packs and water baths- ice water baths for three days trying to get the temperature down after the USS repose for 49 days. USS propose is a hospital ship there

**WC:** Now where was that located?

**JK:** That was just off of- we went out of Denang South China Sea and during those 49 days with my luck we had two typhoons. One in South China Sea and the breeze weren't throwing up, when they got aboard ship they were throwing up there.

**WC:** How long were you on that ship?

**JK:** I was on the ship for 49 days, I lost 33 pounds- and a couple weeks before, actually I was supposed to rotate back to the world, because I had blood taken out, I'm not going to say every day but every other day- blood count, blood count, and still bad, still bad. I gained some weight back and the doctor came in, navy guy and he said 'I'm going to send you back to your unit' and I said 'ok.' So I'm back at my unit and I was there for about two and a half weeks and I rotated back to the world.

**WC:** So after your month on the medical ship they turned around and sent you back to your unit for two weeks?

**JK:** They did.

**WC:** Did you take your malaria pills?

**JK:** You know I was the only one- I swear I was the only one- who did take the malaria pills. Like I said before I was 25, I was a sergeant, they were 18 they were different PFCs, they were lance corporals, and I wanted to set an example, I wanted to make sure that they knew that you were supposed to take the pills. I took the pills and I got malaria.

**WC:** Any residual effects from the malaria?

**JK:** For the first year and a half back, chills that continued for a while at the VA hospital in Philly, they gave me some medications and after about two years it was out of my

system, totally out of my system. If you wondered anything about the Tet offensive it was general Jap GI AP and he's the same general that organized the NVM Phi in 1954 with the French then he came across the DMZ in 68 he was the same guy we restrict- not offensive

**WC:** Did you have any of your friends or any of the guys from your unit participate in that

**JK:** In the sense that we would send out different- I would send out their fee, id send out moles, id send out a villa and we would go out to a hill and we could chop it out to a hill and set up this website

**WC:** Those were individuals

**JK:** Yeah sure they were guys in my unit and we had to track 27s and we had the parabolic antennas and we have site communication with the 26 marines, with the fourth marines, different units going out into the bush and I remember the first time I had to take a track 27 out to the unit in the field I was sitting in the chopper, had the union, had the helmet, had the h-16, the whole bit and the guy said 'you don't want to sit there' one of the guys on the chopper said so I'm going to go over here and eventually under the chopper went like this and I was looking right down at rice paddies and saying 'thank you' to the guy who told me not to sit there I would've fell right down.

**WC:** Did you have communications with your family back in the United States?

**JK:** I had- I'm not going to bring them all in but I had- to this day I have a hundred and some odd letters that my family sent to me in Vietnam. I read them periodically and obviously the most painful one is always your mom and I'm going to read this just for a second because it says everything that the families back home- they were the ones who suffered more than we did because we knew when we were safe

**WC:** What did your mother say?

**JK:** we knew when we were having a beer, or playing poker, or laughing or whatever. Families don't know that when veterans go off to war. 'God will have- God will have your back this big time David, beautiful world again soon and it has been men like you David, and all your young men that you make possible for us to enjoy. Good luck to you, Bobby, Tony, Jim, Durfee, and all the guys in your unit who are taking care of the world. God bless you.' I got these probably about once or twice a month from my mom she was wonderful but I save all these letters.

**WC:** Did you have a girlfriend back then?

**JK:** I did not. I did not have a girlfriend. My mom sent me- we used to get the iced tea boxes of rum balls soaked in rum obviously, and there's a picture of the box my mom used to send me about once a month. And they were rum balls and every time I got one of these the hooch was crowded for the whole night because we just sat around and ate them because they had some rum in it. And then almost every 3 weeks my dad would send me a bottle of j and b and it was wrapped in electrical tape with a towel around it and it had newspapers around it and as soon as that came in that quart bottle would

probably last about a day and a half and that was it. Communications from home was wonderful you notice-

**WC:** So many people have told us that it's nice to hear, it's so important. Where did you go for your R and R?

**JK:** I was scheduled to go to Manila and I was supposed to go late July, early August and of course, like I said before July 19<sup>th</sup> like I could die of malaria and I never got to go home.

**WC:** So you never went home?

**JK:** Well my buddies, my buddies from Nam, they did this day. We meet periodically down in DC and they say to this day this is the longest R and R of anybody because he went to the hospital and he had clean sheets and he wasn't getting shot at.

**WC:** You know it's nice to see you have an interaction with your colleagues, your buddies, you have any funny stories you might want to share with us that we can say?

**JK:** Well I don't know if it's funny but we were taking home and we were in Demine and the plane was on the tarmac and there was the 707 and there's about 125 marines and we were going home and we were lined up and the plane was there and we were going home and I'm right behind Bob Mol's and he turns around and says 'Christ were in trouble.' I said Bob we thought we made it we thought we were going home maybe and he says 'turn around.' And I turn around and there were seven sailors coming out, dress whites and had the envelopes and they had emergency leave and this captain of the Marine Corps walks up and he goes from the back of the line he goes 'one, two three..' You seven marines go back inside you're not going home today. And I was one of the seven so I had to spend another day in Nam and I knew from reading and movies and whatever they make stories about this stuff but we got bumped from our flight leaving Nam and we had to wait the next day. And the air force- god bless the air force, I think c-130 going back to Okinawa the next day and they took the seven of us in an empty c-130 and they gave us breakfast, they gave us coffee, they gave us racks, and it was just a wonderful tour back to Okinawa. But Bob Doles is the same guy that I was best man at his wedding in either '72 or '73. We came out of a bunker one time and we were going- I don't know where we were going but we stopped about 20 feet from the bunker and Bob said 'why is it so quiet' and all of a sudden more rockets started coming in and we had missed, for some reason, the two rockets came in and we didn't know it and everyone else was back in a bunker, back in a hole, and here we are standing there in broad daylight getting rocketed. I forget what Bob had in his hand but he threw it up like that and to this day I can still see slow motion going through the air and then he and I back in a bunker and we stayed there for the rest of the attack with the rockets. My 25<sup>th</sup> birthday, we had a big party, I sent somehow got a bottle of 190-proof and we had some orange juice and 190 and we celebrated my 25<sup>th</sup> birthday and my boys gave me a Zippo cigarette lighter and it had 'grandfather' on it. United States Marine Corps Vietnam 1968, and it had grandfather on it! They were 18, I was 25, and to them I was a grandfather. And I held that lighter obviously all through Nam and I came home and my

dad passed away when he was 81, 1992. Just before I closed the casket, I took that Zippo lighter and I slid it in his pocket so I always know where that Zippo lighter is with my father right now. Who served in Europe by the way, he was a medic in Europe '44 or '45 so that's the family tradition with regard to the military my brother was in the air force, my father was in the army, I was in the Marine Corps.

**WC:** With your time over there did you have the opportunity to interact with the Vietnamese population?

**JK:** the only interaction we had was that they would wash our clothes. If we ever got the time to go out it's just either to the fence. I know a lot of guys went to the fence just to get some dope. I know three guys I name in particular that I know for a fact never smoked dope over here, never did the marijuana, it was Knowles and Veal and Kissings, for whatever reason. I wasn't going to do it because I never did anyway, to this day I've never had a joint and smoked a joint or whatever because then I was in charge and like I said I wasn't going to be high, I wasn't going to be drunk, I wasn't going to be this if we got hit and somebody died and I was whatever. But both Knowles and I would go out and maybe give some clothes to the village people and they would wash them and you'd bring them back like two days later and they'd be nice and washed and cleaned or whatever.

**WC:** Did you ever have a chance to go into the villages as you were travelling to see how they live?

**JK:** Only in a sense of convoys going up highway 1 from Danang, first up to camp Evans- first well we flew into Phu Bai in September '67 but then we took the convoys up from Phu Bai up to Evans and then to Carrol and they're in Choppers or the convoy and I do know that I got some bad looks a couple times on some of the convoys when some of the Marines would shoot at the water buffalo- just wasn't my character I don't know why they were doing it but I'm not too proud of the fact that I kept my mouth shut, instead of saying something about 'hey don't do that, that's their livelihood.' And they didn't give a crap they just shot at them anyway.

**WC:** How were race relations over there?

**JK:** It's funny you ask that because we were there when Martin Luther King was killed in April of '68, we were there when Kennedy got killed in June of '68, we had a couple of African Americans in our unit and those in our unit, there was never any animosity, there was never any hate, there was never any ill will for all the right reasons because you were in it together. Clark, he was black and he was lucky man, he was the coolest dude in the world and to this day we still joke when I see my buddies that we never saw our Clark smile the whole time we were there. Talk about race relations, I know in '64, in this is they're missing in action '64 I was waiting for a trolley car in South Philly and I got jumped and I got beat up by four African Americans outside and they put the boots to me- the whole bit and then fast ahead about four, five years I'm in Vietnam and I got Malaria and I couldn't stand up and getting to the chopper were four guys on each end of the stretcher and four African Americans were carrying me. So I had the juxtaposition

of the four guys kicking my butt in '63 and then in '68 these four African Americans and the two guys behind me, they were so, so, positive about taking care of Sarge, 'we'll make sure he's okay' and race relations were good except when Martin Luther King got killed you could see people look at each other, you could see people and I know some guys who didn't come out of the bumpers for a couple days because they weren't quite sure who was going to do the shootings.

**WC:** How about the officers that's a question?

**JK:** Carl Miller

**WC:** Was the last year a local officer or not?

**JK:** Carl Miller was our unit commander and he was the absolute best. He put me up for a small award and won the rights out offensive, we wanted to make sure the bunker was really secure so we stole a twelve by twelve from the Seabees, and it was huge, it was a big twelve by twelve, installed it and we did quarter it and we wanted to make our bunkers secure. And the Seabees come over and they were- and this tenant was really getting honest about stealing this twelve by twelve and colonel miller came upon the scene and said 'what's going on here' and 'your marine stole this twelve by twelve.' And colonel miller man, he was so cool, he said 'I don't see any twelve by twelve, who the hell are you, leave my marines alone. And that was his character. He came in one night and I said 'how many rounds did we take today sir' and he said 'don't worry about it caisson it took twelve hundred.' And we were, like I said 12 miles from caisson. But the colonel miller was the best. He taught me lot, and it's all about character.

**WC:** Now is he still living, do you know?

**JK:** I have no idea, no idea.

**WC:** Well it sounds like you really keeping in touch with some of the people.

**JK:** Because of the computer world, we're connected now. That website- the headquarters company Fourth Marines Corps, I think I told you before there's a couple thousand scriptures on there, each of us have a story and Carl has put together a website on that site that has everything about Agent Orange if you want the connection about the veterans organizations, where to get help, where to go if you need help, and it's a classic website. Actually, other people across the country are hitting on it. It's so well done, and that was Carl out in Seattle.

**WC:** Your experience in the three years in the military and of course with the marines in Vietnam, did that have an impact afterwards when in your decision to go into the world of education and teaching, and coaching and then being the principal?

**JK:** It's the only reason I went into the education field

**WC:** Do you think that the discipline or the experience or the work ethic carried over?

**JK:** Obviously with the Marine Corps discipline and the work ethic that I had instilled in me from my mom and dad first to begin with, but then with the Marines Corps, the

discipline, I was an athlete in high school. I was a captain of the 1960 cross country championship in Philadelphia- old city. But I was disciplined to begin with but like I said before when I came back from Nam I told my folks 'I'm spending the rest of my life around kids, eighteen year old guys.' And I knew I could connect with them because I did it in Nam and they listened to me and they were respectful and they bonded and that's how I went into education. And it was, it's a journey that continues. I'm still supervising later today I'll be in a classroom with the second graders, I'll be up at Burnt Hills and I'm still doing education for all the right reasons. Life is too short, and if you miss today, you're not getting it back.

**WC:** Is there any other points you want to make before we conclude?

**JK:** I just want to say thank you to everybody that's helping the veterans- yourself, Wayne, toy, and terry and all the guys that didn't come home and if we could ever somehow get to the point where we welcome home- this is the little piece this was set outside my house. I have a photo of this at home. My brother put this together for me the night I came home from Nam. Picked up at the airport, James Shields was there, Brady was there, Hanson was there, a posse was there, McGovern was there, Keenan was there, I was there we just had a celebration when I came home. But 'welcome home' and that's the welcome home that we didn't get when we came home back in the day.

**WC:** Hopefully the new exhibits going into the New York State Military Museum will help New Yorkers welcome home all the people they get coming home from these wars. I'm going to have you pull those photos up but somehow I just lost the clarity...If you could hold up those photos right in front of you.

**JK:** This is just a photo of Kowloon River, probably July 16<sup>th</sup> 1968, a couple days later I was probably chipped down with malaria. I was 116 degrees there, 110 degrees wherever it was. This is back in Camp Lejeune. As I referenced earlier, colonel miller put me up for a commendation medal only because he thought I did a good job with regards to all the communication for the innocent Vietnam. I'm most proud of this, it's a citation and it's not the brightest star, it's not a purple heart, it's not anything like that and it's just a statement that during my time, 'skillfully supervised the installation and maintenance of all radio relay sites, thereby enhancing the communication support capability of the sections. Diligence seemingly unlimited easy Australia, took care of his unit as a sergeant with success to any professional ability combat beat.' I did my job, I think I did it well, and I just hope that people learn from this exchange. Thank you.

**WC:** Thank you, we appreciate it.