James Malcolm Brown
Narrator

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New York State Military Museum
Interviewers

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INT: This is an interview at the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York, on the eleventh of January two thousand eight at approximately 9:30am. The interviewers are Mike Russert and Wayne Clarke. Could you give me your full name, date of birth, and place of birth, please?
JB: James Malcolm Brown; August 11, 1946, and I was born in Troy, New York.

INT: What was your educational background prior to entering service?
JB: I had graduated from Fort Ann (?) Central High School in Fort Ann (?), New York, and I'd had one year of aviation training at the Academy of Aeronautics in Flushing Meadows, New York.

INT: Did you enlist or were you drafted?
JB: I enlisted. At the time I joined, the Marine Corps wasn't drafting. As I recall, I think the first Marine Corps draftees were coming in to boot camp just as we were finishing up boot camp. That would have been late 1965.

INT: So when did you go in to service?
JB: October 1965 I arrived at Parris Island.

INT: Why did you decide to enlist, and why did you pick the Marines?
JB: Family background and history, primarily, on the Brown side of the family. I had an uncle that was actually what they called a China Marine in World War II. He did all the island hopping, et cetera, and he was seriously wounded at one of the landings. His brother–my father–was a Marine aviator. He flew in the end of World War II as a radar operator in F7F Tigercats, and then he flew in Korea in F3D Skyknights as a radar operator. He and his pilot, who was his commanding officer, went down together. They were listed as missing in action until the end of the war.

INT: So you went to Parris Island for basic. How long were you there?

JB: I think training at that time was about ten weeks, and of course when we finished Parris Island, we went to Camp Geiger in June for infantry training, as all Marines are supposed to be riflemen. I had a little bit of leave and went to Jacksonville, Florida for twenty-two weeks of aviation electrician school.

INT: Did you enlist for that school, or did they give that to you based on your application?
JB: I wanted the aviation guarantee, which I got based on testing scores. What my specialty would be, they determined, basically on their needs and slots that were open. I had hoped originally to be an aircraft mechanic, and maybe get on helicopters and gun crews and stuff, but for some reason I must have scored well enough that they sent me to the AE school instead, which turned out to be a pretty good deal actually. Then after that, I was assigned…

INT: Let me just ask, what was that school like? Was there a lot of discipline like you had in basic training, or was it kind of a relaxed, school training like atmosphere?
JB: I recall it was semi relaxed. We still had to follow all of the disciplinary expectations of the military, but it wasn't like in boot camp. We were free to move around and go on liberty and stuff like that.

INT: But the course was pretty intense, isn't it?
JB: The course was very intense. It was twenty-two weeks, and that was just basic aviation electronics; it didn't necessarily train you for any specific aircraft. That came later when you were assigned to a squadron.

INT: Was most of it classroom work, or out in the field doing actual…
JB: Most of it was classroom work with mock up boards and stuff, and testing of general systems, nothing real specific.

INT: When were you assigned to a unit?
JB: As soon as the AE training was over, our next set of orders assigned us to a unit. I was sent to VMAW-533, the Knighthawks at North Carolina, Cherry Point.

INT: What was it?
JB: It was called VMAW-533, the Knighthawks. The VMA is simply a fixed-wing Marine tack; the AW was all-weather, and then 533 was the unit designation. We were immediately incorporated into the squadron for the beginnings of some on the job training, limited of course because it was a specific aircraft. The squadron then later, short time after that, sent the newer people up to the Naval Air Station at Oceana in Virginia, Virginia Beach. We got specific training in our aircraft, which was the VA-6A Intruder. When that was done, we went back to the squadron.

INT: How long was that training?
JB: I can't remember exactly, but that wasn't real long. That was more like, probably six weeks or something like that. It was just specialized systems for our area. The Intruder was extremely complex. It was the most advanced thing they really had at the time, and it involved computers and a bunch of stuff. Where most previous squadrons with other aircraft had an electronic or avionics shop that did everything, the Intruder was so complex that you had three distinct avionics shops. You had an electric shop, which I was a part of. You had fire control and navigation, and the computer section.

INT: So that section was separate?
JB: There was fire control, which was computers. There was what we called com-nav, communication navigation; they did radios and things like that. The basic electrics, which I was in, we did all the instrument systems, fuel systems, lighting, anything that wasn't computer or radio involved. We had a tremendous number of systems, autopilots, a ton of equipment on that aircraft for basic AE. It was just so complex that it took three distinct shops to work on it.

INT: Were you kept pretty busy?
JB: Yeah, they were a high maintenance aircraft–very good, extremely good aircraft, though. Rugged, durable, tremendous bay load, two man plane with a pilot and a radar, or a bombardier navigator they would call them. I prefer radar since my father was a radar operator, so that would have been a sort of comparable job. They flew side by side rather than one behind the other, which you see in the Phantoms, F4 Phantoms, and [unclear] fighters, so it was a side by side aircraft, which made it kind of unique. Very complex.

INT: Did you get to go up at all?
JB: Never got the opportunity to fly in one. I taxied in them. One of our things was the compass system. We think of the computers, but they have a standby compass in there that has to be what we call swung in line every now and then. That's done in what they call compass rose, where you lock one wheel in and rotate the plane. That was always in a distant part of the airfield, and if you had to swing compasses you'd get to taxi around in them and stuff. We knew all the things to get it off the ground. That was part of my systems, engine systems and stuff. I doubt we ever could have got one back down though [laughs]. That would have been a little bit tough.

INT: What would you say were most of your problems that you encountered with them?
JB: A lot of autopilot system problems, just they needed adjustments. They would always get out of whack. A lot of the engine instruments had to be changed around pretty frequently—lighting systems especially. Probably one of the biggest problems we had was the fuel systems registering properly. They could get out of

whack, and of course you've got to know what you have for fuel up there. I remember one problem in particular we had with one aircraft where it would get up to altitude and be flying, and all of a sudden the fuel gauges would just run to zero. They knew they had fuel, but of course they didn't know if they had a leak or something else was going on. They had to bring that plane back. We worked on that plane for close to a month, I think. It still flew once we realized it wasn't actually a fuel leak. It shouldn't have–it was technically a down gripe–but we were also in a combat zone and they needed aircraft. We would work on it on sort of off hours, when they weren't flying it. It was a long haul. Two of us, myself and another Marine, worked with the head tech rep on that plane for close to thirty days before we could find out what was wrong with it. We checked systems over and over and over again. Every inch of wire, every connector, pulled out a few probes out of the main tanks, everything. We couldn't find it because we couldn't duplicate the gripe on the ground. As soon as the plane would land, everything came back up to normal. It happened at like twenty thousand feet or something, and we would figure, we used to actually have jacks for the plane, but we used to joke that unfortunately we didn't have any twenty thousand foot jacks to get it up there. It turned out it was something that was caused by vibration in the aircraft, and of course as soon as it landed, the ground would absorb the excess vibration. It was nothing but a fuel probe that was in one of the main tanks, and it ran between two wire tubes. With the vibration it would rub against those tubes, and eventually it wore the coating off of the probe and it would short out. But it was nothing much more than a scratch, a small scratch. We finally, for like the third time, pulled the probe and actually got a magnifying glass out and just went down the whole probe until we found this and said, "That's gotta be it." We changed the probes out and it was fixed. I'm sure it was not comfortable for the pilots when they would take that aircraft someplace, because if you did get hit and have a leak, you wouldn't necessarily know it. I gave them a lot of credit. We had some good pilots–some great pilots–and bombardier navigators, and they were definitely mission oriented.

INT: When did you go over to Vietnam?
JB: My unit deployed as a unit in March of 1967. When we first checked into Cherry Point from the AE school, the first question we were asked was, "Have you been to Vietnam yet?" Of course the answer was no, and the guy said, "Okay, you guys are going to the VMA-533." They sent a bunch of us there because they were already I guess on the rolls to go. They were firming up and training the people, and they were designated to go. And we did. We went in March of '67, the whole unit packed up using two or three C-141 Starlifters of our personnel and equipment. We went from Cherry Point to Alaska to Japan and right into Chu Lai–boom, boom, boom, boom. All we did was stop to refuel. We had twelve aircraft in the squadron. They left Cherry Point, did a cross-county flight, Hawaii and Philippines and that bit with three C-130s. There was a lead C-130, and there was a tail 130 and another one that carried spare parts. They would sort of leap

frog and fix them as they went across country. We actually had–it's within the Marine Corps documents–one of the most successful transpacs (?) ever made. We arrived in Vietnam with twelve aircraft and an up status ready to go.

INT: How many were in your unit?
JB: I was counting in a cruise book the other day, and I think I came up with right around three hundred—counting pilots, bombardier navigators, and all the support personnel—about three hundred people.

INT: What was it like, what was your impression as soon as you got into Chu Lai?
JB: [Chuckles] It was hot. We left in March from the east coast in North Carolina with fairly cool temperatures. Almost a direct flight and we got off the plane and it was like a hundred ten, a hundred twenty degrees [laughs]. It was very hot, very bright and sunny. Confusing. I mean, we just landed in this airfield; we didn't know anything about it, where it was. It took me months I think to even realize we were at the south end of the field. [Chuckles] I kept thinking we were at the north end, for some reason. There's no orientation there, per se. The base was small, by comparison, to a place like Da Nang or airports around Saigon.

INT: Was it an established Marine base at that time?
JB: [Nods] Chu Lai was a Marine airbase originally. The Marines, I think they landed there in 1965. They actually came ashore the old-fashioned way and scoped out the base and built it. Ironically, a friend of mine from high school, who was a little bit older than myself, had gone into the Marines and he was a forced recon man. He was one of the ones who made the landing to set up the base that I would actually wind up at [laughs] a few years later. It had a main airstrip–full-fledged airstrip. The initial airstrip was just one of the old [unclear – sats?] matting, the metal plank that they used to put down. It was a very short airstrip, the original one, and they flew A-4 Skyhawks out of that. It was so short that the Skyhawks actually had to use the old JATO, the Jet Assisted Take-Off bottles to take-off. By the time I got there, they had a full-fledged runway and crosswinds runway in there. It was in full operation. They had Phantom outfits. At the north end of the field were all the fighters; at the south end of the field were all the attack aircraft, which at that time really were all A-4 Skyhawks. We were the only A-6 Intruder squadron at Chu Lai, and we had a sister squadron up in Da Nang–VMAW-242 "Bats". The "Bats", that's what they called themselves.

INT: What were living conditions like there? Where did you stay, your food, and so on?
JB: When we first got there, we didn't have a place to stay. They weren't expecting us for some reason quite that early. The squadron we were replacing hadn't left, so we actually slept in a–I call it an old grass hooch. It was a building they had set up for recreation. It was the thatched grass with the roof and everything, and slab concrete floor. We used to sleep in there in that until the

other squadron left. We'd go down in the daytime and work on developing our area where the hangar was going to be. Once we got into quarters, our quarters were the standard–we called it standard–they were just plywood hooches. They had a metal roof, plywood sides with screening on them, and they were wide open inside and you would just put your people in there. Initially we slept on cots. Later we manufactured ourselves some bunkbeds out of scrap materials and stuff. Marines have always been good at improvising, I guess, they used to tell us. We did a lot of that, scrounging parts and all the other things that had to be done. We had a pretty good mess hall. It was limited but it was actually prepared food at least at the airbase. If you happened to catch a stint of extra duty, as I did a couple of times, when you were with the group guard on the perimeter at nighttime or something out there, you would either get sea rations or they would bring out hot food in big tin canisters.

INT: So you had to serve security also?
JB: Yeah, I think there were two Marine air groups. I was in MAG-12, which was the attack group. I'm not sure of the number of the other one, may have been MAG-13. It was the fighter group. Each Marine air group was responsible for some perimeter control at nighttime. The MAG-12 air group was made up of a handful of personnel from each squadron, and the other part of it was made up of Marine grunts that were being given a break in essence really. They were being brought back maybe out of the bush someplace to recuperate or be given a break, and their duty would be to man that perimeter at night with us. They supplied the bulk of it, and we supplied the additional people. It usually was a couple of weeks duty if you happened to draw that. You went out at night and sat in bunkers out on the listening posts beyond the wire. I usually was on a machine gun bunker, which rotated as a listening post so we'd have a three man team. One would get a chance to sleep; one would be on top of the bunker with an M-60 machine gun; and the third person would be out on the listening post beyond the wire. We would rotate every few hours so every man got a chance to do each thing. Most of the other holes were two-man holes, but the machines guns for three had the listening posts. That was an interesting time. When you're used to the security of the airbase itself, sitting out on the perimeter after dark and being stuck on a listening post–for an air wing person–it was a different experience.

INT: Were there ever any incidents or any contact with the enemy?
JB: We never had any direct assaults. Our base was more prone to be occasionally mortared or rocketed, sometimes just for harassment fire, and sometimes seriously. I went over in '67; I did a thirteen month tour and a six month extension, and so I was there for the Tet Offensive. We really got nailed on the second night of the Tet Offensive. We lost our hangar. One of the people from my shop that I worked with constantly had his arm taken off by a piece of shrapnel, but we didn't lose any aircraft–not even damaged. We said it was the second night, and since we were expecting it on the second night we flew our

missions that day and then we evacuated the aircraft to Thailand after they completed their mission so they weren't there at nighttime. They'd fly back in during the day and we'd work on them, and they'd go back out, fly the missions, and go back to Thailand until we felt secure there. We did have two aircraft on the ground that couldn't fly at the time, but the revetments–the steel revetments that they had to protect them–absorbed any of the shrapnel that wound up in their direction. We were eventually able to get those planes back up and flying too. The Tet Offensive, though, damaged, it totally destroyed our hangar and had to be rebuilt. It just came down. The last rocket of the night hit the bomb dunk, which was just beyond our area, and it set off a huge sympathetic explosion. Actually it was the concussion from that explosion that ripped this steel girded hangar down to the ground. It damaged a couple more seriously enough that they had to be replaced, for the other squadrons on the line. Concussion was just amazing, absolutely amazing.

INT: When were most of the flights by the Intruders, during the day or at night?
JB: We flew around the clock, but the serious missions usually were at nighttime. Just about every night we had aircraft going up to Hanoi and Haiphong and the Ho Chi Minh Trail–some of the real high risk areas. We lost a few crews over the period. Overall, for the number of missions we flew, we did very well in that area. I know we had at least two airmen, one crew–two man crew–that was lost and were returned as prisoners of war in 1973.

INT: Did you know that crew personally?
JB: I knew the people, yeah. We were familiar with most of the pilots and bombardier navigators. The relationship between officers and enlisted men is always a little bit different in the air wing than it is in the infantry because you see them a lot. There aren't as many of them and they're always in these aircrews and you're working with them on the aircraft. They also know that they're dependent on you for their safety when they're flying. They did the risky part of the business, as we looked at it, and I have nothing but admiration for those crews. But as I said, it was a high maintenance plane and to keep those planes flying, it was a lot of maintenance hours.

INT: How many hours would you say for a plane, for each hour it was in the air, how much maintenance, approximately?
JB: I don't know exactly, but I would say it's easily over a hundred hours of maintenance between the different jobs, definitely. There are just so many different systems in there. You've got people working on ejection seats. You've got metalsmiths working on the aircraft damage. You've got the hand support people working on computers once they're drawn out of the plane. Mostly what we did was troubleshoot and locate things. In the electric shop, if it was a wiring problem, we would fix the wires and the connectors and stuff, but a lot of our equipment ran through computers as well–air navigation computers and things

like that. If the problem was in there, we didn't fix those directly in the squadron. We'd just pull the boxes, replace them, and send the boxes out to our support unit, which would repair them and do the internal work and get them back to you. We would do a lot of the troubleshooting aspect of it, but everywhere there were ordinance people just to load the bombs and stuff onto the aircraft. It was a big job because it would carry so many.

INT: How large was the bomb load?
JB: Standard.

INT: Could you show us in a photograph?
JB: Sure [leans forward to rummage through photographs, then holds one up]. This would be an early version of an A-6 Intruder, early model, and that one's carrying twenty-eight, five hundred pound bombs, which would be a standard load for an Intruder if it was doing close air support and something like that. Now if it was going up north, it would usually carry some drop tanks, so you would lose part of your load, but it could carry just about anything–two hundred fifty pound bombs, obviously twenty-eight of those. We did carry those on occasion. Those were good for close air support because the shrapnel range was a little bit less and you didn't want to be hitting your own people. The two fifties and five hundreds were very common. We could carry seven fifties, we carried thousand pounders, two thousand pounders for [unclear] heavy complex bunkers. It was called a heavy hauler. For a small, two man aircraft, there was nothing that could touch it in payload at that time. The next step up and we're getting in the B-52s. It was an extremely versatile aircraft and very rugged. The big thing was all weather. We could literally fly close air support in zero visibility. It all worked off a black box situation. For an air controller on the ground, if he had the proper black box, you could fly common, ordinary, close air support missions in zero visibility and be successful. In the monsoon season, of course, that made us very, very busy because lots of the other aircraft couldn't fly and especially for the land based Intruders, because as good as they were… The Navy was the only other group that had the Intruders, and there were times where they wouldn't launch them off the carriers, so we would do an awful lot of work in the monsoon season. It was tough because you get all that moisture out there with all the electronics, and you start getting into some other problems.

INT: I was going to ask you how the weather over there affected them.
JB: Making the maintenance a little more difficult, I don't think it ever slowed us down in terms of being able to carry out the missions. It didn't really affect the planes because the crews were trying to operate in all weather conditions. They were, because they are really Navy aircraft, they were all carrier capable. They all have the tail hooks and everything. Most Marine airfields have a resting gear to practice on and for emergencies. We had one pilot who had to make an

emergency landing using a resting gear at the Chu Lai Air Force Base, which he did successfully.
INT: What do you mean by that?
JB: It dropped a tail hook and catch a cable, just like you would see them doing on an aircraft carrier. He had actually made a landing at nighttime, and as he landed the wheel strut came off the aircraft. He lost the left port, as we called it at that time. The port wheel just fell off the plane and he got the plane back up in the air. They prepared the runway for an emergency landing [unclear] the resting gear. He dumped his excess fuel and came in for an approach. The cable broke and he had to go up in the air again [laughs]. And of course by now he'd already dumped a lot of his excess fuel, so he's probably running on fuel as they got it ready, but he came in that last time and made a textbook landing. I was there to watch that, and he kept that plane perfectly level. All he had was the nose wheel and a right wheel–nothing on the left.

INT: Now this is the captain you wrote about?
JB: This would be Captain Sutter.

INT: Okay, his amazing landing.
JB: Yeah, yeah, that was something. He was apparently a charmed pilot. I know he joined the squadron later; he did not go over with us initially. Before he came to us, he had been involved in a mid-air collision back in the States and had to eject and survived. My understanding was that after Vietnam, when he went back to the States, he was involved in another incident–not his fault, but he had to eject again [laughs]. He was either, I would say he must have been a charmed pilot as well as a good one to walk away from two ejections and a crash landing.
INT: Or a pretty lucky one.
JB: Pretty lucky, yes.

INT: You said you worked long hours. How many hours were you on, how many were you off?
JB: We tended to work a day shift and a night shift. I worked nights, most of them. Usually it was like a twelve hour shift. Theoretically you worked seven days a week. They would give us time off in pairs when things might slow down a little bit, and so you'd usually work five, six days a week, but they were twelve hour shifts. Nighttime was quick maintenance, it was turn around maintenance. It was planes coming back, getting ready to go out for another mission. A lot of the longer term maintenance would take place during the day shift. They would work on a lot of what we would call the down gripes, which was when a plane couldn't fly. We would work on a lot of the up gripes at night. Something would come in; pilots would file it and we'd get right out on them and start working on them, especially the up gripes so they could get back in the air. If it was a down gripe that looked like it was fairly simple to do, then we'd go right after that as well.

That might be, for example, something as simple as a landing light. A landing light on a night operation is considered a down gripe, and we did a lot of flying.

Those planes took a lot of impact, between us and the carriers especially. For some reason, they kept breaking these landing lights in the front. I remember one time, I think the squadron was down to two landing lights but twelve aircraft. To keep any plane flying, it had to have a landing light, and we would just cannibalize those two lights, one right after the other [laughs]. As soon as a plane landed, we'd run out and take the landing light out, run over to the next plane, put the landing light in so he could fire up and take off. It was a simple thing, but it took a while. There were like thirty-six, forty screws in the cover of every landing light, and you didn't have the power drills today. They were the old hand cranks, you know [demonstrates rotation and crank with hands]. You'd have to get out there, and we'd be taking them out of one plane, and somebody would be on the other one getting the lens off that. We'd just run lights back and forth all night long just to keep things going because that was a down gripe, but again a relatively simple one so we could handle those at night. We would get a lot of what I would call the turn up gripes. Pilots would go out to get ready for a flight, turn the engines up, get their systems going, and all of a sudden there would be a problem, a problem that had to be fixed before the plane could go. It might be just changing an instrument. It was not uncommon to be out there with the planes turned up and have somebody leaning in to the cockpit changing an instrument out while the pilot and the bombardier navigator sat there. You were changing it as quickly as you could so they could get going because they had a time on target to deal with and everything else.

We did a lot of that kind of stuff at night. It could be very boring on some nights, and it could be non-stop on others, depending on what was going on. I always enjoyed the night shift, though, because you didn't lose sleep on that one. If the base ever got hit, it was always at nighttime. Those of us that were working were already up and in the area, and we'd be all set. We'd go to our fighting holes or our bunkers, whatever was called for. After an attack, they would always wake up the day crew and get them down to the area also in case something was up. They'd be the ones who would lose all the sleep, to come down to that. The base was a fairly good size and for some reason if we did get mortared or rocketed, they would always hit one end of the base first and then there would be a little of a lull. I guess they shifted their increments and their adjustment, and then they would hit the other end, and of course we had a warning siren. Once you realized the other end was getting hit, we'd be on our bunkers, but on them rather than in them, watching the other end get hit. As soon as it would stop, we'd run in to our bunkers and wait for it to start heading down our way, and inevitably it would. I talked to some people from the other air group, and they used to do the same thing if we happened to get hit first [laughs], or after it cleared at their end, they'd come out, check things out, and then watch our end get hit.

INT: You said you were there approximately nineteen months?
JB: Yeah.

INT: What change did you see take place over that period of time?
JB: Well, during that period, there was a halt to the bombing up north for a while, and so our night missions cut back a little bit. It was more of a close air support and Ho Chi Minh Trail type stuff. That was without a doubt a relief for the pilots and any of the air crew, I'm sure, because Hanoi and Haiphong harbor were pretty intense areas. They still did a lot of flying during those periods, it just shifted to another area. From what I understand, the Ho Chi Minh Trail area could be pretty nasty, too. They liked to protect that. As I said, we lost a few crews in that time.

INT: How many crews did you lose, approximately, while you were there?
JB: I think in my tenure there, we lost three air crews.

INT: Where were they lost, and how were they brought down? Do you know at all?
JB: The first crew we lost, we're not sure about. They went up on a mission, up in the—I believe—the Haiphong area and they just disappeared off the radar. At that time, nothing was found. I have done some research on the Internet especially afterwards because you can look up unit histories and stuff. Actually I was on yesterday, and I found some information on that incident. They believe they found the wreckage since then. The claim was that the North Vietnamese shot the aircraft down, but it was a high impact explosive situation. They weren't able to recover any remains or anything that could be used for DNA research, but it was an Intruder. I don't know if they were able to match up part numbers or anything like that. That was Major Basic and Captain Boggs. They were the first crew we lost, and that was a blow to the squadron because we had been doing well, you know, flying a lot of missions and the planes kept coming back. I guess you knew in your heart that it probably couldn't last. That hit everybody pretty hard when that one went down. As I said, they recovered the crew at the end of the war. I did meet–actually through your museum–a bombardier navigator who was over there with me.

INT: David Bena, who we interviewed. Yes.
JB: Yeah, David Bena. He had some information on the people that had been prisoners of war and stuff. We had a good talk, it was kind of nice.

INT: Did you remember him from your time there?
JB: When I first saw his photo in the museum, he kind of looked familiar, but I wasn't a hundred percent positive. I think it was partly because the angle the picture was taken at made him look like he was six feet tall or something. I didn't

remember anybody that tall, and he isn't. He's approximately my height. When I got together with him to have lunch, as soon as he got out of his vehicle I knew who it was. I didn't know much about him, I just remembered him. We had a nice talk for a couple of hours at lunch that day. He was the first person I've seen face to face in about thirty-eight years that was from my unit. I've talked to a couple in email, but he's the first one I've actually been in contact with. There was one guy I worked with that I saw. I went to his wedding a couple of years after I was out of the Marines, but since then I hadn't seen anybody face to face.

INT: Were there any persons that stood out while you were in the service that you recall, left an impression on you?
JB: Yeah, I really liked our first commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel William Brown his name was. He was just what you would want, I guess. He was strict when he had to be, but he was a down to earth person who wasn't beyond joking and fooling around with some of the enlisted men. I remember when I first joined the squadron, we used to play games on the new people. They would get somebody, for example, and send him down to the transport unit and tell him they needed five gallons of prop wash, or something like that, or send somebody to the squadron to get him five hundred feet of flight line. I remember one incident where the colonel was out in the plane. He'd just got in his Intruder, this was still at Cherry Point before we deployed. There was a new guy there, and all of a sudden the colonel kind of signals him to come out into the cockpit. The guy kind of rushes up there, you know, it's the CO, it was just great. He says, "You know, I can't get this thing started; I forgot the keys. Would you go into the office and get them?" The guy runs to the office and of course there's no key to start the plane. Everybody's in on this. The flight line gave the guy a set of keys [laughs], and he brings them back out, takes them up and gives them to the colonel. He probably went home thinking he was going to get a promotion out of this or something, I don't know [laughter]. He wasn't beyond that. You knew he was the colonel, but he was just pleasant to be around. He didn't interfere, he let things go.

Obviously everybody is pretty much proud of the unit that they served with, but 533 was truly a special unit. David Bena had flown with several A-6 units and he said the same thing. He said that that squadron had its act together. Many awards are given after the fact, and VMA-533 for the period of 1967 to 1969 was given the Commandant's Aviation Efficiency Award. In that two year period, in all of Vietnam they flew over ten thousand sorties, which is just huge. It's amazing. We used to keep records of the missions that the planes had flown by putting a little bomb, a painted bomb on the side of the aircraft. We'd have aircraft with four and five rows of ten on there. People would say, "Each bomb is a mission?" No, each bomb is ten missions. They did ten thousand sorties. A sortie may involve more than one aircraft. It's just a mission. A lot of them were one aircraft missions, and a lot of them were multiple. In that two-year period, they had over ten thousand

combat sorties in Vietnam. As I said, we had one of the most successful transpacs (?) that's ever been made. It was a very, very good unit. I extended for six months, but I was far from the only person who did that in that squadron. I don't know what the percentage was, but I've often said it was somewhere between twenty-five and fifty percent of the people probably extended six months with that unit.

INT: Did you have much contact with local people at all?
JB: We supported an orphanage in one of the villages off base, but I spent most of my time right at the base. Of course there were Vietnamese on the base. They did a lot of the jobs on the base, but other than trips out to the orphanage and stuff, myself personally, I didn't have a lot of contact with them. And my travels in Vietnam were limited. The only places I ever really went were Chu Lai, and I did go up to Da Nang, but only to travel home, and when I went on R&R.

INT: Where did you go for R&R?
JB: I went to Bangkok in Thailand. I went there twice, once on my initial thirteen month tour, and I went back on my six month extension. I went back to Bangkok because I liked it there. It was a really nice place, especially for a young guy coming out of where you were. It was different. There were bathtubs and all that kind of stuff. We had basically a pretty good base where I worked, but there certainly weren't any bathtubs. We did have a big, huge community shower, which was nothing but water pipes running with outlets off of them. For quite a while, it was just cold water, and eventually we got a water buffalo in there that had a burner under there so we could get some hot water. For an airbase, it was probably relatively primitive compared to a place like Da Nang or the ones down around Saigon. That did change. Chu Lai, when I went there it was a Marine airbase, but it also eventually during my stay turned into the headquarters of the Americal Division from the army. When they came in, things got a little bit better supply wise around the base and stuff. The old [unclear – sats?] matting runway that the A-4s used to use was still there and that became a helicopter area for the Army. There were a few Air Force choppers there, I think, too, that they used for carrying out the Americal Division.

The night Americal arrived was another night that we got hit heavy. They were coming in by the planeload, and of course the enemy knew that. Housing again was a problem and they were putting them up where one of the A-4 squadrons had left. There was a vacant space right next to ours, actually, with all the steel revetments. They were housing their people in-between those revetments on cots for the first night or two. Actually it was for the first night only, as it turned out, because they got nailed. They got mortared very heavily that night, and they lost a few people right there the very first night they were there and had a bunch wounded. Numbers fly around, but the number that flew around was a hundred casualties. That wouldn't surprise me, because there were a lot of them coming in. They were on concrete, so when the mortars hit the concrete there was no

place for the shrapnel to go but out. If they had been out on the sand, then that would have probably absorbed some of it, but they weren't; they were where they were. That was probably the first time really where the base got heavily hit when I was there. They really poured some mortar fire in on that group.

INT: When did you leave Vietnam?
JB: It would have been '69, near the end of '69, probably October, November of '69. Then I went back to Cherry Point where I joined another A-6 squadron, VMAW-121, the Green Knights. That was interesting, too. I checked into a squadron and they had no airplanes [laughs]. We had absolutely no aircraft. They were converting from A-4s to A-6s, and myself and another guy that came back, we checked in the same day, we both had been in the 533 together. We checked in and instead of, "Have you been to Vietnam yet?", they said to us, "Brown and Hung(?). Why are those names familiar?" [laughs]. We thought, oh, we're in trouble again and we just got here! What it was was that the man that was in charge of the electric shop for 121 had been our staff sergeant in charge of the shop in Vietnam who came home after the first tour, and he requested us. He said when these two guys come back I want them in my unit, and so we went to 121 and helped them convert to A-6s. We slowly began to get aircraft. By the time I left, we still didn't have a full squadron but we were up to six or eight, and we were getting more flight hours out of our six and eight aircraft than the full-fledged twelve aircraft squadrons were getting. We were actually borrowing fuel from other squadrons, because fuel was limited Stateside because everything was going overseas. As I said, we were getting more flight time out of our six and eight aircraft than the twelve man squadrons were. At the same time, we were training new people. I was put in charge of a night crew. I was promoted to sergeant and put in charge of a night crew to help train people who would be deploying to other squadrons.

INT: Did you do this until you were discharged?
JB: I did that until I discharged.

INT: When were you discharged?
JB: I was due to get out in October of '69, but I got out at the end of August. I had an early out to go to college. Once you could show that you'd been accepted to college, if you were a certain timeframe they would let you out early so you could go home and get things straightened out in time to go to school.

INT: Did you use the GI Bill for that?
JB: For what it was worth, yeah [laughs], I used that. It was only I think a hundred and twenty dollars a month. Unfortunately you couldn't even credit that towards your tuition.

INT: Where did you go to school?

JB: I went to Adirondack Community College in Glens Falls for two years and then I went down to Oneonta.

INT: Did you go find any problems being a Vietnam veteran coming home?
JB: Traditionally there was the no welcome home thing, but I can't say that I was maltreated in any way when I came home. It was a community college. I fit in pretty well except that I was five, six years older than the people in my freshman class. I didn't really mention or make any big deal out of having been to Vietnam. Other than maybe a few people from my high school who were going to ACC, nobody really knew that. I do always recall that when I was there, that's when Kent State occurred, and that's when the invasion of Cambodia occurred. They became hot issues, obviously, on a campus. In fact, I had to do a speech course that year, and I did my speech on Kent State, what had happened there. ACC, like many of the other campuses, had a protest march, et cetera. When they were going to do that, they had a big meeting in the gymnasium, not the gym but the where the stage is—the theatre I guess—to organize something like that. I remember saying at the time that I could very willingly march about what happened at Kent State, but I couldn't march about going into the invasion of Cambodia. That, of course, had always been a safe haven and attacks would be launched out of there down south and stuff. I really, genuinely believed that you needed to move those people out of there. The President had also set a deadline on that, and I said give that a chance to happen, because if he doesn't do what he says he's going to do, then you can impeach him. I believed in–even though I'm sure there were a lot of political things behind that–from the military point of view, that made sense to me. I may have been back here, but I still had a lot of friends that were over there. I just couldn't do that part of it, so I marched halfway and got out [laughs]. I marched halfway down the route and said to my friends, "I'm getting out now. I did my half for Kent State. I'm not going to march against Cambodia."

INT: How do you think your time in the service had an effect on your life?
JB: I would look at it as positive. I don't think anybody can go through the military in a time of war… and if you survive, you're going to have some extremely valuable lessons. I was watching an interview of this type on TV with a World War Two Marine, and he said, "They taught me discipline." They definitely do that, and I think it's a discipline that you carry with you always and that really pays off. It becomes part of you. The old saying that 'once a Marine, always a Marine', you can't get that out of your system, it remains part of you always. To this day, I go out on November tenth, the Marine Corps birthday, and I have a toast, even if I go alone. Ironically, the last couple of years it's been sailors who have gone with me [laughs] and they ask, "Is it okay for sailors to take a Marine out and buy him a drink on the Marine Corps birthday?" I say, "Yeah, it's okay to buy me a drink when we go out."

INT: Can you show us the photographs you have?
JB: Sure [sorts through photos]. These all would have been taken around 1967, 1968, July. The first three I will put up are just the living area scenes.

[Holds up the first photo] They're pictures of me, but you can get an idea of what those hooches I was talking about looked like, kind of the plywood and screens and stuff in the background.

These are all quite similar. [Choosing another photo to show the camera] This one you can see the flaps protruding. To cut down on ventilation and keep the rain out during the monsoons, they had these big, full sheet plywood flaps, and they would just hold them up with a stick. When you put them all up, you had screening all the way around so whatever breeze there was could go right through the area. Chu Lai, too, was really, it's built on sand. There's nothing jungle about it.

[Holds up another photo] In the background in this, you can see some pallets laying on the ground. That's what we used for sidewalks. We would take old pallets that equipment came in on, and we'd scrounge them and lay them out as sidewalks so you didn't walk in the sand all the time. One of the nice things about that base was that it was right on the South China Sea. Less than a hundred yards from our living area was the beach, and we could go down there every day and you could go swimming when the weather was good.

[Holds up another photos where JB holds an M60 machine gun] This would have been a picture from when I did [unclear] guard period. I've got an M60 machine gun there. On that particular day, we had been out in the daytime rather than at night. We did what's called an EOD run, Explosive Ordnance Disposal. They would take truckloads of dud bombs out into an area off the base obviously. They would have a big hole, and they would put all these bombs in there and destroy them so the enemy couldn't get them. We would have to set up a perimeter guard. On that particular day, I was on an M60 for perimeter guard.

The last photo I have is one of me working up in the wheel well of an A-6, just fixing a switch that had to do with the landing gear door so they would know things were closed and everything was up tight. We'd be in positions like that. As Navy aircraft, the wings folded up, and we'd have to fix lights up on the tips of the wings. We'd be up on the wingtips. We'd be way back in the tail. There was a lot of internal components in that. Claustrophobic was one thing you did not want to be. Some of those systems had, like an airspeed system or an altitude system, had lines that would accumulate water and they'd have to be drained. They were way back in the tiny point of the tail, and I was, you couldn't tell it now, but then I was one of the guys small enough to be able to crawl back in there. It was like being in a cave or a tunnel, you could hardly move. Your arms were all scrunched up, you

were working with wrenches. The same with the instruments. There were times I remember it being like working on my car at home where I'd have my feet up over the seat and you're working up under the dashboard. Well, that's exactly the way the Intruder was with some of those instrument systems. You'd have your back on the ejection seat, and your head and arms up behind the instrument panel trying to get wiring and stuff off the back of the instruments. I got caught in there once or twice during mortar attacks, upside down in the cockpit. Somebody would knock on the cockpit, and you'd pull your head out and all of a sudden you'd see lights flashing and you knew there was incoming. To get out of the Intruder when it was sitting there without hydraulic pressure, the only way you could get out of that cockpit was to hand pump the cockpit open. It would take about eighty pumps to get the cockpit open enough to get out. You'd be surprised how fast you can pump when you can hear thumping in the background as those mortars are going off and you can see them in the mirrors of the aircraft, walking down the runway. You could get out in a real hurry.

INT: Thank you very much for your interview.
JB: You're welcome.