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Interview
Chris Burns
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Interview conducted by Lenore Fenn
Videotape length 123 minutes

INT: Tell us who you are, and a little bit about your background, where you grew up, where you went to school.

CB: My name is Chris Burns. I grew up in a small town south of Boston by the name of Weymouth. Grew up on the waterfront, being around the water a lot. Went to Catholic schools with nuns for the first eight years or so, and then I went to high school in Boston, in the North End, which was run by the Franciscan brothers.

I ended up in the service because of a little hometown jam, I guess you would call it, and they believed in getting rid of minor offenders right away. And the choice was, threats of...or go into the Army, so then I ended up in the Army. I ended up in the paratroopers, because my lawyer had been a paratrooper, and he just thought it was a good way to go, and I liked the idea of being in an elite unit. And so that is how I ended up in the Army. Nine months later, I went to Vietnam, when the 101st Airborne division went over. And again, it was being part of an elite movement. A lot of people. It was one of the biggest operations of flying people from one place to the other, right up until Desert Storm. My military specialty was I carried a radio for the forward observers, so him and myself were assigned to an infantry company, which was A company, 2nd 506. So, I spent my first seven or eight months in the field with an infantry company. After that, I came out, and I was able to get a job in the rear area. I got a job running a PX, which was kind of like having the only Walmart in a sizable area, because everything of value came through. I extended my tour and I ended up doing a total of 23 months. This is between the...I went

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into the service when I was 17 and a half. I was in Vietnam by the time I was a couple of months over 18.

The second part of my tour, I ended up living in the city of Da Nang, being an expediter. We shipped all the PX supplies for roughly around 20,000 people. They liked to have people that were ex-grunts in this job, because they felt that we would take a lot better care of the people that were in the field. We had great disdain for the people that were in the rear. The second year in living in the town and working in the city was very good, because I got to know the Vietnamese as a people which changed a lot of my thoughts and feelings. Kind of went from the outhouse to the penthouse with this switch in job categories and stuff. It later bothered me a great deal, kind of a guilt for surviving, and that I had such a good life compared to what I knew the reality of what the war was. So that is how I got to that point in time.

INT: What were the politics of your family of origin? How did they feel about the war, about your going?

CB: They basically...I kind of look at it now as coming from a very 1950's type family, strong on the moral values, fairly strong on the religious because of going to the Catholic schools, believed very much in the government, the politics of the time as far as—I guess it would fall more into the category of being hawks. My father didn't want me to go in the service. He did not want me to go to Vietnam. He is a combat veteran of New Guinea, so he saw a lot of the same things that I saw. I think there was a lot of anger in me for a lot of years, for the fact that he let me do it, despite the fact that I was afraid the war was going to get over before I went there. Coming back, they had a very hard time dealing with the fact that I had changed and no longer believed in the war. In other words, I was no longer a blind follower. I had a lot of questions about it, and my views changed a great deal. And coming back to this country, especially being

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away for two years, the country had changed so radically, particularly among people my age, my friends that I was in high school with. A remarkable number of males decided to become schoolteachers, things like that. Very hard for my parents to see that change in me, and the person that I came back as. They were very much shocked by the fact that I was anti-war, and got interested in the things that I did when I came back.

INT: Can I stop a minute, just a second. I may have misunderstood you, but I thought you said your dad didn't want you to go into the paratroopers, or into this war?

CB: Into the war, particularly with the...I kind of think that the thinking was, first, that I was too young, because when I went into the military I was seventeen and a half, I guess, seventeen and seven months, eight months. So I was very young. The training I went through moved very quickly. The part about being in the airborne outfit didn't make any difference, because he actually believed that the outfits—and it seems to be, I found it to be true—that the outfits, that it takes a little bit more, that take a great deal of pride in them, that have the elite thing to them, usually have, you get tougher jobs, but you are better equipped to handle it.

INT: So it wasn't that he didn't approve of the war, it was, it was your tender age that concerned him?

CB: Yes, but I...he knows all too well that—or very well, exactly—what it was like. I think that the reason he probably signed is he just believed I would go one way or the other. Because that was at the time, I was on a waiting list for the Navy and things like that.

INT: You talked a little bit about how the country had changed during the time you were away. Would you expand on that?

CB: Yeah, it very basically seemed to kind of go from a “Leave It to Beaver” fifties type style that I had been brought up in, and I think that the period before...and I try and look back at...I don't remember paying a great

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deal of attention to the politics versus keeping up on the facts, as far as reading the newspaper and seeing what was happening. It was the way I was brought up. I kind of think we were raised on John Wayne, Robert Mitchum type of movies that glorified war, and now I can kind of look back at them and see that a fair part of that is propaganda. I mean, I do remember when the Cuban missile crisis came out. All of us talking about what outfits that we would enlist and go in, and this is at a very young age, twelve or thirteen, somewhere in there. And it was the way we were brought up, and we were brought up to look at our military obligation as our obligation to our country as there were no questions about it, there were no doubts. It may not have been fair, there was a lot of different things in there, but we very much believed that it was our duty, and that, one way or the other, we would end up going. I think it was a lot less...we weren't as selfish as individuals as I think we are now.

INT: And when you came back, what were the most dramatic differences?

CB: Well, of course, everything went from fifties style haircuts and clothing, and the way you looked, and to this day, I am still finding out things that happened in that two and a half year period. Of course, I had exposed to kind of three things: One was my beliefs when I went in, how that was; the second, would be the things that I learned about the war, about the political system, about the way the world really worked; and then when I came back to notice, I guess, the different reasons people have. I didn't always agree with the words and actions that others would put down for their reasons.

I think that the Vietnam veterans, when they came home, an awful lot of them, their concerns were just on the way the war was waged, the way it was managed, and that our beliefs, or my personal belief, was that if you were going to do this and you were going to wage war, then, then don't

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hold us up. Don't hold us back. Don't play all the games that they played in the political—and by political, I mean the people in the White House, not the process that was happening outside the White House.

So I think it was a lack of commitment that we saw that bothered us the most, and I remember being upset at different times about what you were reading about happening, happening back here as the war was in progress, but one of the things that we always referred back to was, back here was the world, and we were in another reality over there. It's...the changes were just overwhelming. I mean, the changes in people's moral values, everybody screaming and yelling about all the freedoms that we wanted, and the actual reality is we had at that period in time a lot more freedom that we have ever had. At this present day, I have kind of seen our freedoms erode away over the years, and I think there is a lot more control in the world now.

INT: That is an interesting idea. Would you be specific?

CB: Sure. We had a very...we kind of we thought the world needed a great deal of changing, and we were going to change all that, and I think because of the fact that we hadn't been really involved because of our young age—the age that we served at as soldiers, being eighteen and nineteen, twenty—that we never really had any lives of our own. I think of the people back here, particularly those that were draft age, and things like that, their concerns were not just political and moral decisions. I think there was a great deal of rather healthy fear.

But, but, we, we, we had... I mean they didn't have computers. They couldn't keep track of everything. The world was an awful lot more trusting. And I think people as individuals came and had a much better value system than they do now. You know, that sense of honor and duty to country. We didn't have the sense of individualism that we have these days.

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So, we're...again, it was unselfish. I mean, a lot of people looked at it as far as being, if you weren't going to be in the service, well, the Peace Corps, or doing things like that. And so we had all these choices, and I think the more we screamed and yelled about them, the more they said, we're going to have to do something about this one or that one. And I mean, that was blatantly obvious with the politics of the day, through Nixon and Spiro Agnew and that type of crew. They really just started clamping down on different things. I think the fact that...I am kind of getting away from things right there...

INT: When you were in Da Nang, and got to know the people, it changed your view of the war. How did you get to know them? What happened?

CB: Before I had ended up in Da Nang, the whole time I had been in the field, I don't think I saw a building over two stories tall. You didn't see the Vietnamese as individuals at all. Because of the paranoia and the fact that it was a war type thing, that it was constantly all around us, versus saying, if you are on this side of this line, you are safe, or if you are this much further away, you are even safer. I think the nature of being in the infantry and going through villages and your interactions with people, it is very difficult to get to know anybody when you are dropping by their house or their neighborhood, here comes a hundred guys with guns. That is not a very pleasant thing for them. What happened when I lived in Da Nang...I mean, my encounters with the Vietnamese as a people, we were limited to...well, when I was in the infantry, we were stationed in one area for a fair amount of time, and then we traveled more, but we had an interpreter with us. I got to know him a little bit. We would know a little bit of the people that worked in, say, the barbershops. I got to know the Vietnamese as a people, once I started having them as employees, and seeing things. And when I came back that second year, I mean, I ended up working with

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Vietnamese employees that were working out of the depots that I worked at. Had more time to spend time in clubs, like enlisted men's clubs, that type of deal. Had Vietnamese employees at the PX depot, working out at the docks to pick the freighters and stuff from the US and from Japan were unloaded, and I got to see more what their home life was.

I had a relationship with the typical GI little kid type thing, where he kind of hung around, we would bring him in and buy him sodas and feed him hamburgers and that type of stuff and in turn he took me home to his family, which was fairly well off because his father was a fisherman. If he couldn't eat all of his food, or we weren't going to eat all of ours, he would wrap it up and take it home. So he brought me home to his house. He had picked up a good understanding of English, and those type things. And the reality really set home for the fact, I mean, we joked about it and everything, was the fact that the Vietnamese as a people, particularly say the age category, same age category as ourselves, when they went in the Army, it was for the duration of the war. I mean, I felt at different times that they had a little fear of different troublesome situations that we got in. But the thing was, we had a one year tour. They were in it until it was all over. I mean, basically, you kind of learn that the average person, whether it was the American or the Vietnamese, they want a job, they want time with their children. I mean, their family is very important to them. They want a future for their children.

They want to...they begrudgingly pay taxes, the same as we do, but the reality for them is that the war and the strife was there all the time. It ran through there that any and all children would be drafted by one side or the other, just by the fact that we would have control of an area for a period of time. Then when we would leave the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong would then move back in. They were paying taxes to both governments. They were having their sons and daughters taken by both sides. Their food,

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their crops, were the same thing. So it sank home a lot more, what the war was all about, and the daily effect it had on their lives.

INT: You made reference to the feelings about troops, or what did you say, in the field, and then the troops that were support troops...

CB: Yes.

INT: Would you talk a little bit about that?

CB: Um, okay. Basically, what would happen is we moved in as a whole big unit. So, we took over a base that was already there. We improved it. And then from that area, which is a couple of steps removed from the big rear areas, which was Saigon, that type of deal, they just lived another life. I mean, they lived in buildings that had roofs. They had... like the PX store that I worked in later was air-conditioned. They had clean laundry. Any number of things. The job that was considered worst was to be in the field, in the bush, in the jungle, or the rice paddy, as the case may be. So what happened—at least this is my belief—is that the individual who is at the very, very front end of the spear or actually out there in the field, one of the things that you know is exactly how bad...you are in the most jeopardized position because you are out there actively going around any of the small groups or large groups. You are doing without. You might eat canned food for considerable periods of time. The water you take, you take out of streams, rivers, ponds, shell holes, because you are going through five quarts of water a day. It was brutally hot and humid, well over a hundred a lot of days. You wore clothes until they rotted away or were thrown away. You just never knew when your...you would go from the tedium and boredom that is your normal routine, your normal walk through the jungle to being right in the very thick of it, going into an ambush, having a booby trap go off, that type of thing. I mean, you are sleeping on the ground. I mean, just the matter of going to the bathroom. You had to take a rifle, a helmet. You had to find toilet paper, and then

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you would have to go and leave your friends in the company and go out there, ten or fifteen or twenty feet away and, and try to have a bowel movement. And, you know, all the things in life that you take for granted back here, even in the rear areas back there, you just didn't have.

And, one of your type things is that you have to build up in yourself that you are tougher, you can take it, this is why you are here. Some people thrived on it, and some people, were overcome with fear. I think the emotions and things that you would normally have time to deal with you never had time to deal with.

So any time we went back to the rear area where people had air-conditioning, I mean, in the bigger rear areas, Long Bin, Ben Hoa, Saigon, they had, I mean, they had swimming pools, they had movies every night, all kinds of things. They could go to the store and buy soda. They could go to the club and drink beer. We had none of that. We would get two or three days off when we came back in, which was called "stand down." We would get all our packages. We didn't always get our mail. My mother sent packages on such a regular basis, and there was weeks went by without them.

Things would just happen. I mean, there is just no security, no safeness at all, so when you came back to the rear area, it was looked at, boy, that was some real plush living. and it didn't make any difference, just the fact that they had a canvas roof over their head, that they had sandbags and fighting positions already built, and they didn't have to worry about it as much as we did. Being in the field, we just didn't take a lot of shit off anybody, because, (a) what were they going to do, send us to Vietnam? (b), what were they going to do, send us to the field? We were already in as bad a neighborhood as you could be, so that's the way we had to look at things.

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So, it was jealousy and envy. When I worked in the PX and I traveled from place to place, we had at the time a mobile PX which was either set up in a truck, or set up in—we had these metal boxes, the big shipping containers. So I would have the store, and of course what they did as I was going from stand down to stand down, so everybody would always ask me how I got this great job in the PX, and I used to tell them, “As soon as you finish your first year,” and that would let them know that I had been there, and also, because you wear different patches on your uniform they would be able to tell that you were over there, you kind of know the language and the lingo. And there were fortunate individuals who came through and the PX system at one time was very short people working in it, so fifty truck drivers became PX people because of the fact that the day they landed in Vietnam, they had the shortage and they had an oversupply of truck drivers, so...It was kind of definitely, very definitely a macho type thing, and the only way you get through stuff like that is by convincing yourself you are tough and you can take everything that they...the grief you got from both sides.

INT: Wow. When you were in your training or in the field, were you aware of protests, of criticism of the war? When, at what point did you become aware of that?

CB: I think in the beginning...I know in the beginning, before I left and everything we had a very black and white view about it. We believed very strongly in our democratic system, the way things worked, that this was the right choice and this was how to do it, so you really looked down at those people. There is also the reverse envy type thing, because we were there and they were back here, and they didn't know what they were talking about and doing. And I think there's part of us—I know there's a part of m—that kind of believes that a lot of it at that time wasn't the fact that they opposed the war so much politically as they feared it, it might become very

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personal, and they might go. I mean, I think that's the point in our country, in our society, where becoming a college educated person became a very, very smart thing to do, because it bought you four years of doing that. The price for dropping out of college was to go into the service.

I think it really started to change for me politically, and looking at the way the war was waged when I started to run into problems and notice things as far as the contract—I don't want to say contract—as far as the way the war was organized and being run, kind of the conduct of it, the nitpicking and the serving an extra year there, I started also to see that battles happened every year almost in the same spot, and the fact that we just had that one year commitment was very tough to take, because people, it took them a while to get trained and to become efficient, somebody you could depend on, that type of stuff. And the fact that the officer corps in particular—everybody—was into getting their tickets punched so that they would have six months in the field and then six months in a staff job. That was very difficult to take, because, again, you just get them to where they had the knowledge and the skills and stuff like that, and then they would rotate, and the average grunt wouldn't rotate, and he was stuck to within a week or ten days of when he was going to go home.

So a lot of those questions really started to get in my mind, and then to come home and just find out how my contemporaries viewed it, how the people did, and I mean, there was a lot of people who believed very strongly on a on a moral basis for it. Again, there's nothing like...I wasn't 100% for or against the war. I mean, there's different percentages of what's inside of you that tells you what to do, and it becomes a tripping point and it tips over.

An awful lot was—and then I started seeing this a lot after I got out of the field, because I kept in contact with my friends that I had spent my time out there with—remember I went away on my R&R for a week, ten days,

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you know, couple extra days goofing off on the way back, and I came back. I had been in my job in the PX for only a couple of weeks, and seeing one friend in particular, and him telling me how hard it was, and he also carried a radio, as I did. He was from Western Mass., and he told me he wasn't going to live. And he didn't. I came back from [sigh] that R&R and all, out of that, he was in the 2nd platoon, and [sigh], oh, I want to say seven or eight guys were killed, or wounded—killed, killed—and more wounded, just in that one week. And that's kind of when you realized, or the feeling set in, that you become guilty for surviving. There was a part of me that believed I could have avoided some of the situations, that [I]—me as a person and me as the talents and the skills that I had—could somehow have changed the results.

INT: Would you talk a little bit about the role of drugs in military life as you saw it?

CB: I was fairly fortunate with that. The easiest alcohol and alcohol of choice was supplied by the government, which was beer. We weren't allowed to drink hard liquor. I am speaking of the time when we in the field. We would come back, and then we would have, oh, like a big barbecue dinner with steaks and they would break out the beer and that type stuff. We would get our packages and our packages would have hard alcohol from our aunts and uncles and friends, that type of stuff. You know, pints, half pints. Pot use was very, um, I don't want to say prevalent, but it came about, and of course, you have got a group of people whose ages and experiences run from seventeen, eighteen back here up until their early twenties. There was a high degree of usage of pot. It wasn't used in the field a great deal in my type of unit. I think there was a lot more usage of it than they were willing to admit. I mean, I want to say figures of close to 80%. It didn't hurt that it was undoubtedly the best pot in

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the world [laughing], and that it was strong. It did the things we wanted it to do. I mean it took away the edge. So it's a very strange thing.

Even since then, during that period over there, for all that period of time, living in a society for over two years where everybody had a gun, I never saw one violent act committed by a person that used a weapon, or even their—their fist. It just didn't happen. The combinations of alcohol and hard alcohol use...that's when people had sense, cleaning weapons and things like that. I didn't see any heroin usage. We didn't use pot. We might use it once in a while out in the field because you have to remember sometimes when you weren't in contact, when you weren't fighting, the scenery was pretty terrific. It's a very beautiful, very pretty country. There always was feelings of being someplace no man had been before, because of that, and so there was that type of setting that I think kind of came about when I got out and everything.

But, again, heroin wasn't there. I had friends later who came back with it, with heroin habits and things like that. In the second year, which would have been 1969, the percentage of drug use got much higher. It was open racial hostilities, and then I believe there was a greater blend of that. But again, part of being in an elite unit, you were a lot more disciplined. There was a lot of volunteers, so that kind of changed things.

INT: To what do you attribute the growing racial hostility?

CB: Um, politics. Politics back here. The sense that blacks were dying in higher numbers in combat roles. The people that were being drafted in were not very happy to be in there. There wasn't the percentage of blacks going to colleges and on to higher education. An awful lot of them would come from city environments.

People should realize that segregation and the racial views from the people of the South were vastly different from today. High schools and colleges down there had only been integrated a short period of time. So

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that was a tough atmosphere. An awful lot of the NCOs, which is the non-commissioned officers, the supervisors, if you will, came from southern backgrounds. The military was also a way for blacks to advance themselves. And I saw that type of fighting during my second year when there was much more going on back here. I mean, I can remember hearing of the assassination of Martin Luther King—that happened while I was out in the field—the assassination of Robert Kennedy were very big things, and so there was that black awareness was growing, so that people wouldn't always hang out together. People who had been very close in the field would come back in the rear area. I mean, I remember one fistfight between a black medic and another white guy. They were tearing each other apart, and yet, days before, had been, you know, their life and survival depended on it. An awful lot of it, I think, happened more so among the people in the rear because they had the time, and they could do things like that, and it did get nasty. And there were shootings. There were...we had a very stylized black handshake called the [dap].

And interesting, the whole service thing for me was my first introduction to not only blacks, Mexican Americans, we had Canadians, we had people from countries from South America who were in there. So there, I guess as you learn tolerance, the other side of the coin is the intolerance, and you kind of have to be educated to that. One of the nice things about hanging around with the potheads—and also because of the types of jobs that I had—is that I was accepted in both groups. But it was very strange to be the only white person in a group of ten, fifteen, or twenty black people, black men, so it was strangeness there. There was also a racial tone at times towards the Vietnamese. We also had Koreans there, we had Filipinos, I guess we all kind of—not all, I mean—I seemed to see that everybody kind of likes to have somebody else that they can look down on. You know, you take a functional alcoholic will look down at an

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alcoholic who is in the streets as being far worse than they. That type of mentality, I think, cuts across an awful lot of the same things.

INT: Were you exposed to Agent Orange at all? Were you aware of its hazards?

CB: At the time, we were not aware of the hazards of Agent Orange. When I was in the field it was a very, very beneficial thing to see because it could clear the sides of the road. You wouldn't have ambushes, but the reality that I was being poisoned never really set in until after I came home and learned more about it. And I have learned a great deal more in the years since then.

The area that I initially did my time in the field in, we were drinking. I would drink close to four to five quarts of water a day. So, anytime you crossed a stream, ran across a spring, a river, any other source of water, you would take it. I mean, I never used the water purification pills because of the terrible taste, but they wouldn't have purified anything out of it. What happened in this one particular area—and I have only found this out in the last couple of years—is that you think that the water was okay, because they were flying it from the field, I mean, out to the field from the rear area, and what happened is this area had a very sandy terrain, and they did all the spraying before I got there and so the contaminant had just gone down into the water, and we had shallow wells so that's where it came from. I often tell people that I only made one mistake over there, and that was that I drank the water.

A very, very pertinent thing that happened is, I have one friend that I have kept in regular touch with. I was out of touch with him for about ten years, and the last ten years, we see each other fairly often and travel together. We went to Washington for a reburial ceremony of a lieutenant that was killed during the Tet offensive. Two guys who had—one was from Florida, the other was from Chicago—who had not seen each other or

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any of that, there was five of us in total that got together. And they both had—it's a form of psoriasis they'd like to believe—but there's great big ovals, sores that openly weep, and through their knuckles, on their head. The ones on the arms were very striking. My friend Bob often wears long sleeved shirts just for that very reason. And there is no way in the world you can convince me that that isn't caused by the Agent Orange.

I have quite a bit of trouble with numbness in my fingers and hands. I would say through the early seventies. I have a hard time when I lose weight, so I am a very firm believer in the fact that it is a very definite cancer-causing agent. Had people that died of Hodgkin's disease. I fairly regularly read the newspapers and read the obituaries, and I see the people of my own age, and I kind of like compare, and I have often felt like writing letters to people and asking them that very same question that you asked me. The government is never going to admit it. I think it is very interesting that they had that small town in—was it Missouri? something like that—and the government bought the whole town because of the fact that the contaminated oil had been spread on the streets. So, yeah, I know it. I mean, I wasn't aware of it then, but I have been very aware of it since then.

INT: Tell us about coming back into the country. Did you come back with friends, or all by yourself?

CB: I had the experience of coming back twice because of the fact that I came back once after thirteen months. I came back in December, surprised my parents and everybody for Christmas. I have always been a great person for traveling and then just showing up without any phone calls ahead of time. Came back in uniform. Didn't receive a terribly bad reception the first time. Didn't have a lot of time, really, I mean, I wasn't political, politicized then. I didn't go anywhere in uniform other than to travel and everything, so it was pretty much...I mean, people were very

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receptive. They treated me kind of I think in a way that I thought was a bit like the kind of the World War II victory parade type things.

INT: When was this?

CB: This was in December of 1968. I came back a year later, in October. I mean, by then I was very happy to be getting out of the Army, despised it, didn't want to do anything with the uniform, tried to fly from San Francisco to here and they made me put my uniform on to get on the plane. I changed. I spent a couple of days in San Francisco. I knew I had to make some kind of adjustment on getting out of the service and doing that. And so I spent about a week out there and just kind of relaxed a little. Flew back in on a kind of red-eye flight. My parents and my sisters all walked past me at the airport because they were looking for somebody in uniform, and I had my civilian clothes on. So it was pretty decent. My father had finished the sign that he hadn't finished the first time which said "Welcome Home," and then he put again, underneath it. So it was a fair amount, a pretty good amount of support from friends and family.

The fact that I went back for a second year did not go over very well with anybody. I had a lady, who, in fact, I had just seen her recently in Florida. Very devout. When I went and told her I was going back to Vietnam, she said, "I'm not going to pray for you anymore," which was kind of funny. I never realized until quite a long time after I came back about what my decision to go back there again must have meant to my parents. It must have been horrible. I didn't tell them until the last day I was leaving. I kept telling them I was going to New Jersey, and I was going to New Jersey to catch the plane to go back to Vietnam.

My orders got fouled up and what happened is, I was back in Vietnam. I was very smug and complacent, flying it in there, talking to my seatmate who had been asking me about the Tet offensive of a year ago. "Oh, yeah," I says, "I spent a couple of days AWOL because I knew I was going back to

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Vietnam and what were they going to do to me,” and as I was flying in I found that Tet was a rotating holiday, just like our Easter, so it happens on a different [laughing] couple of days every year, and I was flying right back in there which was kind of one of life's little ironies.

I think people fairly quickly...I never talked at all about the bad side. I mean, even in my letters my mother and father got a lot of weather reports, nice and sunny, “Oh, no, it rained again,” where I might be traveling, but I just couldn't bring myself to give them any details. I guess I didn't have that type of relationship, too. I know some people did. I did have my film screened by a friend of mine, just in case somebody did grab my camera. I mean, I didn't want pictures of dead bodies and that type of thing. I didn't take any joy or see any need to do that, but a lot of people have very different views on that.

INT: Have you had the opportunity or desire to share the realities of your experience with your parents since then, or...

CB: Not a great deal. Basically, when I came back, during the course of my second year there, I had access to alcohol, lots of alcohol. And picked up a pretty good alcohol habit. That was how I was dealing with my feelings. I came back, I had an awful lot of funny stories, because that is one of the...I guess tragedy and comedy [go] together in a war, just as in any other part of life, but even maybe more so because of the pressures and the feelings. You have those two things, an awful lot of funny things to tell people. I never really shared my feelings or emotions about any of it with anybody for ten or twelve years. And that was because I just collapsed mentally. I just couldn't carry all that weight with me anymore.

INT: How did you first connect with the VVAW, and how did you happen to be involved in the march, Operation POW it was called?

CB: The way that I first got involved with it is, I remember going to a very large peace demonstration very shortly after I got out held on Boston

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Common, with a lot of people going to see what it was about, and in that process, I can't remember exactly, I found out there was a veterans' group against the war in Vietnam. And I decided that was for me. Part of it was my alienation from people my own age, my own experiences, because of kind of a...even then I was a rarity among the people that I grew up with, the people that I went to school with, and the fact that I did go into the Army and did go to Vietnam, and went back for that second tour...So I was living in the city of Boston at the time, and I would have to say it was just—I can't remember the exact moment—but once I found it I knew that that was for me. I had the time. I raised money for them. They booked me as a speaker, like at colleges, that type of thing. So I got very heavily involved very quickly. We had gone on the march down to Washington, that the Vietnam veterans went on, and had gone through that experience. So I guess it's part of who I am as an individual. It struck a very positive chord in me. And I got very, very involved in it, and one thing kind of flowed from one to the other.

INT: What do you remember about that particular event?

CB: We had come up with the idea and it was laid out, and a lot of it was strategy, tactics, planning. We had pretty regularly been doing different events. We were in demand as speakers, as representatives, because of the tremendous credibility that we had, because we were the one group that the folks in Washington couldn't put down. We had a very, very busy agenda. And it seemed, it was such a natural thing to try and spread the message, and coming from such a historical part of the country, [it] lent itself to that type of thing and the activism, the feelings and emotions that were involved—I mean, this was democracy as it was meant to be.

INT: How did the VVAW run itself? How was it organized?

CB: It was a remarkable effort by a very strong group of individualists. It was very democratic. Everything was brought up and there was a lot of

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role shifting. We were all very, very, um...for the most part, most of us could do any particular job. We kind of traded off on assignments—there were a few people...[one of] us [is now] our state senator [U.S. Senator] John Kerry— now that we were more organized and had more of an agenda. But we spent a lot of time yelling and arguing at each other at different times on how we were going to do things. But the training in tactics that we got from the military came in very, very handy, and so it was truly remarkable. It was enjoyable. If you didn't particularly like how something was going to be handled—and there was different things that different people had their little things, I don't think is the right way to go—and they could sit on the sideline or change things—whatever. It was all done for the common good. An awful lot of issues were voted on for everybody. We had our office in Cambridge, and it was a very, very stimulating time, because of all the different efforts. There [were] efforts for people to get out of the service so that they wouldn't have to go there. There [was] draft counseling. I mean, it was very much the busy beehive thing, and it wasn't just any one person running it or doing it. All the responsibilities were shared. You participated to the degree that you felt committed to.

INT: Would you clarify some confusion? When you said that your military training helped you to have the most democratic experience, and I thought of the military as a top down, hierarchical...

CB: Oh, exactly. But [laughing]...

INT: So it was in reaction to that?

CB: No, it was learning that an organized approach to doing things is a much better way to be. It's would be kind of like an old saying that I've heard of the Boston Red Sox, is they get to the airport and twenty-five players take twenty-five taxis, and basically we'd be thirty people who could get on a bus and do things together. So, the thinking and the

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organizing part is what I meant. It wasn't specific military MOS's, military training. It was the fact that being organized or just disorganized but organized was the best way to achieve results.

INT: So how was it you had arrived in Concord? How many vets were there? How were you received?

CB: I don't exactly remember how we did it. I was involved and worked out of the office which was coordinating a lot of different things, and what it ended up being is that we had different areas of responsibility, and if you are going to be part of the organizers, you don't get to really be the participant as much as you would like to be at times. It's very much like the videotaping. I was looking at it last night from seeing that hockey game. It was the fact that you have to keep one eye in the camera all the time as much as you would like to be watching, and that one eye only can look at the camera part. It's the other eye that wanders around, and you hope it picks up the rest of it. So this shifting of roles and leadership—again, we were very okay, I'll do this, I'll do that and you—that's, that's how, how things got done. Again, it was just a great idea from history. We were very much trying to find ways to effectively communicate with the people back here, and to speed and hasten the end of the war. Boston is a very unique city out of all the cities in our country because of the tremendous amount of history that has happened here—our heritage, a huge population of students, and all those things to that type of activity.

INT: How did people hear about it? What kind of network did you have?

CB: Actually, that happened to be one of my responsibilities—myself and another fellow by the name of Chris Gregory. What we ended up doing was we learned to publicize our efforts, and once we came out with a game plan, even at that tender age, and the media type thing, we learned

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that if you want to have a story reported, you often have to be the reporter. If you want to have TV... news isn't what it was years ago, now it is a half an hour. But even with the half an hour news you call up assignment editors and you get your phone numbers for the wire services, UPS, Associated Press, and you call up the person on the assignment desk and you tell them this was going to go on. You make up press releases. It was a great learning experience on how to do all these things. Whatever it took, we tried. The big blend of people that you had...I mean, we had non-veterans who were very involved. I remember one in particular had worked for Father Drinan who ran for Congress, and that particular individual brought us a whole list of political people likely to give contributions to our cause. So we solicited them for money. He also knew some of the individuals in the press, so, once you start seeing how these things work, we were able to get the message out in a number of different ways.

INT: Was there a different network for reaching vets? Or was it the same, that as VVAW got publicity...

CB: I think as we got publicity we attracted people. I think that those people that felt that effect and wanted to and were able to contribute something—we did that. But I think it was the publicity. I think the fact that we were veterans—we had been there—made us so credible, others who had their stories and their feelings to tell gravitated towards us. The Vietnam veterans were not known for running out and joining the American Legion or the Veterans of Foreign Wars. So having our own organization, having it focused, having it focused on...

INT: [?]

CB: The list of campaign donors, that type of thing. It was very much integrated. We not only had help from non-veterans, our government was nice enough to send some of their representatives to spy on us, and that was

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a pretty well known thing among the people that were there, because it didn't take a whole lot of time before you could sniff some of them out, and you realized that you weren't so photogenic [that] complete strangers would like to take your picture.

INT: Tell us about guerrilla theater. What were the objectives? How did you do it?

CB: I wasn't always that enthusiastic about that. I did see the effectiveness of the shock of people when this burst upon them. It was very much a performance-oriented art, I guess, in that you would have your theater wherever the setting happened to be, and then you would show up and try to explain to people through that particular medium what it would be like for them if they were in Vietnam, [if] they lived in Vietnam. I wasn't the biggest fan of it. It did prove to be pretty effective. I think in some ways playacting always hasn't been a strong trait for me. I can see how it worked and how it did shock people and get them to act. It was trying to raise people's consciousness, but that's a pretty tough thing to do when you consider the seriousness of the message and the means that we were trying to do it with. You know, we were running around with plastic Mattel weapons; we could all still fit into our uniforms, so we used those. It gets [to] people, seeing a bunch of people turn up in green uniforms. Of course, we had longer hair and beards and that type of thing. But I think if we had had weapons that we could have shot blanks off and stuff, I would have been more in favor of it.

INT: I don't know from what you said, where exactly you were when Operation POW was [going on]?

CB: During that whole spring and the series of things I was finishing off my last year of high school with a school in downtown Boston, and I kind of had a half day schedule. So, I was working out of the office. Once I was introduced to the idea and showed up, I am kind of like, get my hands

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on it and get right in there. So, I was very involved in everything that we were doing at the time. Of course, [Chris] Gregory and myself both ended up on the PR part of it. Our job was that we had our contacts in the press and news, and we would call the assignment editors, ask them to send people, and get the word out for not only just vets, but non-vets and, and anybody that we could get to support our particular cause. The idea of going from town to town and retracing the route of Paul Revere was such a very natural idea. I don't know how that particular idea popped up, but once it was thought about and laid out, it, it went ahead amazingly fast.

We knew we were headed for a showdown in Lexington, because we had difficulty with the permitting process, and the unwillingness to give us a place to stay, their being afraid that we were going to set a precedent. They told us they didn't even allow the Boy Scouts to stay there overnight, or something of that nature, and of course we were indignant because we were no longer Boy Scouts. I remember we were calling the press and the assignment editors, and they all [said] yeah, we're going to send them, and then, talking to them later in the day. It's a shame we didn't have cellular phones. Things would have run a lot more smoother. But the fact that we called them ahead of time and told them what the scenario was shaping up to be, then they felt we might be staging it for their benefit. Which is something they don't think very often. So, we didn't have the people right on hand, and the fact that as the events of the day progressed into the evening and the discussions and everything, and as the citizens of the town went home, tried to keep them abreast of things, and telling them, and we had very, very strong reasoning that it wasn't going to be a quiet night with a good night's sleep.

INT: Were you marching alone with the whole group, or were you in a coordinating position, making phone calls and...

CB: Both.

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INT: At a pay phone?

CB: Yes, yes [laughing]. In fact, in those days you could even get incoming calls. Yeah, ended up doing both. And what we were trying to do was leapfrogging. My particular personal belief is—again this is my own need—I don't need to be on TV, in fact I didn't like having even 35mm photographs taken. So it was no hardship for me not to be a direct spokesman, although you end up—through everybody switching roles at different times—doing that. I ended up in both things, both being in with the marching sections and then saying okay, I have to drop out here, run back, get my car, drive down to the next night's spot, and then walk up to meet them, and then come in. When you are young and energetic, and coming back from two years of getting yourself in shape in Vietnam you realize well... that I think a lot of us also very easily fit into taking the different roles that were cast upon us as they came. There wasn't a great deal of the type of publicity-seeking as an individual that we have today. It was very much an organization of folks that were out for the greater good rather than individual glory.

INT: What kind of problems did you have with pro-war veterans?

CB: Matter of fact, I had one for a roommate [laughing]. And it was very tough. My roommate and I had gone through basic training, advanced training, parachute training, and I ended up going to the 101st on my way to Vietnam. Because he was a couple of months younger than me, he wasn't going to be eighteen by the time they left, so he got sent to another unit. He got badly wounded over there, came back, and we both ended up at the same school. Now when I found him, or he found me, he had long hair, a beard, a necklace [laughing], that type of thing, and I was pretty much the clean cut individual that I am today [laughing]. But he was very, very hawkish, and he had a very difficult time with it; that I was doing this bothered him a great deal. I think there was a certain amount of tolerance

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by other veterans who didn't agree with our feelings and our emotions, that we most certainly had a right to state them. I don't think it was—maybe it got to be polarized a little bit, but not a great deal. I mean, I don't remember having Vietnam Veterans for the War group organizing either, so...I think a lot of people, veterans in particular, combat veterans, couldn't and did not want to deal with anything that reminded them of it, that brought up those feelings. There was a great deal of feeling that people had that you would be dishonoring your friends who were wounded or killed.

I mean, it was even...the struggle that my parents as individuals had with the fact that I came home. I went away pro-war and came home anti-war. I don't remember any great big, you know, head to head type battles. I think that the people that were pro-war and then ended up in the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars, that type of thing, we respected their rights, and I think they did [ours]. So, I don't remember any big confrontations.

INT: Hold on a second. I have got to stop for a minute. I find what you are telling, it is so powerful, is hard to bring myself back out of your stories, and pay any attention to my questions. It is very moving. It's very important, and it's very valuable.

CB: I think that the idea and the concept of oral history, as things are passed down from person to person, is very important. In the times that I was brought up you often had grandparents and extended family living very close, and so people passed things down that way, and I don't think it happens... I think it's important for people, and particularly in the educational field, to be able to look up and find history as it happens to the individuals that were involved in that. If they have a cause, if they have things that they believe in, it is very important to stand up for your rights, speak firm. It is one of the things that we are guaranteed in this country, and that we ought to use. And I like the idea that at another point in time,

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that people can...when they have questions or if they want to see how to do things, this type of thing in a way was a revolution of its own and a non-violent one at that, and that it needs to be done and should be done. I very much like the idea that little part of history—and actually not so little part of history— and our lives from our generation...people will be able to come back and if they want to poke around and search and look in the computer, that they'll be able to find some answers and questions, and know a little bit more about it from the people that were involved.

INT: Given the role that you were playing that Memorial Day weekend I can't ask you, how was it in Concord, how were you received, and what kind of people joined and a whole chronology of questions, [because] I don't know when you were there and when you were running back to your car, when you were making pay phone calls, so I think it would be better to simply ask you: What are your memories of the Friday, Saturday, Sunday events?

CB: Probably wouldn't be real good on the chronological. In fact, some of this was for the very first time that I was getting out here to the great wilderness of Concord and Lexington. Even to this day I read a lot of history, and so you know all those things, but it kind of gives you kind of goose bumps, a very strong sense of reality, when you are realizing that you have this cause and you believe in it, and that you are traveling in the same footsteps in the same direction because you want to be heard. And that you're a piece of history. It's history in the making.

We had divided ourselves up in different roles, as far as the organizational part. We had also changed and shifted as they went on. The parts of things that I remember most vividly was the debates and the talks that we had beforehand, as things were going on, as we were trying to...because working in the office—the headquarters type of thing—you know how your negotiations are going with your different individuals, and

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how you are getting cooperation from some, from others the fact that people wanted to hold up these rules and regulations for the town Green and say there is no way you can possibly do this. They offer the other piece of land, and finding out that it used to be the dump, and it's kind of funny, because [with] people even within the organization there is such diversity and so many different opinions that we were arguing back and forth: "Well, they are trying to compromise," "No, they are sending us a big insult by doing this," and then the other hand, "Okay, we'll start the second revolution right here and now." It was really wonderful. Getting to the Green, and having a meeting with the residents of the town—and you know, in those days it was being liberal or leftist, and all kinds of little clichés—and the fact that people showed up with their children as individuals, as entire families, grandparents, grandfathers, grandmothers. I mean that was all really a neat thing. And everybody had another chance to talk, and you know, we have our reports from here and there that the police are here and organized; yes they are going to do something, no they are not going to do something, and it was such a...being able to participate in the very real reality of what a democracy really is and how it should work and that everybody has their rights and their say, and that evolution as things went around, for me, the real highlight, the just wonderful part of it was the people getting into the churches and up and ringing the bells, and hearing all the bells in town go off.

And then everybody coming back to be arrested. I mean, it was just terrific. And it...I don't know...for people to go out of their way...and you know we were treated very wonderfully. I don't really remember rudeness or people acting out against us. We were very determined and policed ourselves so that we would not be characterized as drunks or druggies or any of that type of thing. We had sat down and had sort of a game plan, and when we realized that the arrests were going to come and everything we

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were into uncharted territory, so to speak. We sat down and divided up the leadership and the responsibilities, and each time we filled up the buses and they took away, we had another couple of tour operators get on the next set, so we had that blend of the veterans and the citizens of Concord, Lexington. And so it was real nice, and it was—I wouldn't want to say scary, but it was kind of sad to see all the police come with all their riot control gear and all of that type of stuff. In those days, probably the vast majority of the police are also veterans. Maybe not of Vietnam, maybe of Korea or World War II, or just veterans; in those days it was very common. Every family had...you served when your time came in the service. To see that kind of muscle, like, to come up...but I mean, they brought up the school busses...it was very orderly and I am sure a new and thrilling experience for the folks that have never had any part of our judicial system. I mean, it was just very nice.

As an individual I ended up being on the last group, so to speak, and what the police would not do and did not do was to arrest or try to do anything with the disabled veterans, those using crutches, in a wheelchair, that type of thing, so there was group [i.e., meeting] and I can't remember the exact words, but it's kind of like from the Star Spangled Banner and by the early morning light we were still there symbolically. And we were really there. Then the next step was to find out where the courthouse was, what the next whole part of the procedure...but I mean, whoever was the first person to get up there and ring bells, I don't know, I'll have to find out at some point, but I mean, that was just such a remarkable way of communicating and it was just like stepping back in a time machine, going back to history. Because there was more than one church there, and there were an awful lot of bells, and there was a, stirring, I mean, very patriotic I guess in a way, and it just meant an awful lot, it really did, and I think it was a really effective message. And you know, it is neat seeing the stories

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in the newspapers—we didn't have VCRs so we couldn't see ourselves on TV, that type of thing—but it was really about what this whole system is, and that everybody had their viewpoints and some people were able to, you know—some towns, some communities—were able to look at it and just say, well, just let it happen. In Lexington, the authorities took one point of view and we took another, and we both got what we were looking for. Both sides were able to...one side had to do what they felt they had to do, and go by the technicalities and the rules and also undoubtedly by what their political beliefs were, and the other side, they stood up and they were counted, and they were citizens are every bit as important as soldiers. And that is one of the ways that the veterans looked upon themselves, as being veterans who were willing to serve their country once again in a vastly different role, and that we did do that. It meant a lot to me as an individual, meant an awful lot to us as a group.

INT: How did the police conduct themselves?

CB: I didn't have any problem with it, or didn't see anything. Because you are the unique combination of the veterans and of the ordinary everyday citizens, that combination kind of kept everybody into their roles. I don't really...I mean, people lined up orderly to get on their bus like we were going off on a fieldtrip. So there was no need...I mean, we thought about that ahead of time as far as the capacity or how to conduct ourselves and how they would conduct themselves, how they would conduct and play their role, kind of. And we lined up. You probably could have written up everybody individually and told them to go over there or to get in their cars and drove over there and everybody would have showed up. I mean, it was done right, I think, by everybody that was involved, and that is the way your political views...I mean, the police had a job to do, and small towns are very connected and it wasn't exactly like they could all call in sick or anything. But it was looked at and thought about ahead of time as far as

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how to conduct ourselves and how we hoped that they would conduct themselves.

INT: What do you think were the concerns of the Selectmen?

CB: I think you have that same combination of...there is an election next year [laughing]... I think that they undoubtedly got phone calls, both pro and con. To tell you the truth, I don't know what the population of Lexington was in those days. I mean, they had means, they had discussed it; things don't happen in small towns just on calling up and saying, "Gee, Fred, we have got a real problem down on the Green, there's four hundred people down there," or five hundred people or whatever it was. It was all part of the democratic process. And I think being the older World War II veteran, [the] Korean war veteran of that vintage, they had very real concerns. I think people that get involved in public life like that probably were actually able to do what they felt they had to do; when you compare it to what the media of today is, everybody has to take a read on which [way] was it is going to bounce and they probably acted a lot more in the vein of what they thought as individuals and what they thought about the image of the town of Lexington. You have got to look at it from their viewpoint that all of a sudden that all these people are going to show up in the center of town and have a mission and a purpose, and they are also the ones that are, as they see it, trying to hold up the value systems of the town as they perceive it.

One of the analogies that I use talking to people about this guerrilla theater or the demonstrations and stuff like that is: oftentimes what we would do in our helicopters would be to fly in—and it was not uncommon to have twenty or thirty of them, and drop off a large group of people and surround a village or something of that nature—and I often say to people, well, what do you think would happen if you had fifteen or twenty or thirty helicopters land on Boston Common, each helicopter has six or eight people

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jump out with guns and weapon? What kind of a day do you think you are going to have? That is the reality of what we did in our conduct of the war, and when you are having a demonstration to show your feelings and your beliefs and everything, that different people had their, their roles and we all had our chance to say things one way or the other and...I mean, they are a product of their times and they're beings just as we were. The only difference is that ours were very much fresher and there was also an urgency to stop the dying, and not to see anybody hurt by dragging the war on.

INT: Do you have any particular memories of the bus ride or the Department of Public Works where folks spent the night?

CB: No.

INT: Or Concord court system the next day?

CB: No, since they did not arrest the last group of veterans, and I was with the rear guard. We got to stay on the Common the whole night, and the police obviously weren't going to arrest us or do anything. I mean, just their personal belief...

INT: How many people were left there?

CB: Oh, I want to say around fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, something like that. I think at a certain point they probably just got tired of hauling people off, too. It's hard when you play the numbers game, but I don't really have any recollections except thinking about how was I—how were we—going to get the bail money together for that many people, and you know, how was that part of the system going to work. I didn't end up over at the Courthouse until later. And then we had to decide what we were going to do and everything. I remember the passion. We had some very good public speakers, and the passion with which they spoke and what they felt in their hearts and everything. So, anyway, I never did get to take that particular bus ride.

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INT: The Green was left immaculate. Who cleaned up?

CB: Well, it wasn't me [laughing]. In all things that we did, I think maybe that might have been a situation of our previous training. I think also we had pretty much made decisions on alcohol use, and that type of thing, to avoid that. So, I don't know who cleaned up. I may or may not have had something to do with that. They do train you to be neat and orderly in the military, so we'll have to say it's a combination of that.

INT: I was about to be sexist and say it is a woman's question [laughing]. But I think [with] fears expressed about the grass and what would happen to the grass on the Green and so forth it is kind of interesting that it was left totally immaculate.

CB: Well, that wasn't by accident. We made our decisions. We weren't going to have a mini-Woodstock or any of that type. We wanted to have our conduct and the way we acted, the way we did everything we knew it had to be the very best. And we knew, kind of, the results that we wanted. So, that's discipline, caring. I think that was very characteristic of all the people that were involved in demonstrations at that time and things like that—particularly [those who had] gone to the neat and orderly school.

INT: What do you think was accomplished by these demonstrations, locally, nationally?

CB: I don't think it had the quick sudden effect that we wished would happen. I think for myself as a veteran it was important that we were able to express our feelings. We were a group of people who just could not be put down as, well, you are a bunch of college kids, or you are a bunch of lefty-leaning Communists. We couldn't be categorized in those [ways], because first and foremost we were veterans of Vietnam. I wouldn't be surprised that there were a higher percentage of people that were what they call these days combat veterans. In other words, somebody who walked in the jungle and the rice paddies, front-line you know, helicopter pilots, that

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type of thing. And there were a number of people that were officers and sergeants, so there was a good blend of people. I think it was important for us to come home and see how the world had changed, how things had changed. There's a big difference once you get out of your survival mode and the things that you did to survive and to live, and then to be able to come back and decide how you wanted to change things, how you wanted to...you didn't want people to go through what you had gone through. I think it was very important as veterans and as citizens of the towns that we moved through, and the citizens of the country that we were able to act in both roles, that the people [stood] up and supported us. One of the questions I often ask people who say the law was against this or did this or that, is: How many times were you arrested? If you are going to be involved, be real involved, and just don't show up because it is a nice sunny day.

One of the things that Vietnam veterans brought out—and it struck a particular chord in me—is that during the Revolutionary War, I believe it was Washingtonⁱ who said there are soldiers that show up in the spring and summertime of our country's need, and then there's the soldiers that show up in the fall and the winter. And we were winter soldiers. And we were there in the worst of times. And we felt compelled to act when we came back. I mean, after you finish a two or three or four year hitch in the military, that's a significant portion of your life to give at such a young age, and yet we still had the feelings and emotions that we weren't finished with this yet.

INT: Was the Vietnam War different from other wars, and if so, how?

ⁱ Actually these were the words of Thomas Paine: “These are the times that try men’s souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.” (*The Crisis*, No.1, December 23, 1776; written after George Washington had retreated across the Delaware.) The VVAW used the term “winter soldier”—hence, a soldier who will not shrink from his duty—derived from this reference.

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CB: Very, very much different. As far as the war went, over there in Vietnam and the whole preparation and process for it...you knew there were people against the war, you knew that there were a variety of reasons why people went. We believed [some] of the things. I remember being worried that the war would be over before I got there, and I would never experience it. Once you were over there it is a very tough situation because the way and the manner in which we waged the war—and I am speaking particularly for the people that were on the front-line, the people that were in the field—no place was secure, you didn't have a place where you could just come back and say, I don't have anything to worry about. Even when I [was] working in the PX and that type of job there were a lot of rocket attacks, there were mortar attacks. There it was very different. And you knew it was very divisive and polarized people, people going one way or the other, the officers, and you know, we saw an awful lot of people that were there to promote themselves, to advance themselves in their military careers. And you knew you didn't have the support. A tremendously painful thing for me was to see the process when the Gulf War went on. I think Vietnam veterans all over the place were very mindful and [it] kind of really rang home. I mean, first it was the uncertainty of us getting into another war, and what type of war it would be, and the horror that could result from it. And not wanting that to happen. Very hard to deal with all the yellow ribbons, the born again patriotism. I think a lot of that was people's feeling about their guilt over Vietnam and how they blamed the soldier, not the politician. That was personally very, very difficult for me to take.

One of the nice things was [that] down on the Cape, they had a welcome home parade for the Gulf veterans and all that, and they organized it so the parade had the Vietnam veterans group on the Cape; they made us all Grand

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Marshals, and so we led off the parade. So that was my welcome home parade, a lot of years afterwards.

INT: When was this?

CB: The afterwards part was 1969-1970, and this parade, I want to say it was in the spring of 1990? 1991?

INT: What have you learned from all of this, and how were you changed?

CB: I guess I have to separate it out into a couple of areas, the Vietnam experiences that pertain to what happened in Vietnam. I used to say it was good, that it taught me a lot, that it gave me a lot of skills and a certain confidence about life, that I had faced the very worst and the very hardest. That was kind of my spiel and my beliefs. Say, 1979-1980-81, in that area, one of the things that I had, how you dealt with your feelings in a war and with loss and pain, is *not* to deal with them. You just stuff them away in a box, and that is kind of the way I had dealt with it, and I had all my funny stories, and things like that and that was what I looked at, and I never really dealt with the pain and the loss. I became very burnt out on the cause of the anti-war thing probably within a period of eighteen months. Being very active, I didn't really have cause or reason to think or deal with it for about another ten years. I want to say around '80-81, in that range there.

And through two sets of circumstances I went to put away some feelings and emotions that I was dealing with, and I went to put them in that box, and they broke out. I hadn't cried since the Tet offensive, and it was very brief then, and then I went to a point in my life where I could not get it out of my mind. I cried all the time. It's a great deal of pain emotionally. And the part about me living and other people dying, it just tore me apart. My folks were ready to put me in a hospital. My alcoholism had come back, full tilt. Since things were so bad, I decided to drink. It was the first time in my life that I had to ask somebody else for help. I never had to do

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that, and particularly dealing with the feelings and the emotions, I started to see a therapist. For a brief while I was involved in founding another veterans' group on the Cape. I kind of went in and out of as far as being active as to when I could deal with it and when I couldn't deal with it. I saw a psychiatrist, a therapist, a counselor, probably off and on for a period of five or six years, sometimes as often as once a week. It was very helpful in my growth as a person, in learning how to deal with things and feelings. It was a real hard stretch. I had to start taking anti-depressants. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't stop the nightmares. I already had gone through some of that similar stuff for a period in the first year or so that I was home, and I think once I got through that, once I stopped, probably is one of the reasons why I stopped the activity with the Vietnam veterans because it was just so painful for me, and I was dealing with and seeing a lot of people who had been hurt by the war an awful lot more than me. And there is this tendency to compare your experiences versus their experiences, and it just eats you up as a human being. It really does. There is something about being involved in a war, being involved in killing—it kills a part of you that is very important as an individual, and it is very hard. Very hard to learn to deal with.

You know, people told me to forget it, to put it behind me. Oh, there's a whole list of things. And that's not possible. At that time in your life, when you do that, by the age of twenty I had done twenty-three months in Vietnam, gone through all that and come back and I thought because I was physically whole that I wasn't hurt, that I had never been wounded. That just wasn't, just wasn't true. So, I still have my bad periods and my painful periods. I just recently went out to see parents of a friend of mine that was killed in Western Mass. He's the same guy who told me he knew he was going to die.

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You'd think with some of the bloodier and more traumatic moments that also stay in your mind, you know... and I consistently see his face with that look: He is all loaded up on his way down the runway and telling me that, and then finding out, like two weeks later, he was killed within days. It was very hard. I didn't realize it and I didn't want to deal...I mean, I just could not go out and tell those folks that their son died for nothing. He was their only child, and I mean...you know...and I just see how their lives have changed. Initially when I did re-find them and get in touch with them again there was some hostility from the mother, and I knew it was from: "Why did you live and why did my son die?" It was hard. All those years, and I couldn't go and, and, I mean, I'd...to send my...I would talk to them some more over the phone a couple of times. A group called "In Touch" put us together, and I went out and I spent the day and a night with them, and I just...now I know so much more of how much a loss that had to be for them. And you're dealing with the pain and what they went through and that type of stuff, and it's just sad. I mean, those lives have been changed forever.

One of the most often asked questions that you get as a Vietnam veteran almost right off the bat—there's a couple of them. One is, "Did you kill anybody?" The second one usually is, "How many?" or "how did it feel?" And the realization that I came up with after quite a while and that I tell people now is, "I didn't kill anybody, I killed a lot of *somebodies*." They had mothers and fathers, children, aunts, uncles, grandparents, you know. And that struggle for what it must have been [weeping], what it was like for my parents, and how they must have worried and the price they must have paid, how they must have, you know...it's, it's affected them virtually the whole time that I have been home.

You can deal with it on an intellectual basis, or you think you can, but sooner or later it comes down to [weeping] a lot of those feelings inside. I

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guess part of that is, you know, why I felt that, that making and talking about this in this little piece of history is real, real important and ... I went yesterday—they have an exhibition of items that were left at the Vietnam Wall, and I have been kind of avoiding it, and within minutes, I mean, I was crying and I was going to leave. And then I stayed, you know...just that all the pain and the emotions and the feelings, the tremendously high price that everybody had paid. Very few people's lives were unaffected by it, and I remember one particular saying: A war is only truly over when the very last person that it hurt has gone to their peace. And it's real true.

INT: Is there anything else you would like to tell us about?

CB: You didn't bring enough film and cameras to cover this, the two years there and the long, long trip back.

INT: I don't want to push you into an area that isn't comfortable, but we all, I think, like to know, what helps. What can help?

CB: I am very fortunate in that I have always had a family that's loved me unconditionally. They know I know how much it has affected them and affected others. I think that one of the harder and tougher things—and it's something that I am very aware of—is that the veterans who most need help, who had the very worst of jobs, the most dangerous of jobs, are probably the least likely to be able to get help because of the fact that the common denominator for ending up in the infantry or one of the combat specialties is the fact that you don't have a particular skill or level of training. And, you know, when you see the facts about the tremendous amount of Vietnam veterans that are homeless, that have problems with drugs, alcohol—I mean their marriages, their children—I think, it's important, as human beings, as all of us, when we see people less fortunate, when we see people that are okay in so far as the material things, and you see that side of them, that there's maybe that anger that is hidden or that edge, just try to understand that they are caring, loving persons, and they

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have had experiences in life, that you never are going to be able to forget, it is never going to go away. You need to learn how to deal effectively with the pain about their lives. Just don't make judgments, which is hard to do as human beings, but don't...[when] you see people that are in pain and hurt and not necessarily from this one class of people, help them. Help.

I think something like this, educating and stuff, I mean, I tried a number of different ways to make people try to give them an understanding of it, and it's not real easy to understand. It's not going to be there in black and white, but care a little bit for them. Try and accept and just realize it may have physical and mental manifestations, but it's something inside you, something that you can't put your hands on or your fingers to say that they did what they believed in, they did what they felt they had to do. And it takes that something away from you and, I guess, kind of goes back to, you know—teach your children.

INT: I guess that's the end of the formal part of the interview, the questions that I have, but would it be all right if other folks asked some questions?

CB: Sure.

INT 2: One was the sense that he made very real to me that many soldiers who were in Vietnam felt they had been betrayed. Some of the guns didn't work, they were told the wrong things by their Congressman, and things like that. I was wondering, if you had any of those experiences where certain things were misrepresented?

CB: I think a great deal was misrepresented. I think what happens is we're the culture that was brought up on the propaganda type movies, you know, John Wayne, Robert Mitchum. It was easy to be a hero. That type of stuff. And when you come up with the reality of the situation, it is very different than what you thought it was going to be. I mean, having rules and regulations, war is actually a...there are no rules. In trying to be the

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type of American soldiers that we were supposed to be, and to do the things that we had to do, your value system takes a real beating when you see what people will do to stay alive. And the other side of that equation is what happens when they die? You can have a person that is horribly maimed and will live despite all odds, at least long enough to get him on a helicopter, and you can have a person where you have to look all over their body trying to find out how they died, and one small hole can do it. We're, we're at the same time unbelievably strong and we're unbelievably vulnerable. I think the sense of betrayal, there is a certain amount—it depends on the time period when you were there. The earlier M16s needed while I was there, they were bad. But they were also very good in that it's new technology. They didn't know everything about it, it wasn't proved, so in the beginning, yes, it can be bad. The AK47 which was the main weapon of the North Vietnamese was highly, highly efficient, could take a real beating as far as being dirty and was a simpler weapon. So there were people in our outfit who carried the Russian weapon rather than the American weapon. I think the betrayal is felt much more greatly in terms of political leadership within the military, within the political system back here. And that is where that comes in and also the treatment as individuals when we came back.

INT 2: One of the good things that he brings out, as far as I am concerned, is the sense of camaraderie that was there, on one level, because other veterans have said that because we were only there for one year, we didn't feel this kind of unit identity. And you seem to have had it.

CB: I was very fortunate in the way that I went over there is my whole unit went over there, what were two full brigades of the 101st Airborne plus all the helicopters, all the support units. So, in other words, we all went over there as a group. There were people within us—and it proved to be very, very valuable for us—that had been there before, being part of an

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elite unit because you had gone through harder, more difficult training. It changes your viewpoint on it. So, it was very comfortable being there and being with all people you know already; in other words, it's kind of like when you go from one school to another, if there's another twenty kids from your class end up in your new class at the high school, then you are going to feel pretty good, because you know all those people and you are going through all this breaking in process together. At one point, I went as an individual just from one company to another one within it. There were problems from that, I can say that. I was just very fortunate to go over with the people that I did go over with as a group.

INT 2: Do you think in terms, in philosophical terms, about war, do you think if people believe they are fighting a just war, it is easier?

CB: It's easier to motivate the individual who has to do the fighting. It kind of boils down to everybody believes it, and yet, when you take a look in, kind of like we have this thing that has been going on for like the last year or two with Bosnia, the Serbs and the Croats, and from day to day, I can't figure out who the hell is one, is the other, and what's in the middle, and it's barbaric on both sides. Everybody would like to believe it is just. I believe it is political and economic. They just come up with the advertising and the slogans and the campaigns to make it all sound good. They got a bunch of eighteen year olds that don't know nothing. Push them through the training and send them over there.

INT 2: Well, I was thinking of your friend in Western Massachusetts, whether his mother would have felt better if he had been killed in the Second World War, you know, somehow.

CB: They are very bitter about...well, you know the enormous price that they had to pay...what they see happening with the other veterans, the way their son's friends came back and the people that have been in touch. There is an enormous, enormous price paid by the individuals and their

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families who survived, and the only thing worse than that is the people who didn't survive and the...I mean, in fact, on the same day their son died another mother who lost her only child, too, in the same engagement...it's a...I don't know, sometimes I wonder if that's why I haven't had...

END OF INTERVIEW