

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 472-004**

**Interviewee: Steven Johnson**

**Interviewer: Jane Duffy**

**Date of Interview: November 24, 2019**

**Project: Veterans Experience Oral History Project**

Jane Duffy: Hi, we're sitting here with Steve Johnson today and we're going to talk about his time in the service. So, Steve, what branch were you in?

Steven Johnson: I was with the army.

JD: With the army? What years?

SJ: 1969 to 1972.

JD: So, you were in there right when I was born.

SJ: Could have been.

JD: Where did you go to basic?

SJ: Basic was Fort Lewis, advanced training at Fort Sill, and Airborne school at Fort Benning.

JD: So, you were Airborne [U.S. Army Airborne]. What was your M.O.S.?

SJ: 13 Alpha 1 Poppa.

JD: Which is?

SJ: What is "cannons from the sky."

JD: Really?

SJ: Artillery.

JD: Nice, nice. Did you go overseas?

SJ: Twenty-eight months in Europe.

JD: Nice, what part of Europe?

SJ: Germany. Wiesbaden Germany. I was attached to the 509th. As their support—artillery support.

JD: Do you have any kind of stories that you'd like to tell, like during your schooling or basic or when you were stationed in Germany?

SJ: I joined the Airborne because extra \$55 a month haz [hazard] pay. And I met some characters in there; I met some real heroes because Vietnam was going on. So, if you did your tour in Vietnam, they usually sent you to Europe for your last year if you were a three-year man. So, I met a lot of people. I remember Sergeant Kirby Puckett. He would fall out in formation with more ribbons on his chest than Carter's got liver pills [reference to Carter's Little Liver Pills]. He did two tours in Vietnam. He was a gung ho. His hometown named a street after him. All the stuff that heroes—that hero worshipers or whatever.

I remember they told us we were going to play war games, and Kirby refused. He said he had enough of war, and he wasn't going to play no games around it. Our captain swore that he was going to do an Article 15 and everything, and it was sent up, up, up the chain. It got to the general of the 8th Division, and he laughed and he said, "Nah, I can't do nothing with this guy." But learned a lot from Kirby, and he was my platoon sergeant at that time. It was really fun to meet people like that. Tell you the truth, that's where my addiction to drugs came in. I tried my first—I was a little country boy going into the service and everything. Smoked a little weed prior to that, and within a year, I was addicted to morphine. I started the next two years or so, it was all black out here and there. But Europe was pretty wild at that time. I went to places like Amsterdam, Istanbul. We were a show team—artillery—so we were showcased to NATO. We did all these jumps in front of all these generals and stuff like that. So, it was interesting, but it's like country boy grows up quick.

Wiesbaden was right next to Mainz, and Mainz was bombed out pretty good in the Second World War. Then it took me until I got back to the States and started getting older myself is that all these gentlemen that were in their 40s and stuff with one legs and stuff running around Germany were veterans from the German. It never, never crossed my mind while I was there.

But it's like my grandfather, he basically went in—he was the oldest of us. He was already in his late 20s when the First World War started. Let me, 18—yeah, he was almost 28 when the First World War and he fought the trenches. My father, he was—Korea was already over, but he went to Korea as a, oh, I think it was must've been about '58, something like that. The war was already over. But he was a technical advisor at that time. It's like everybody in my family. I got cousins that were door gunners in Vietnam. Just one after another.

I remember I was maybe in the 8th grade, something like that, my cousin was dating a gentleman, Doug Gard (?)—I don't even know if he's alive—from Kalispell. He was just came back from Vietnam. He was a Marine in his uniform, and it was like the traction. At that time, it seemed like everybody was going. Everybody was either being drafted or going to Vietnam, coming back. When I got back myself, it's like I'd go to these parties and I'd look across the room, and you could tell the other vet—just had that look in their eyes. It was like I was

attracted to them. But thank god, I had enough brains to get out. I just couldn't take orders. I called my rank like a yo-yo—up and down. I was in trouble all the time. But that's, you know, a little piece of it.

JD: Did you notice that when you got out of the military that it was difficult to get back to civilian life?

SJ: It's a completely different game. I still get tears in my eyes when I go to a store, and somebody will sit there—I'll be wearing my hat or something, and they'll go, "Oh, I want to thank you for your service," because it wasn't like that. We hid it. As soon as I was off post on my final leave in the military, everything military was gone. I didn't travel in my military uniform or anything. It was like, everybody thought everybody was baby killers and everything and demonstrations going on all over. How do you tell somebody, "Well, I wasn't over there." That was my game. But as a whole, everybody was punished.

JD: Seems like it.

SJ: It's sad. It's sad. It took 30 years, 40 years for them to recognize that we did what our country asked. Even my company, a lot of people went to Vietnam on that 20, 20-some months in Europe. It seemed like every month we'd have two or three people volunteering to go to Vietnam. So, it was a mess.

JD: What do you think about how the veterans that are coming back today, of how they're treated? How do you feel about that?

SJ: Sometime envious. I didn't go into the combat, but it's still like I want to say that the shadows in the mind kind of creep up once in a while. It's like we didn't get any special patch or anything. I can't remember any of my friends getting out and being a part of a parade. It was like up to a certain point of '67, '68, it was still, "Hometown here setting up a parade." Then when we came back in the first part of the '70s, no way. They wanted to hide us. So, it's hard, and there's a part of me that thinks everybody should do military time.

JD: Why?

SJ: You grow up. You grow up. Mine was I went in at 17. I quit school two weeks prior and joined the service like two weeks later. That's what you did. If the school was wasn't what you were thinking about, it was the army. Get your GED. Go on from there. I think it's important.

JD: Yeah. It definitely teaches a sort of discipline.

All right. Is there anything else that you would like to add? Maybe something that I didn't think of asking you? The biggest thing that I that I was thinking about is did you feel because of

everybody in your family—your grandfather—being in the military, that that was just what you were supposed to do?

SJ: No. When I went in, it was because I painted myself into that corner. I was in trouble. I quit school, and it was one of the doors that was open. It made more sense to do that than anything else, because all my cousins and stuff were already joined or already in the service. So, it's like, okay. But the experience that I had going—I got inducted into Oakland. I remember riding the buses down the streets, and you could call it a canyon. They kept us in this hotel and went down to do our swearing in and stuff, and it felt like a canyon—the tall buildings on each side. You were in a bus and on each side the street, the Black Panthers were demonstrating and the war. People were demonstrating, both sides, going into the induction station. It was like, “Did I do the right thing? Am I doing the right thing?” When we got sworn in, I remember that they came into the room, and they said, “Well, we need a few good men for the Marines.” Nobody budged. And it was like, okay.

But I was a scared boy, because we flew from Oakland that night to Fort Lewis in the dark, and I think they do that on purpose. It's like I arrived even in jump school at night. I remember sitting in Fort Benning, Georgia—rainy night—and somebody was playing “Rainy Night in Georgia” on the [unintelligible]. It was like, “Holy smokes!” I enjoyed my jumps. I remember the first time I went out of a plane; it was like I was talking to the guy behind me. I was about, oh, ten people from the door, and I turned around and everybody's already going out the door. So, I kind of scrambled, and by the time I got to the door, it was like I was out the door and never even thought about it. It was like, “whoa,” oh my. But I took pride—I took a lot of pride in it because I think that was part of the Airborne deal. You got out, and you were a man of men.

It was good for me. It was good for me because by the time I got out, a lot of my friends that were in high school with me, they were already doing time in prisons. I believe that the service kept me out of prison.

JD: Well, that was a good thing. It was a good thing.

SJ: I can't think of anything else. A couple of brain cells might hit here and there.

JD: That's okay. That's okay. I want to thank you for taking the time and sitting down and talking with me.

SJ: Yeah, I appreciate it, Jane, and like I said, I'll send you them three pictures of my family.

JD: I would love to have those as part of this. Awesome.

SJ: We were all military gung-hos. I remember playing with my grandfather's steel helmet, his gas mask from the First World War—all of his stuff. Oh! Yeah.

JD: He was your hero.

SJ: I was his hero.

JD: Really?

SJ: I was real young when my grandfather died. I don't even think I was in school yet. But my mother and I remember pieces of—my grandfather used to plow the fields and put me on the box on the tractor, toolbox, and he'd plow. My mother said, "Your grandfather just loved the hell out of you, and he's already had, oh, three boys and a girl from his daughter." But I was son's firstborn. I think that might have made a difference. I don't know. But we lived on the farm when I was young with him and stuff. It's funny how people do that. But it taught me a lot. The only thing is that I got out and I wasn't even 21 yet, and I'd been drinking for like three, four years in the service overseas.

JD: Right, and you come back to the States, and—

SJ: It's like, "What?" I think I was four months shy of being 21. It was like, "What?" But things are changing.

JD: Yeah, they are. They really are. All right then. Well, thank you.

SJ: That was shorter than I thought.

JD: It doesn't have to take long.

[End of Interview]