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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Jim Johnson:  
Oakland Army Base Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Robin Li  
in 2009

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Jim Johnson, photo courtesy of Mr. Johnson

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Interview #1: January 09, 2009  
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01-00:00:00

Li: This is Robin Li speaking with Jim Johnson on January 9, 2009 in San Francisco, California. So we're going to begin with a fairly straightforward question, which is can you tell me when and where you were born.

01-00:00:44

Johnson: Oh, I was born in Oklahoma in 1934.

01-00:00:51

Li: And can you tell me a little bit about your background?

01-00:00:56

Johnson: Well, my undergraduate degree is in chemical engineering and I have an MBA from Golden Gate University and I worked at Oakland Army Base from 1970 to 1983 as the education services officer and the Army community services officer.

01-00:01:12

Li: And how did you get from chemical engineering to an MBA?

01-00:01:18

Johnson: I never really worked in the field in which I earned my degree. After I had been out of college for three years I became a Naval officer because my occupational deferment expired with the company that I was working for, and so I didn't want to be drafted. So I joined the Navy. And since I already had my degree, I went to OCS and became a Naval officer. And then after I got out of the Navy, I had forgotten everything I ever learned about chemical engineering, and so I went back to school and got an MBA. And then I will tell you eventually how I ended up at Oakland Army Base in the field of education.

01-00:02:04

Li: Okay. And so what year was it that you enlisted in the Navy?

01-00:02:07

Johnson: I was commissioned in 1960 and my commission was signed by President John F. Kennedy.

01-00:02:13

Li: Oh, wow. And what was your experience like in the Navy?

01-00:02:20

Johnson: Well, it was super. I joined the Navy to see the world and I ended up at the Naval Weapons Station Concord and I never went to sea because the Naval Weapon Station Concord hardly ever got under way. So shore duty on the West Coast was considered a really good billet.

01-00:02:42

Li: Yes. So prior to joining the Navy, had you left the Midwest before?

01-00:02:49

Johnson: Well, I went to school at the Missouri School of Mines and Metallurgy and got a degree in chemical engineering and I was awarded a scholarship by Atlas Powder Company for my senior year in college, and so I went to work for Atlas Powder Company for three years after I graduated, but then, as I said, my occupational deferment expired, so I had to do something about my military obligation, and so that's why I became a Naval officer.

01-00:03:22

Li: And what was your rank?

01-00:03:24

Johnson: I was a lieutenant when I got out. That's equivalent to a captain in the Army.

01-00:03:35

Li: All right. And so what year did you leave the Navy?

01-00:03:40

Johnson: In 1964.

01-00:03:42

Li: 1964. And what drew you to an MBA program?

01-00:03:47

Johnson: Then I just earned my MBA at Golden Gate University in 1965.

01-00:03:53

Li: Sixty-five. And what were you planning to do with that degree? Did you have ambitions for that?

01-00:03:59

Johnson: Well, I didn't know exactly, because I knew that I didn't want to go back and work in a lab, as I was doing for Atlas Powder Company. So I wanted something that would be different from what I had been doing. So I got a job with Matson Navigation as a computer systems analyst.

01-00:04:26

Li: Okay. And that was after you graduated in 1965?

01-00:04:28

Johnson: Um-hmm, um-hmm.

01-00:04:30

Li: What was the Bay Area like at that time?

01-00:04:33

Johnson: Well, I lived in San Francisco and the Bay Area hasn't changed all that much, but the neighborhood where I lived, on Potrero Hill, has changed.

01-00:04:45

Li: So have you been in the same location since 19—

01-00:04:46

Johnson: Yes. I've lived in this house for thirty-four years.

01-00:04:52

Li: And what was this neighborhood like then?

01-00:04:55

Johnson: Well, it was not yuppified as it is now.

01-00:04:58

Li: No Whole Foods?

01-00:04:59

Johnson: Right.

01-00:05:08

Li: So how long were you with Matson?

01-00:05:10

Johnson: I was with Matson two years and they had a fifty percent reduction in force and I got caught in that, and so that's the reason that I was no longer with Matson.

01-00:05:25

Li: And where did you go from there?

01-00:05:28

Johnson: Well, from there I went to Oakland Army Base, so I'll tell you how I arrived at Oakland Army Base and got my civil service appointment. I was teaching school at night at Golden Gate University. I taught algebra one, algebra two, and statistics, and these were all undergraduate courses. However, statistics was a foundation course that was required for all candidates who were seeking their MBA. For example, if someone had an undergraduate degree in something other than business, then they had to take business foundation courses, such as accounting one, accounting two, finance, human relations, and statistics. And so in my statistics class, I had undergraduate and graduate students, and I normally didn't know which was which, except normally the graduate students were older.

And so this one semester in 1970, there was an older fellow in the class and he was quite a bit older than the rest of the students. He was probably fifty. And another thing that was unusual about him was that he was not doing well. He had flunked every one of the weekly exams that I had given. So I called him aside and I said, "Owen, you're not doing well in this course." And he said, "I know. I knew that I wouldn't do well." And he said, "I was scared, so I've saved this course for the very last." I said, "Are you an MBA candidate?" And he said, "Yes, I am." And he said, "This is the only course that I need to

complete my degree." And I said, "Well, you were supposed to take this course long before you took your graduate seminars." And he said, "Well, I put it off until last because I knew that I would have trouble with it," and I said, "Well, somebody told you that and you believed it, and that was a self-fulfilling prophecy." But I said, "This course is not difficult and you're very bright, and you can get through it well, but you're going to have to have some outside help, and I will be happy to assist you with that if you are willing to come to my house every Saturday morning at nine o'clock. I can work with you for a couple of hours and I think that I can get you up to speed so that you can complete this course successfully, because it is a requirement for your degree." And he said, "Well, if you're willing to do that, Jim," he said, "I'm certainly willing to do it, too." So that's what we did. He came to my house every Saturday morning at nine o'clock and we worked for one or two hours, and we did that for four weeks, and he developed the confidence in the material that he needed to complete the course successfully. And so he was very pleased and so was I.

So I attended his graduation. I normally didn't go to graduations, but I was so pleased for Owen that I attended the graduation. And at the graduation, he said, "Jim, what do you do? What's your real job during the day?" And I said, "Well, I work for Matson Navigation Company and they had a reduction in force and I was caught in that, and so I'm between jobs for my daytime work." He said, "You don't know who I really am, do you?" And I said, "Well, your name is Owen Walsh and you completed my course successfully and you have your MBA and I'm very proud of you." He said, "Jim, I'm a full bird colonel in the United States Army and I'm the chief of staff at the Oakland Army Base." And he said, "We have an education officer out there that can't find her ass with a search warrant, and I would like for you to have that job."

01-00:09:21

Li:

Oh, wow.

01-00:09:22

Johnson:

So he said, "You'll come out there and you'll report directly to me. You'll work at the education center and you'll be the assistant to the education officer and she will see that you're really doing her work and she's going to resign and you're going to have the job." And so that's exactly what happened. This went on for about two months. The lady who was the education officer did, in fact, resign and that's how I became an employee at the Oakland Army Base. And it sounds kind of underhanded in a way, but actually it worked out just fine, because the lady really wasn't doing the work and I just caught on to that really quickly and really enjoyed it and it worked out fine, so all's well that end's well.

01-00:10:11

Li:

Right. So what drew you to education? Why were you teaching at night at Golden Gate University?

01-00:10:16

Johnson:

Well, I've always been showbiz oriented, and being a schoolteacher is like being in showbiz. You're very much in charge and you're on stage and it's an opportunity to share the knowledge that you have with other people. And so it's a helping profession and I was drawn to that certainly more than being a chemical engineer.

01-00:10:46

Li:

Right. So where have you gotten the title, Reverend Jim Johnson? What are you a reverend—?

01-00:10:49

Johnson:

Oh. Well, I am an ordained minister in A Course In Miracles. And A Course In Miracles is Christianity without the guilt. And so that leaves out a whole lot of them.

01-00:11:02

Li:

Is that Marianne Williamson? Does she write on that?

01-00:11:05

Johnson:

Yes, she does. She is also a student of A Course In Miracles.

01-00:11:09

Li:

Okay. All right. I'm familiar with her name. And so by the time that you joined the Oakland Army Base, that was 1970 that you went there?

01-00:11:19

Johnson:

Yes.

01-00:11:20

Li:

Okay. And so your starting position was Director of Education?

01-00:11:25

Johnson:

I was the Education Services Officer. And eventually I became the Chief of Community Services. That was a military slot and in about 1982, when the community services officer retired, Lieutenant Colonel Jim Gleason, they gave me the job of community services officer. I was hopeful that they would convert the slot to a civilian slot, but they did not, so I was the acting Army Community Services Officer and so I held that position and had the education center, as well. So as the community services officer, that included all of the craft shop, the bowling alley, the gym, the housing area, all of the facilities that had to do with community service, and I was doing that and running the education center, as well.

01-00:12:34

Li:

And what year was that that you took that position?

01-00:12:36

Johnson:

Probably 1982.

01-00:12:39

Li: And so you were a civilian employee of the US Army throughout your time there?

01-00:12:42

Johnson: I was. Yes.

01-00:12:44

Li: Did your military background help at all in terms of—?

01-00:12:46

Johnson: Well, it did. I really enjoyed being a Naval officer and I identified with the military environment, and so I would say, yes, that's the reason that I enjoyed the military environment at Oakland Army Base as a civilian, because I enjoyed being a Naval officer and associating with the military people, both the officer and the enlisted at the Oakland Army Base. I was very, very comfortable.

01-00:13:15

Li: And so what was the state of the education services when you arrived and how did it evolve?

01-00:13:21

Johnson: Well, Colonel Walsh felt that the education officer at the base was really not doing a good job and so I guess he was really so pleased with the fact that I was so interested in helping him that he felt that that might transfer to the people for whom he was responsible at the Oakland Army Base, the military people, and so that's why he wanted me to have that job. And as it turned out, it worked out very, very well. I was very conscientious and dedicated to make sure that every enlisted person who did not have a high school diploma was enrolled in our on post GED classes. So that every enlisted person who did not have a high school diploma would not leave Oakland Army Base without having the GED equivalency.

01-00:14:15

Li: Was this a requirement or was this something that you just took?

01-00:14:18

Johnson: It was an encouragement, but with the backing of Colonel Walsh, we made it at Oakland Army Base an absolute requirement.

01-00:14:28

Li: So would you get a list of the people who did not have high school diplomas?

01-00:14:31

Johnson: Yes, yes. And then they would send the people to me. I would counsel them and there was a one hundred percent enrollment.

01-00:14:40

Li: Oh, wow. Was there a common background, social or economic, to the people who you tended to work with?

01-00:14:48

Johnson:

No. These were just people that, for some reason or another, didn't have a high school diploma. And it was interesting the way we funded this, because at most military bases, the education center would hire teachers to run the GED program on the base. Well, I didn't have any money to do that, so I contacted the principal of Oakland Technical High School in Oakland and I said, "You know, you don't really have the time to be running your GED program here in the high school, and you're overcrowded. I have a tremendous facility at Oakland Army Base, so I'll make you a deal. You provide me with the teachers and you can use the facility that I have at Oakland Army Base." I said, "This will take some doing to allow outside civilians to come aboard the base, but I'm pretty sure I can pull that off, and it'll be a good working arrangement between the educational community and the military community." And so with Colonel Walsh's backing, I was able to get the general to agree that we would allow non-military people on the base.

And so I provided the facility and the Oakland Unified School District provided the teachers in math and English, and the program was conducted during the day and the military people were given time off of their duties to attend the classes. And so it didn't mean that I had to budget and pay the teachers because they were paid by the Oakland Unified School District, and so they had all the benefits that the teachers had being part of the district. And so it was a win/win situation for them, and it was a win/win situation for me, because I didn't have to budget for them, and it was a win/win situation for the students who were in the class, as well. And it was also a good mixture of having the military people sitting right next to civilian people in the outside community and it was a great relationship. And as a matter of fact, it gave Oakland Army Base a good name in that we were cooperating with the outside community, and the general took great credit for this, which was perfect. I was happy for him to have the credit. And it was a win/win situation for everyone, and particularly since I didn't have to budget for it.

01-00:17:38

Li:

So this seems like a pretty unusual setup to have. Were there other Army bases—

01-00:17:43

Johnson:

I don't know of any other Army base that did that. It just seemed like a good idea. And since I had the full support of the command, I was able to pull it off.

01-00:17:55

Li:

And so were the teachers who taught on base, did they also teach at the Oakland High Schools or were they dedicated—?

01-00:18:00

Johnson:

They were part of the faculty at Oakland Tech High School.

01-00:18:08

Li:

And now the GED exam, it's pretty rigorous. It's a fairly difficult—

01-00:18:11

Johnson:

Well, I think for someone who has passed the GED test, it certainly shows that they have a body of knowledge that you're not really sure whether someone who graduated from high school has that body of knowledge. There are five subjects that they have to pass. The most rigorous, of course, are math and English. And for someone to be able to pass those tests shows that they do have a good grasp of that information, and I think someone who has graduated with a GED possibly might have a better education than someone who didn't do a very good job and being passed along in some high school program. And also, since this program was being run really by the Oakland Unified School District, the diploma was given by the Oakland Unified School District, not by the Oakland Army Base, so these people had an actual diploma from Oakland Technical High School.

01-00:19:15

Li:

Oh, wow.

01-00:19:17

Johnson:

To my knowledge, no other Army base had a program in which the graduates of the GED program had such credentials.

01-00:19:30

Li:

Right. And so what was the retention rate like? Would people persist with these classes until they received {inaudible}?

01-00:19:36

Johnson:

Oh, they didn't have any choice.

01-00:19:40

Li:

And was that unusual for an Army base?

01-00:19:42

Johnson:

Yes, yes.

01-00:19:44

Li:

Other people could be at other bases and not—?

01-00:19:45

Johnson:

The thing that was so unusual was the relationship that I had with the command section because of Colonel Walsh. Whatever I wanted to do, I was able to do because of him.

01-00:20:00

Li:

And you mentioned on the phone that you also had officers who were doing MBA programs at Golden Gate University?

01-00:20:06

Johnson:

Well, yes. After we got the people who didn't have a high school diploma their requirement met, then, of course, there were all of these enlisted people, men and women on Oakland Army Base, who did have a high school diploma who needed to have a baccalaureate degree. And so the next step was to take

care of these people. So I found a college in Columbia, Missouri, Columbia College, who gave off campus programs on military bases, and they were very generous in awarding credit for military experience and for awarding credit for passing the end-of-course test. And so I contracted with this college to put their program on Oakland Army Base, and also I got the guy who did my job at Treasure Island to do the same there, so we had quite a population, between Oakland Army Base enlisted people and Treasure Island enlisted people, for participating in this program in which the only degree that was offered was a baccalaureate degree in business administration. And so we offered courses that would lead toward that degree. And if a student at Treasure Island or at Oakland Army Base were onboard for three years, if they went to school three nights a week, and if they had attended military schools that the Columbia College would award credit for, and if they could pass the end of course test, in the three years that they were in the military on those bases, they could leave with an undergraduate degree in business administration.

01-00:22:01

Li: Wow.

01-00:22:03

Johnson: The unique thing about the Columbia College program, too, was that instead of having a sixteen week semester, they had an eight week mini-mester, which means that a student wouldn't have to wait longer than eight weeks to jump in and start a course. And since the mini-mesters were only eight weeks long, you still had to get the forty hours of class time in, so we had to start at six o'clock at night and go 'til nine. So it was a long, long evening for the students who had been working all day. But if they were committed, the piece of cake at the end was a baccalaureate degree.

01-00:22:59

Li: Right. And so all the students you were working with were living on base, right?

01-00:23:07

Johnson: Yes. That population, yes. All of those students either lived—the enlisted men—either lived in barracks or, if they were married, they lived in the enlisted quarters. To my knowledge, the enlisted people were not allowed to live off base.

01-00:23:27

Li: Okay. So they were able to go to work or to class—easy commute.

01-00:23:30

Johnson: An easy commute.

01-00:23:31

Li: Right. Okay.

01-00:23:34

Johnson:

Yes. Then after we got the enlisted people taken care of with the GED program and the baccalaureate degree program, then we didn't want to leave out the officers who needed to have an MBA. And I didn't have enough population of officers to have on post classes for MBA, so they had to attend the main campus at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. But the thing that was interesting, too, about the funding for these classes—I mentioned about the GED program. I didn't have to pay for that because the Oakland Unified School District traded off. They provided the teachers and I provided the space. And with Columbia College being a private school, of course they charged tuition. So the question is how were my military students going to pay that tuition?

Well, on most military bases, the education center had a budget called tuition assistance, and it was a very lengthy paper process. Each one of these students had to fill out these forms and the education officer had to be a part of all of that and the tuition assistance paid seventy-five percent of the tuition and it was very complicated to budget for this because, you know, how many students were you going to have and how much money would you need. Well, we didn't have to do any of that at Oakland Army Base because I insisted that the students use their in-service GI Bill. You did not have to wait to get out of the service to use your GI Bill. You could use the GI Bill while you were in service, and the GI Bill paid 100% of the tuition, and also, since it was the GI Bill, and Columbia College knew about how to use that, then they took care of the paperwork, so that meant I didn't have to worry about budgeting for the money, I didn't have to worry about how it was being paid for, and I didn't have to fill out any of the forms. So we were running a full scale program for a GED program and for the baccalaureate degree in business administration and the MBA program at Oakland Army Base and the only cost to Oakland Base was my salary and that of my secretary.

01-00:26:11

Li:

Oh, wow.

01-00:26:11

Johnson:

So it was unheard of for an education center to be running a full service all the way from GED to MBA with the salaries of two people and that's it.

01-00:26:22

Li:

Wow. I wonder if this became a model for other bases, too?

01-00:26:25

Johnson:

Well, it would have been, yes.

01-00:26:28

Li:

Yes. And so how long did it take you to establish these programs from the time you got there?

01-00:26:33

Johnson:

The way to do that just seemed to come to me naturally and it was no big deal. It's just that's the way it happened. I just thought about it and that's the way it turned out. But, of course, it would never, never have happened had I not had the command support that I had from Colonel Walsh. And Colonel Walsh, being the chief of staff, really ran Oakland Army Base. The general was pretty much a figurehead and whatever Owen Walsh said, that's the way it was. And so for me to have his support was of paramount importance in order for me to accomplish what I did.

01-00:27:18

Li:

Right. What was the greatest challenge, do you think, in your job?

01-00:27:22

Johnson:

Well, it certainly wasn't money and it certainly wasn't command support and it certainly wasn't getting the people into the programs, because it was mandatory for the GED program, and there was certainly no problem in getting people to participate in the baccalaureate degree program because everybody wanted in and it wasn't difficult for the officers to be convinced that they needed an MBA. And so there really wasn't any particular challenge. All I can say is that it was very, very gratifying.

And then, also, in as much as I had these classes in business administration on the base, I had an MBA from Golden Gate, so I was qualified to teach for Columbia College. So in a way, the director of the Columbia College program worked for me, but then at night, I worked for them because I taught statistics, algebra I, algebra II, finance, and human relations. So I was able to not only work my daytime job, as my students were doing, but they went to school three nights a week and so did I, except I was on the other side of the blackboard.

01-00:28:59

Li:

And so you were living in San Francisco at the time and you would—how much of your day would be spent on the base?

01-00:29:05

Johnson:

Oh, all day.

01-00:29:06

Li:

All day.

01-00:29:07

Johnson:

Yes. I wouldn't come home after I got off work, right.

01-00:29:11

Li:

After work. So you would get there in the morning and stay until after you were done teaching?

01-00:29:13

Johnson:

Right.

01-00:29:12

Li: And what was an average day like for you?

01-00:29:16

Johnson: Well, it was a fun day, because I was doing exactly what I loved to be doing and it was so gratifying to see the success of these people achieving their goals.

01-00:29:32

Li: So when you'd arrive at work in the morning, would you be counseling students, would you be working with the teachers coming from the Oakland School District? How would—

01-00:29:42

Johnson: All the above.

01-00:29:44

Li: All the above?

01-00:29:44

Johnson: Yes, yes.

01-00:29:45

Li: And how much space did you take up in terms of your classes? Did you—?

01-00:29:50

Johnson: I had three classrooms, and then, also, we were involved in administering the end of course test at the college level. My secretary did that and she had to be a monitor of the test. So that was part of her daily duties, to administer the test so that these people could get credit to apply toward their baccalaureate degree.

01-00:30:21

Li: And did you get the sense that the students you worked with would have gotten these degrees anyway?

01-00:30:27

Johnson: I don't think so. First of all, the program had to be available, and it had to be easily available. And they had to be motivated to do it. But once the ball got rolling, it was almost like if you weren't in one of the programs at the education center, you just weren't in. And so it became a thing for everyone to be involved in. It was the thing to do.

01-00:30:57

Li: So would you say it was part of the culture of base life to be—?

01-00:31:01

Johnson: Well, it became the culture of that base life. The general said to me one day, he said, "Jimmy, I can't get anything done because all my military people are in school." And I said, "Well, that really isn't true because they're all doing it in their own time, except for the GED people, and I really appreciate your

letting them have time off during the day for that program. But the people that are in school are on their own time and they are dedicated and doing this after they are no longer working for you."

01-00:31:30

Li: Right. So it sounds like this program was probably pretty transformative for people?

01-00:31:37

Johnson: Well, it was. And then not only did we have those programs going, but we had the craft shop was putting on classes and I thought, "My goodness, why can't we get the Oakland Junior College?" There was Merritt and Laney in Oakland, and then there was Vista College, which was their off campus program. So I contacted Vista College and they agreed to use our facility, the craft shop, and I guess that was pretty much it, the craft shop. Instead of our having to hire teachers to teach classes at the craft shop, since we had that wonderful facility, then Vista College took advantage of our facility and provided the teachers to put on the classes in the craft shop. We had upholstery, woodworking, pottery, ceramics, and jewelry, and we had this wonderful facility, but it required the consent of the general, once again, to allow these civilians, outsiders, to come into the base. But with the urging of Colonel Walsh, that was a snap and a done deal. So once again, we got good publicity. This military base cooperating with the community colleges, Vista College to put on these programs.

And so once again, I didn't have to pay the teachers. It was paid for by the Vista College. And not only that, the people who were taking these classes got college credit. And not only that, I was able to get the people who worked in the craft shop to take annual leave during the time the classes were run and they became members of the faculty of Vista, and so they were working during their day time job, took annual leave at night, and were hired by Vista College to teach the classes that they would normally be teaching anyway, but they were getting paid for it by the community college and they were being able to award college credit to the people who were taking the classes. So that was another win/win situation and we were running that program and it didn't cost Oakland Army Base any money at all, and I did not have to budget for it because somebody else was paying for it.

01-00:34:13

Li: Wow. And so then these people would have on their résumés that they worked for Vista College as well as working for the Oakland Army Base.

01-00:34:19

Johnson: Yes. And also, it added college credit to the people who were taking the classes.

01-00:34:24

Li: And so like with the GED program, you would have civilian students coming onto base to take classes?

01-00:34:32

Johnson: Yes. That took some doing. I mean, it just required command approval. And without command approval, the program would not have worked. But I would not have been able to have done this without Colonel Walsh. And so the universe works in mysterious ways. Little did I know that when I was having him in my living room teaching him statistics, that it would evolve into this magnificent program at Oakland Army Base.

01-00:35:05

Li: Yes. That's amazing. So you had GED, baccalaureate degrees, MBA, and then—

01-00:35:11

Johnson: The craft.

01-00:35:11

Li: As well as these crafts, which would also—I mean, I would think could be life skills in terms of getting a job as an upholsterer or getting a job in that kind of vocational work.

01-00:35:22

Johnson: Yes. Right.

01-00:35:26

Li: And so would the in service GI Bill cover any costs that would be—

01-00:35:29

Johnson: All of them, yes.

01-00:35:30

Li: For all of them.

01-00:35:32

Johnson: All of the college classes, yes.

01-00:35:36

Li: And you mentioned that the Officers Wives Clubs had had fundraising for your program.

01-00:35:41

Johnson: Yes. The Officers Wives Club had a thrift shop and the profit that they made from it came to the education center and that helped defray the cost for tuition for the students. And I was on the board to help decide who would get the money. And so the Officers Wives Club felt that they were really doing a magnanimous thing, and they were, because when they would volunteer to put in their time to run the thrift shop, people would say, "Well, where does this money go? Your profits? Where does this money go?" "Well, for education."

And so they felt that the money was going to a good cause and they felt that the work that they were doing was going to a good cause and so that was an incentive for them to do what they were doing.

01-00:36:53

Li: Right, right. So since it did seem like it was a big deal to have civilians come onto base for these education classes, would you describe the base community as fairly distinct, that there was a sense of community life on the base that was separate from the life of Oakland?

01-00:37:10

Johnson: Yes. As a matter of fact, when I first went to the base, civilian employees were not permitted to use the facilities on the base that were designed for the military people. For example, the gym was strictly for the military people. The craft shop was strictly for the military people. The bowling alley, the theater. But as the Vietnam War wound down and the military population decreased, here we had all of these facilities being underutilized. And so then it took a command decision. I think it was even higher than just Oakland Army Base. I think that it took an Army decision to allow civilians to use the military facilities, the bowling alley, the craft shop, and all of that. But then it really was a leap forward to allow people from off the base, the outsiders, to come in. And I'm not sure whether the commanding general at Oakland Army Base got permission from the Department of the Army to do that or not. I think that maybe we just did that.

01-00:38:36

Li: So the students who had come to campus would be allowed to go use the bowling alley or—?

01-00:38:41

Johnson: If they were in a program. If they were enrolled in a class. They would only be allowed to use the part of the facility that had to do with the class that they were taking. But the civilian employees at Oakland Army Base were allowed to use all of their facilities anytime finally.

01-00:39:10

Li: Right. And do you remember what year that was? That that was changed?

01-00:39:12

Johnson: In the late seventies.

01-00:39:14

Li: Late seventies. Could you talk a little bit about being on base during the Vietnam War, what the atmosphere was like?

01-00:39:20

Johnson: Well, I was there during the tail end of it, and so the biggest thing that was noticeable to me, of course, was that my military population diminished. All the people that I had there that was servicing—by the time I left Oakland Army Base in 1983, I hardly had any military people to service at all because

the war was over and the men and women, the enlisted people, were discharged. And Oakland Army Base also was a transfer point. We had a lot of transit people coming through that would be there for, oh, like maybe three months or so. Well, they were part of my population that I served. And, of course, when the war was over, those people were completely gone. The transfer point completely shutdown. So my heyday was from 1970 through maybe 1978 in running this successful education program. And then, of course, if I didn't have any people to serve and my population diminished, then, of course, there went the program.

01-00:40:46

Li: Right. Because it was not ever for civilian employees.

01-00:40:48

Johnson: No. Well, the civilian employees had their own education program. I had a counterpart who worked for civilian personnel and that person allegedly did for the civilians what I did for the military. Except it didn't happen. And also, I was allowed to run my program during the day for my GED people, and, of course, the civilian employees were not allowed to have time off.

01-00:41:24

Li: Right, right. So at its peak, how many people do you think were involved in your programs?

01-00:41:32

Johnson: Well, I would say a couple hundred.

01-00:41:41

Li: Okay. So that's a lot of students to manage, I mean, for just you and one secretary.

01-00:41:47

Johnson: Yes. And also, the interesting thing was that I mentioned that my counterpart at Treasure Island got on the bandwagon, too, with Columbia College, and so we had Navy people taking classes at Oakland Army Base and we had—and if they needed a course that was being taught at Oakland Army Base—and then we had my people taking classes at Treasure Island if that class was being offered there. So we had an intermingling of Army and Navy, and that was an interesting concept, too.

01-00:42:22

Li: Yes. It seems unusual to have that kind of exchange across.

01-00:42:25

Johnson: Well, we were so nearby, and we were doing the same thing, so for us to cooperate was really the pragmatic thing to do.

01-00:42:34

Li: Right. Was there an education officer on Treasure Island, your counterpart?

01-00:42:36

Johnson: Yes.

01-00:42:38

Li: Did he or she borrow any of your ideas about how to setup programs?

01-00:42:44

Johnson: Yes, we did it the same way.

01-00:42:45

Li: The same way? Huh. So you said that you became the community services officer in the early eighties. Was that partially because the enlisted population was decreasing?

01-00:43:03

Johnson: Yes. I had the time to do it, and I also had the qualifications to do it, and a military person hadn't reported aboard. And so rather than making it an auxiliary duty for a military person, they made it an auxiliary duty for me, and it worked out just fine. I was hopeful that they would civilianize the slot and give it to me permanently, but they were not willing to give up that military slot to do that. And so what happens is, in 1983, a military person did come aboard to fill that slot, and I then became the assistant community services officer. And that did not work out at all.

01-00:43:53

Li: Okay. So you felt you had to take a demotion.

01-00:43:57

Johnson: It was, it was. And that's when I left.

01-00:44:01

Li: Okay. All right. And as community services officer for that year, 1982-83, what sort of things did you oversee?

01-00:44:10

Johnson: Well, the craft shop, the bowling alley, the housing area, gym, the craft shop, the child development center, the youth center.

Yes. It just seems almost unbelievable that Oakland Army Base no longer exists. As a matter of fact, Building One, where I worked at Oakland Army Base, the building no longer exists. It was imploded. And when I drive along 880 and look over that way and see just a vacant land where Building One used to be, it's almost mind boggling. But then, of course, there's no military in the Bay Area at all. I mean, not only is Oakland Army Base gone, so is Presidio, Treasure Island, Naval Air Station Alameda. The closest military base is Travis, and that's not very close.

01-00:45:52

Li: So did you feel like in that time, that the military presence in the Bay Area was palpable? That there was a sense that this was a center for that kind of activity?

01-00:46:03

Johnson: Oh, yes, it was, and it was really devastating to the city of Alameda, for example, when the Naval Air Station closed, because that was the employment for so many people, both military and civilian. So the lack of military presence in the Bay Area has had a tremendous economic effect.

01-00:46:31

Li: Could you talk to me a little bit about life on base outside of your work? You mentioned that you did a variety show. A variety show.

01-00:46:45

Johnson: Well, since I was show biz oriented, I thought that it would be fun to put on a talent show once a year, and so we decided to charge admission and be charged a dollar to see the show. And the money went to Army Emergency Relief. And so we would advertise for people with talent to be in the show, and we had people with talent in the show, and we had people with no talent in the show. But it was great fun putting it on, and people who were in my classes, it was just almost a prerequisite that they had to be in the show. And every time we put the show on, I would always have three military people doing the Andrew Sisters *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* number, which I choreographed for them, and it was always three male enlisted people. And if it was a new general, I mean, it was really a shocker for him. But anyway, that's one of the main reasons that the people always came to see the show, because they wanted to see who the Andrews Sisters were going to be this time around. So anyway, it was a fun thing to do.

We would probably have, oh, maybe twenty acts. And it was during the lunch hour, and if we ran over the lunch hour, nobody said anything because the money was going to a worthy cause, Army Emergency Relief, and it was a real morale booster, as well. So, I mean, that was not in my job description, but it certainly was one of the fun things that I did, and it also was a worthwhile thing to be doing, as well.

01-00:49:04

Li: Yes. And so did you start doing that from the first year you arrived on base?

01-00:49:08

Johnson: No. That idea didn't hit until I had been there about five years.

01-00:49:16

Li: And were these kinds of things common? You know, having activities on base? Like having a variety show, putting on events?

01-00:49:25

Johnson:

I don't know. I don't know what other bases were doing. I just know what we were doing. I know when I first got started in the education center, of course, I knew nothing about running an education center, so I must say that I spent three days at Fort Ord visiting the education center there, finding out what they did, and I visited the Presidio for three days to find out what those Army Education Centers were doing. And so I took those ideas, incorporated them, and improved on them.

01-00:50:07

Li:

And so looking back, do you look at yourself as an educator as your primary work?

01-00:50:14

Johnson:

Well, that's where I spent most of my working career, being the education officer at the Oakland Army Base. Yes.

01-00:50:23

Li:

And how important do you feel like people skills were in your job?

01-00:50:29

Johnson:

Well, that's, I guess, one of the reasons that I was attracted to it, because I enjoyed teaching school, I enjoyed seeing other people being involved in getting their education, and so I guess it was my people skills desire that drew me in that direction.

01-00:50:57

Li:

And did you have to do much counseling and support {inaudible}?

01-00:50:59

Johnson:

That was my main job. Yes. But it really wasn't all that difficult because we had the programs all setup and the people knew about the programs, and the programs had such a good reputation that they were eager to participate. Now, it was one size fits all. I mean, if they didn't want a degree in business administration, this wasn't the program for them. If they wanted a degree in something else, then, of course, we had to take that into account, but they could not participate in the on post classes. We would have to find someplace off post for them. But we chose business administration because it is the most pragmatic and most versatile degree for someone to have. If you had to choose one degree to work toward, well, let's try business.

01-00:52:02

Li:

And so for students, say, who wanted to do, oh, I don't know, pre-med or something specific, would you work with other nearby colleges to help them with classes?

01-00:52:15

Johnson:

Well, I would send them to Laney College or Merritt College, junior colleges in Oakland because of the nearbyness. But that was very, very rare.

01-00:52:34

Li: Okay. And how open did you feel like people were when you would approach them? You know, people off campus to work with Oakland Army Base?

01-00:52:45

Johnson: Oh, well, it worked really well. The principal of Oakland Tech was very receptive for the tradeoff. He would provide the teachers, I would provide the facility, and the director of Vista College was very eager for his people to use our craft shop and to hire our people who were skilled in teaching ceramics, upholstery, and woodworking and jewelry because that was what they did during the day. That was their job. And so they would just take annual leave at night so that they weren't being paid by Vista College and by the federal government at the same time. And so I provided the people and the facility, and they paid them.

01-00:53:36

Li: And so they would just take leave just in the evening hours?

01-00:53:40

Johnson: Um-hmm.

01-00:53:41

Li: How interesting.

01-00:53:41

Johnson: Yes, you could take two or three hours of leave at a time. It's just dipping into your vacation. But they were hot to do it.

01-00:53:53

Li: Have you kept in touch with any of the people that you worked with over the years?

01-00:53:58

Johnson: Yes. Well, there is a club called the Oakland Army Base Retirees Luncheon, and that is held every six months, in May and October, and those of us who have left Oakland Army Base generally attend that. And I'd say probably there are maybe forty of us in that group. As far as any of my counselees, I must say that I don't know where any of them are. Well, first of all, that was thirty years ago. And so back in those days, I was in my thirties, and now I'm in my seventies, and so they were in their twenties and thirties. And so where they are, I don't know.

01-00:55:01

Li: Did you know what some of them had gone on to do afterwards at the time?

01-00:55:06

Johnson: I must say that the follow-up on those people, I really don't have any information on that. It was a transient thing. They came there and they did their thing and they succeeded, and then they went on. And where they went and what they did, it was—

01-00:55:30

Li: {inaudible} military life.

01-00:55:31

Johnson: —their military career and they went on with their careers. We just know that during that time that they were at Oakland Army Base, their career was enhanced.

01-00:55:41

Li: Yes. So that must have been satisfying, knowing at the end of the day that even if people come and go, that you had a positive effect on people's lives.

01-00:55:50

Johnson: Yes, yes.

01-00:55:57

Li: Could you talk a little bit about the military and how central that the culture of the military was to the work your students did, the attitude they had to the work they did. Did you feel like it was a factor?

01-00:56:11

Johnson: Well, the people that I worked with were transportation specialists, and so they were highly dedicated and highly motivated and already trained in a field when they came to Oakland Army Base. And so I was dealing with really the cream of the crop and so it really wasn't difficult to motivate these people toward getting their education because they were already motivated to succeed and to do a good job, and since this was an enhancement to what they already had planned for themselves, it just all fit together well.

01-00:56:57

Li: And so the officers who participated in the MBA program, did you recruit people or would they seek you out if they were interested?

01-00:57:14

Johnson: We would advertise in the base newspaper. We were very fortunate. The education center was most fortunate that the base newspaper, *The Western Arrow*, gave us a lot of publicity. And so the officers knew about the opportunities. There were other programs available for them, too. I mean, Golden Gate University and the MBA program wasn't the only program that I would counsel officers to get in to. But I wanted the officers all to have an advanced degree of some kind and you can't really beat an MBA. What is a more pragmatic graduate degree to have than an MBA? For example, my boss, Colonel Gleason said, "Well, Jim, I don't need a master's degree. I already have one." And I said, "In what?" He said, "Well, in history." And I said, "What are you going to do with that?" So he was one of my enrollees.

01-00:58:21

Li: Oh, really?

01-00:58:23

Johnson: Yes. And he had his MBA by the time he left Oakland Army Base.

01-00:58:27

Li: Wow. And could that affect your promotion within the Army?

01-00:58:32

Johnson: Yes. Both for the enlisted and the officers. Yes. It was to their credit to get credits.

01-00:58:42

Li: Okay. I mean, I would think make them eligible for a higher pay scale and a higher position.

01-00:58:45

Johnson: Yes.

01-00:58:50

Li: Did you ever have people who tried to come to Oakland Army Base because they knew about the educational program?

01-00:58:55

Johnson: I don't think so. I think people came to Oakland Army Base because that's where they were assigned. And it really was considered a pretty good billet. To be able to be stationed on the West Coast near San Francisco was a desirable billet.

01-00:59:23

Li: Yes. Let me just stop.

[End Audio File 1]

Begin Audio File 2 01-09-2009.mp3

02-00:00:00

Li: Robin Li speaking with Jim Johnson on January 9, 2009 in San Francisco, California. This is tape number two. So you were just going over how unique this program was for an Army base.

02-00:00:12

Johnson: Yes. I would say that if you spoke with an education services officer at any other military installation, there would be some similarities, but there would be some great differences. For example, the funding, for one. The command support. I would not have been able to do this had I not had the direct relationship that I had with Colonel Walsh, which was established in that very unusual way.

02-00:00:46

Li: And I wanted to ask just a little bit about the perception of the Army base off base because of the programs that you helped run.

02-00:00:59

Johnson:

Well, we got a good reputation. I know that *The Oakland Tribune* ran an article about how the Oakland Army Base was cooperating with the outside community, and that was a big boost for the general. He took credit for being able to participate in the outside community. Giving a positive image for the military base. The Vietnam War had a bad rap, and here we were supporting the Vietnam War. So for us to be doing something to support the community was a feather in his cap, and I'm delighted that he was able to ride on that wave.

02-00:01:55

Li:

Yes. I was wondering. It seems like the Bay Area in the 1970s might have been relatively anti-military and politically—

02-00:02:04

Johnson:

As they still are. Yes. More so now.

02-00:02:07

Li:

Was that ever a tension that you felt as an employee of the Oakland Army Base?

02-00:02:13

Johnson:

No. As employees, I don't think we ever felt threatened in any way.

02-00:02:19

Li:

Were there protests that happened near base during the Vietnam War?

02-00:02:23

Johnson:

Well, as I say, I got there at the tail end of the Vietnam War, and it was pretty much on its way out. And so if there were protests, it would have happened before my time.

02-00:02:40

Li:

Right. Okay. So just to wrap up, are there any other things you wanted to add about the program that you worked on?

02-00:02:46

Johnson:

No. I hadn't thought about this in a long time, Robin, and it really is very nostalgic for me to look back and think of how much fun it was.

02-00:02:56

Li:

Yes. Thank you so much. I really appreciate you taking the time. Thank you.

[End of Interview]