LEXINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS, INC.

Interview
Bestor Cram
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Interview conducted by Norma McGavern-Norland
Videotape length 116 minutes

INT: Bestor, why did you get involved with Vietnam Veterans Against the War in the seventies?

BC: I first became connected with Vietnam Veterans Against the War in the fall of 1970. I had been in the Marine Corps as an officer. I joined in 1966, and was released at the "Convenience of the Government" in 1970 after having served a complete tour in Vietnam from Tet[1] 1968 through Tet 1969. Upon my return to this country and then being stationed down at Camp Pendleton in California my own ideas regarding the war had crystallized and matured, which was a process that had begun while I was in combat, and these ideas were requiring me to act in some manner in which I demonstrated my own position regarding the war and my own involvement with the Marine Corps. Prior to my release in the Marine Corps I filed a Conscientious Objection claim. It threw the Marine Corps off track a little bit. They had never had an officer in their entire 189 years of existence file a CO claim, much less they could not understand why I would want to do this *after* I had been to Vietnam. All of their experiences with people who were filing a Conscientious Objection claim were prior to being sent off to Vietnam. So that whole period of time I confronted the Marine Corps [was] my own way to both demonstrate, I think, really for myself initially but very much also to other people that were around me what I had come to believe about the nature of this particular war.

My claim was based on "selective war theory" which was in the process of being argued in the Supreme Court, or hadn't really actually reached the Supreme Court. It was a process of Conscientious Objection theory that

[1] The name of a Vietnamese holiday and the time of a major offensive operation.

was not acceptable to the government at this particular time. You either had to profess a belief in a Supreme Being or complete your religious guideline. Doctrine demanded that you not participate in [any] war, and those were really the criteria for you to successfully be given a CO status. So I developed my own plan and proposition to the Marine Corps, and then confronted them, and for the remainder of my service they contemplated the thought a great deal, about what it was that I was expressing to them. But they could not act upon it because there was another person by the name of Welch who was going through a CO claims status upgrade that was based upon selective war theory, and that was expected to go to the Supreme Court. So eventually I was released on April Fools Day in 1970. Kind of appropriate, I thought, and at the "Convenience of the Government" following four years of service.

In a sense my life had become quite political in terms of the way in which I was thinking and the way in which I was behaving, and so consequently when I moved back from California to New York it was in my mind to continue to reach out to find other groups of people to associate with who had similar ideas and were expressing themselves in terms of being opposed to the war, and I learned of this organization called "Vietnam Veterans Against the War—VVAW." I'm not actually certain when it was initially started, but it was either in 1969 or 1970, I think, that it was originally founded, and their first main activity was a gathering of Veterans to recreate a march of George Washington during the Revolutionary War from Morristown, New Jersey to Valley Forge. I joined the organization and participated in that march, and it was essentially my first participation with another group of veterans who were opposed to the war. There wasn't necessarily a common idea amongst any of the veterans as to their opposition. All of us had different thoughts and different feelings and different experiences from our war experience. All of us had

different reasons for expressing our opposition. It was really a very wide range of folks who came together to commonly continue in a sense what we thought was our patriotic service.

INT: Did you talk about the experiences that you had in Vietnam with one another?

BC: We did talk a great deal about the experiences that we had in Vietnam. In fact I think for many of us the political activity was very important, but so was the opportunity to just find another person who could understand what it was that you were trying to process in your own mind in terms of understanding the experiences that you had. And I think for many of us this was a very important process of re-entering the society that had gone through an extraordinary transformation during the time that we had been isolated from that society.

INT: Can you characterize your experience in Vietnam in a kind of summary way?

BC: Well, the experiences that I had in Vietnam were quite varied. It was maybe 10 percent of the soldiers in Vietnam that experienced combat on a fairly regular basis. For the 90 percent of the rest of us combat was an irregular experience. My work always potentially had combat associated with it, but in fact I was not in a situation where I was going out and looking for contact with a so-called enemy to engage in a firefight. I was in charge of a company of men whose tasks were to do minesweeping, to remove booby traps, to clear roads for passage. Generally, that activity is done before breakfast. We were also engaged in building roads and in destroying roads, building bridges and destroying bridges. I was also an intelligence officer there, so it was my job to keep a battalion of people abreast of the kind of activity that was taking place in the area that we were located in. Being in the Marine Corps, I was in I-Corps, which is the upper area of South Vietnam from Da Nang all the way up to DMZ

[Demilitarized Zone], and the other activities that I was involved in was also as an operations officer, which meant that I planned sort of the activities in terms of what the battalion was involved in in carrying out its mission, and our mission was basically to support to kind of infantry activity in terms of what kinds of things had to be built or made safe. For a three month period I was tasked to build what was called a "Da Nang Wire Barrier," which was essentially a no man's land that was built as a ring around the city of Da Nang about 11 miles out, and we were tasked to kind of clear everything that was in our way in a 500 meter-wide area. It was kind of a folly conceptually, and never did work or have any merit to it, but it was one of the jobs that I had while I was there.

INT: Did many of the things that you did while you were there seem like a similar kind of folly? Did they make sense to you? Was it a place where you could see the difference between what you thought was the reality and what was the rhetoric of what was going on?

BC: It wasn't immediately apparent that there was a great discrepancy between what our tasks were and what we thought really was the reality of the situation, because a great deal of your life in Vietnam and I think in a combat situation is in a very selfish existence of both trying to just preserve yourself to survive in a climate that is quite hostile. It became apparent over a period of time that the so-called Vietnamization programs and the whole interaction that we had with the indigenous populations of Vietnam were quite different than the way in which they were being described to the general public and being described to us, and you learned. For instance, one of my jobs was to know certain roads quite well, and to know those roads quite well so that I could tell whether or not somebody had actually come and planted something in the road, so it was important for me to develop relations with the people who lived along side these roads, and after a period of time you realized that your daytime relations were quite

different [than] relations with the people, and so you begin to piece things together, and you begin to realize that there's quite a few different levels of activity that are going on here, and it's not all as it appears. I think that, too, being a command situation I was less conscious of the discrepancy between a soldier's life and the commander's life and the commander's interpretation of what the soldier's life and activities were to be. I was sort of in between. Being the youngest of the officers I was in a sense part soldier, part command. I had enough activity with other commanders to begin to realize that after a while what it was that they were expressing to me was much more of a political line that was fairly much out of touch with what we felt was actually happening. You know, your experience in the war is so minute in a very small area. You don't have necessarily a great perspective of the large picture. What was happening in my experience in my mind was during the period of time I was there where there was an extraordinary transformation taking place back here in the United States from October 1968 to October 1969. During that period of time Martin Luther King was killed, Robert Kennedy was killed; there were riots in cities in this country. Although we were isolated from being a participant in the change that was taking place in the society, in some respects we were also very aware of the fact that there was great upheaval, and that upheaval meant that there were things that one had to consider besides just the day-to-day life existences of war, and I think it was in that climate that I began to really formulate some of the ideas and ways in which to think about what it was that I was experiencing and how I saw it.

INT: Do you think you were a different person when you came back in some ways, or were you just growing up?

BC: Oh, no doubt about it. It made an indelible change upon me. I'm not certain if I can even today articulate precisely the differences that it changed, but it…you rapidly became an adult.

INT: How old were you when you came back?

BC: Twenty-four. Yes. I was twenty-four.

INT: That was young.

BC: Well, it's young, although I was an old man compared to all the people that were under my command. I had mostly 18 and 19-year-olds.

INT: How did you come to go to Vietnam in the first place?

BC: The manner in which I joined the Marine Corps was in 1966. I was going to college in Ohio, which was not a particularly hotbed of dissent and political activity at the time. The campus that I was on was a small college called Dennison University that had a very, very small group of people that were beginning to challenge the conventional thinking about the war. I don't think I had any true awareness of really the full set of issues that the anti-war and peace movement were really embracing at the time. I am certain that I was in great competition with my father to be as much of a man as he was, and he had served in the Second World War. I had always been brought up to believe that it was a patriotic duty to be in the service, and I also was very well aware of the fact that, given the situation with the draft, that the choices that were available to me were…most of those choices I didn't see as a choice. I certainly didn't see putting myself in a situation where I was going to be leaving the country to avoid service. I didn't consider that at the time an honorable thing to do. I didn't feel like I had a great awareness of whether or not this was a just war or unjust war. In fact, I had a great curiosity to find out, and I was not in a situation where I was intending to continue education; so I wasn't looking for a student deferment; I wasn't looking for a medical deferment; I didn't have the privilege of influence or money to buy a deferment. And it did seem like a bit of an adventure, actually.

INT: What was your role in the Vietnam Veterans Against the War?

BC: When I came back to Boston after having been released from the Marine Corps, I initially hooked up with an organization called the "Legal In-Service Project," called LISP. We were located down on Winthrop Street in Cambridge, and the Legal In-Service Project was a group of four of us who were all ex-service people who were providing counseling to people who were in the service. The Legal In-Service Project was also loosely associated with Mass PAX, and so it had a tangential connection to the peace movement, but it was very much really doing organizing at Fort Devens, and that and other military bases where there were servicemen who were opposed to the war or were getting orders to go to the war and needed to have alternatives for their lives. So we were working with a lot of people who were trying to find out ways in which to do a Conscientious Objections claims. We set up a coffeehouse outside of Fort Devens called "Common Cause," and we were encouraging people to do underground newspapers and to recognize that there were a number of ways in which on an individual basis they could act politically, and we also in our own way encouraged collective action for political activity while in the service. And it was through the Legal In-Service Project that a number of the people out of New York who were the original founders of the VVAW got to know us. I had actually already joined VVAW as a member and had participated in an event that took place in New Jersey and Pennsylvania. And they literally came up to us and asked if we would take on the role of being New England coordinators, and there was a dual reason to come to the Legal In-Service Project: we were all Vietnam veterans. All of us had some professional training, and being connected with the peace movement gave us an immediately entrée into really a vast network of organizing capacities. I think it was also understood at that particular time New England was extraordinarily forceful in terms of being in the peace movement. There was a great deal of political activity in terms of the number of people that

were involved in the peace movement, as well as a great deal of the money that was coming to the peace movement was coming from New England. So, having an office in Boston was a natural thing to grow out of this organization, which barely conceived itself as a national organization. It just was looking to some of its members. So, it was through the activity with the Legal In-Service Project that I got involved with VVAW, and immediately it became an organization that attracted a great deal of people who are now not like the folks that we were working with in Legal In-Service Project, but were all people who had been in the service and had gotten out.

INT: How were their goals different from that earlier group? Was there any difference in the action?

BC: Well, Legal-In Service Project was dedicated to serving somebody who's already in the military, and in a sense that was a very individual activity. It was not really necessarily dedicated to…its principal vision was not necessarily an anti-war vision. Its principal vision was one of service, and it had a strong affiliation with Quakers and with the principals who came from those organizations. VVAW was very much dedicated to being a vanguard in the peace movement and working to end the war, and so there was a strong belief that a major voice was missing from the peace movement which was the voice of those people who knew the war first-hand, and so VVAW's principal mission was—once it was created—to work to end the war.

INT: How was it run then? Do you remember was it run fairly exceptionally democratically and collectively? Was it run by someone from the top?

BC: Well, it was a very small band of outlaws here. [Laughter] And the organization initially in New York, I think, was run by a very few people. When we set up the office in New England, which grew to be the

largest chapter in the VVAW for a period of time, it was run quite democratically in terms of involving the membership base in a great deal of the decisions, but at the same time there were a number of us who—I suppose in self-appointed positions of authority, maybe the upper echelon made the decisions in a non-democratic process. That's really the answer to that question, and I can't really recall…essentially the organization went through a lot of transformations to the point that it was actually …it was such a democratic organization that it became quite infiltrated by a number of very left-wing political folks who essentially dismantled the organization from its original plans.

INT: But that was later?

BC: That was later on. That took place in 1972. It was after the demonstration.

INT: It wasn't much later. If we're talking about the events of 1971, where was that organization in 1971? Do you remember?

BC: Well, the organization in 1971 was an organization that was growing very rapidly, and also was having an influence that was far greater than the size of the organization from the standpoint of the peace movement. There was a period of time when I think that VVAW did participate in sort of a vanguard position in the peace movement and articulated some issues that had not been dealt with and also spoke with a voice that could not be challenged. The organization itself ended up having some internal problems where some credibility was challenged by the fact that the executive director of VVAW was found out not to be a veteran at all. This was unbeknownst to all of us. So, this organization had its own unnatural problems like a lot of organizations suffered through during those times. The New England branch was a very pure branch, though, for at least the period from 1970 through 1972 in which I was a part of it, and when I say pure, I'm not saying we're a bunch of great do-gooders here that

couldn't be influenced at all, but I mean our purpose was very specific, very focused, and I think that as an organization it represented the membership although it wasn't…I don't think we had elected officials at all. We certainly weren't an American Legion. Nobody wanted to belong to an American Legion or anything like that. We did end up having some problems ourselves, though. We had problems with the FBI, and then later on as I indicated we had problems with the far left that ultimately disrupted the organization.

INT: Would you tell us what sorts of things you did during 1971. This event in Lexington was in May. Do you remember what other kinds of things had been happening during that year, that winter, that spring?

BC: Well, there had been a major event, if I recall correctly in April.

INT: That's right.

BC: Which was Operation Dewey Canyon Three.[2] Operation Dewey Canyon One was an undisclosed operation of American servicepeople going into Laos, I believe, and most of the people that participated in that didn't even know that they'd gone into Laos, and this was of course against the dictates of Congress and certainly was explained in which the American people were lied to about the nature of this operation. I've forgotten now what Operation Dewey Canyon Two was, but I believe it was a similar operation. Operation Dewey Canyon Three was a gathering of Vietnam veterans prior to May Day in Washington, DC. May Day was going to be the largest demonstration of bringing in a coalition of groups from all over the country to try and shut down the government, essentially through disruptive protests. The main concept was to prevent traffic and people from getting to work. Prior to that demonstration the Vietnam Veterans Against the War encamped on the Capitol Mall for a week in which we

[2]The VVAW used the name Dewey Canyon ironically; whereas code-named Dewey Canyons One and Two undertaken by the U. S. military were labeled "limited incursions" into Laos and Cambodia, so "Dewey Canyon Three" was "a limited incursion into the country of Congress."

engaged in political lobbying with Senators and Congressmen for an entire week, and there were representatives, I think, from almost every single state that participated in that. The nature of that political activity in a sense describes, I think, where the organization, VVAW, was at at that time. VVAW was very much dedicated to both developing a local understanding and a local support for peace work and recognized that if there was going to be an altering and change in American foreign policy it was going to occur because the local population was very much involved in the peace movement. At the same time it also recognized that that change in foreign policy was going to occur as a result also of contact with representatives. To have the credibility going to the representatives was built upon both the fact that we were veterans, but also the fact that we had a large support base from local communities. So, we were working at grass level organizing and developing support for the organization, and at the same time we were also very much engaged in dealing with Congressmen and dealing with Senators in a very direct way.

INT: One of the most memorable images at that time was when the Vietnam veterans returned their medals. Is that also connected with that April action in Washington?[3]

BC: That's right.

INT: Because that was emotionally a very memorable action, I think. It made front page news around the country, and was one of the more charged acting-out of how people felt. Were you one of those?

BC: Yes, I was one of the participants of returning the medals.

INT: Do you remember anything specific about it, how people were feeling, what that looked like from your side?

BC: Well, I remember personally feeling that this was a very emotionally cleansing experience for myself, and I felt it from others. I

think people express themselves in a variety of different ways. There was a great deal of rage. There was a great deal of personal turmoil. For many of us the fact that we were against the war didn't necessarily mean that we were against the military. We were veterans. We felt like we had served our country. We weren't against the country necessarily, in the kind of way in which people oftentimes expressed themselves. There was a sense of patriotism that existed amongst veterans, and we felt to a certain extent it was a patriotic duty to carry on what we knew about this war, and to continue to serve the country in a patriotic way, and this was the way we felt we could do that. So, I think the emotional, cathartic experience of that particular day of returning the medals was also very confusing, because it really meant that you were having to confront a lot of the values and a lot of the things that you felt you had embraced at a very deep and fundamental level. You were renouncing something that you had made promises to and about, and…

INT: Not to mention lives risked in the earning of these medals.

BC: Well, all of those medals represented exactly an extraordinary risk that each individual had made. There were many Purple Hearts that were returned, and many Commendations of Valor. These were soldiers who had been willing to risk their lives.

INT: Tell us how the plan to march here in Lexington or in Massachusetts in Memorial Day 1971 came about.

BC: Well, one of the things that became early…what I should say is I think VVAW was always quite extraordinary at visualizing some metaphors, and visualizing the imagery that helped bring the war home and helped also the veteran deal with his own coming home. In a sense VVAW existed as much to welcome home veterans as it did to give an opportunity for veterans to speak to neighbors and a public that in a sense generally

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[3]Vietnam veterans protesting the Vietnam War who were awarded medals for bravery or who had been

didn't want to hear what the veteran had to say. Oftentimes the veteran found himself or herself feeling condemned for having participated in the war by many peers, family members, or just the general community.

INT: This was also added to, wasn't it, by the fact that because of the kind of rotations they had in Vietnam, unlike I think the way things are done now, people did not come home in battalions or…

BC: Well, that's correct. I remember very specifically my father discussing how he participated in the Second World War where he was identified very much with a unit, and there was unit identity and unit pride and in a sense unit cohesiveness that enabled you to go off and do something as a group and then return as a group, and have the strength of that group support. Veterans rotated individually; they left flying to Vietnam on commercial carriers, and then returned on commercial carriers 13 months later or 12 months later, depending upon the service you were in, and literally were within 48 hours walking the streets and expected to be just a regular old civilian, fitting into a world that had changed dramatically just during the short period of time that you had been in a sense away from it. So you're absolutely right in saying that those conditions all contributed to a sense of upheaval, and in a sense VVAW very early on recognized that it provided a great service, although this was not the main reason that it was created, it did provide a great service to returning veterans. It took an act of courage for veterans to join VVAW. The first [act of] courage was just for people to acknowledge that they were veterans. Most of us in a sense wanted to disappear. I wanted to lose that emblem of identity, and most of society didn't want you to have that emblem of identity. It certainly wasn't something that you were able to walk proudly through society with—at least in a lot of communities, not all communities, but certainly in a lot of

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wounded and received Purple Hearts symbolically removed their medals and tossed them aside

communities and particularly in many of the urban communities on the two coasts.

Early on VVAW embraced the words from a poet, and I've forgotten—you may be able to recall the "sunshine patriot and winter soldier"[4]—and that was sort of the focus of what the original march to Valley Forge was all about, was to identify with the "winter soldier," and the concept there was essentially a concept of recognizing that one's duty to one's country is not over just because you've been released from service. So, VVAW saw themselves as "winter soldiers," and in fact conducted a three-day testimony called the "Winter Soldier Investigation," which took place in Detroit in which panels were held on atrocities that took place in Vietnam. This was done in the fall of 1970, I believe. And coupling with this notion of the "winter soldier" and the patriotism with the activities that took place in terms of the march to Washington, the Operation Dewey Canyon Three, and the march to Valley Forge, and various different activities that were taking place amongst different organizations, including what was happening in New England. It became quite apparent that the so-called "theater" of VVAW was a very effective way in which to continue to both coalesce support, develop a larger base of membership to organize, and have influence, and get the word out, and to grow in terms of our own political influence. So a group of us—recognizing that Operation Dewey Canyon Three had been quite successful in raising a national awareness of VVAW, and the ideas that were coming from the minds of veterans—we developed a strategy to try to just carry on that work in Boston and New England. I really should say New England; I shouldn't say Boston. I mean, Boston is the center, but we were very much organized throughout all of

[4]These words relate to those 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 derived the term "winter soldier"—a soldier who will not shrink from his duty—from this reference.

New England, working in Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine, and an enormous amount of work in western Massachusetts.

And so creating "Operation POW," which was what we called the Lexington march, was in a sense our own extension of sort of VVAW "theater," that we had embraced. When I say "theater" I mean we literally were involved in theater at times. We conducted a number of guerilla theater operations down in Government Center in which we dressed as soldiers and staged mock battles in the subway tunnels and out on the brick pavement of Government Center, much to the not-too-great reception by the commuting public, but to great effectiveness in terms of getting people to pay attention to a small band of desperados that felt a need to express themselves. "Operation POW" evolved out of the thinking of a couple of ideas and metaphors. We were recognizing that at this particular time the nation as a whole and in its general support of the war no longer existed. The vast majority of the nation was no longer in support of the war, and the President was not in support of the war. They were trying to find an honorable way to end it, a very dishonorable thing to try to do, prolong a war to try to find an honorable way to end it. We characterized the nation as being a prisoner of the war. We also were trying to…by calling the operation "Operation POW" we also were recognizing that there were going to continue to be prisoners and more prisoners of this war as long as this war was conducted, and that we had not forgotten those prisoners, but the way in which those prisoners were going to come back to this country was going to be the end of the war. The other imagery that we were working on was, again, seeing ourselves as "winter soldiers" and as patriots, and that's why we selected to sort of reverse the march or the ride of Paul Revere as the route that we were going to take for our particular demonstration.

INT: Can you describe the route? What you were planning to do?

BC: Well, the plan I think was pretty much what we did execute, except we had to get a little help along the way to get to some places. We had planned we were going to walk from Concord from the bridge.

INT: Start in Concord?

BC: We were going to start in Concord and go through Lexington.

INT: On Friday in Concord.

BC: We were going to spend the night, actually, Friday night in Concord, and in fact, we had Father Drinan play Paul Revere.

INT: Father Drinan was…

BC: Father Drinan was a very vocal anti-war activist and Jesuit priest who was a member of Congress at the time. And he actually came out on horseback with a lantern, did not ride the entire trip, but symbolized again the patriotic warning. We spent the night in Concord and at that bridge, and then we walked from Concord to Lexington and…

INT: This was in the National Park?

BC: Yes. I should say we did spend the night in the National Park without incident, in fact, I think there were Park police that stayed there in the night with us as well, and it was a very receptive environment, I should say. People were…there was not any hostility or confrontation that was experienced, and in fact as we envisioned this particular demonstration. Some demonstrations and some protests are envisioned to have confrontation as a way in which to ensure that something's going to happen that's going to be taken notice of and that is part of the process, I think, of political activity. We have in most of the work in VVAW chosen a non-violent process, and the confrontation that we were going to have was an intentional confrontation where we knew that we were going necessarily be forced into a legal situation that was going to force authorities to behave in a manner that would create some kind of disobedience on our part, and

particularly this march, Operation POW, from Concord to Lexington to Bunker Hill, which was the next day, and then to the Common, we felt we had enough things built into that that it was going to be...that was going to be plenty of activity, and we certainly didn't feel the need to build in an intentional confrontational situation, and our experience had always been in demonstrations that we had participated in the past that by being on the streets, by being in the neighborhoods, by being out, literally moving from one town to the next we would generate a lot of support, and a lot of people would come out and would in a sense create the kind of environment that was supportive to the work we were trying to do.

INT: Beforehand arrangements were made and plans were made and discussed with various people, I would expect, from different towns and different places. Did you have any hint in any of those negotiations or what you heard of them in the planning that there was going to be anything more complicated than what you just talked about?

BC: I knew you were going to get into these details and this was the part that I can't quite remember, and I'm going to have you speak with someone else who actually did the specific correspondence with the Board of Selectmen at Lexington. We had begun organizing almost immediately after Operation Dewey Canyon Three. So we're not in the huge lead-time, but there was time in which we were making contact with people that were going to participate in our event on the Common that included [Presidential candidate]Gene McCarthy. I believe that there had been correspondence with the National Park in Concord, although I just don't know the extent of that, and I know that there had been letters sent requesting permission to camp in Lexington.

INT: On the Battle Green or just “somewhere”?

BC: We knew that there was a camping area. We expected that that's where we were going to be assigned to. We never specified that. We were,

as I recall—and this is the area that I'm least familiar with in terms of my memory right now—we had sent out letters requesting permission for camping in Lexington, and that we didn't always specify the Green. I think that we actually probably specified the Green expecting that we were going to be told no, and that an alternative would be given to us, and I think at that particular time we still were going to demand that we be able to go to the Green because that was part of the historical march that we wanted to recreate. We felt it important to be there, but in the planning stages there wasn't necessarily a specific demand on our part or in our thinking that was going to require that we spend the night there.

INT: Had you gotten any sense that there had been any complication, any discussion, some sense of unease?

BC: I think on Thursday we got some sense, but I can't recall actually what it was.

INT: But it was pretty late in the game?

BC: Oh, it was very late in the game. I think that if there was a naiveté on our part, we were unaware of actually the political make-up of some of the governing boards in some of the different towns. I think we could have made some assumptions, but they weren't necessarily well founded on a great deal of facts or understanding on our part.

INT: And having had things go easily in Concord, perhaps the thought was that everything following that would probably go in a similar vein?

BC: I think we were having successful experiences in all of the things that we were lining up for this particular demonstration, particularly with all the different community organizations that we were in touch with, and the kind of support that was being given to us, plus the aftermath of Operation Dewey Canyon Three was a very positive aftermath. It had placed the VVAW on a national map in a manner in which it was separated from really the May Day demonstrations, and we were seen as a responsible

group of ragtag soldiers. John Kerry had become a spokesperson overnight in a way that had an eloquence that was quite different than the rest of the peace movement.

INT: Was this is April, about that time?

BC: Right, when he spoke in front of Fulbright's Senate Armed Forces Committee. It [had], I think, substantial credibility. We weren't walking around with swelled heads, but we felt, well, if there's a time in which we can get some things done and people are going to listen to us, now is the time so we better keep on keeping on. But I don't recall us getting any indications until a very late date that we had some problems. We began to anticipate there were problems. We, in fact, recognized that we needed to put together a bail fund. This was not something that we had initially planned on, but we recognized that now, with the fact that there was not complete understanding in terms of what it was we were going to do, and what authorities thought we were going to do, and that there was a discrepancy in terms of how we were going to conduct ourselves the way we wanted to do it, and the way in which the authorities wanted us to. We anticipated the potential of some kind of confrontation that would place people's—not *lives* in jeopardy—but place ourselves in jeopardy in terms of the law. I should say also, though, I had no idea actually how many veterans were going to show up for this demonstration. I didn't know if we were going to be 5 or were going to be 500. I think it turned out to be more around 150 or so, if I…

INT: Is that how many you had in Concord on Friday night, about 150?

BC: I don't even think we had that many. I think—you know, I think a number of people joined us on Saturday.

INT: What was the plan on Saturday that you recall?

BC: Well, the plan was to march, and we were going to then…I think we had a picnic in a place…you've got it noted here, the Minuteman

National Park, I guess, is that right? And I think there was a rally that took place there.

INT: En route from Concord?

BC: En route from Concord there was this rally of…I should say it was one of the things that was planned. We did conduct some guerilla theater in Concord in which…this guerilla theater was a dramatization of atrocities, and dramatization of essentially the manner in which soldiers were being taught to deal with Vietnamese, and I think that was one of the areas that we concentrated on trying to educate the American public about.

INT: Now, you walked from Concord to Lexington?

BC: We walked from Concord to Lexington.

INT: Were there people in wheelchairs, too, or others who were not able to walk? Did everybody come this way?

BC: There were people who literally crossed the bridge with us, who were in wheelchairs. We had a Jeep with us in which some people were carried in the Jeep. In fact, the Jeep had retraced the entire route of Paul Revere Friday night, carrying the lantern and delivering that to Father Drinan. He did not ride the horse the entire distance. I think he rode it 20 yards but…[Laughter]

INT: Did very many people talk to you while you came along, while you were walking along into Lexington?

BC: Well, my recollections were that there were a number of people who came out to greet us. I don't recall anything but support. I do recall people lining the way, and sometimes holding placards and flags, but also expressing their support for VVAW, recognizing that this was a group of protestors. My responsibilities—I was the principal organizer of this event and in a sense its original architect, and I spent a great deal of time sort of scampering back and forth between different places trying to measure a sense—you know, what was going on, and what we were doing. We were

very unmilitary in a lot of respects in the way in which we conducted ourselves. We were pretty much a non-authoritarian organization.

INT: Deliberately?

BC: Deliberately. But there was an awareness on the part of myself and a number of the other people who felt a responsibility toward the handling of the demonstration to keep a good pulse upon what was happening. We did not have sophisticated walkie-talkie technologies available to us to now, so it was basically sort of riding back and forth, or running back and forth, kind of keeping track of what was happening. We also were…

INT: What sort of guidelines did you have about behavior among yourselves?

BC: The only guideline was that this was a non-violent demonstration. There was no guideline in terms of what the political discourse was. Individuals were responsible for their own ideas and thoughts to be expressed. When there was going to be a statement that was put out by the organization as we began to develop statements during the so-called "siege" in Lexington, they were done with a group of people who then did present those statements to the membership to have those ratified as being the ideas of the organization. I think that there were a great number of people there that I didn't know who came and joined the demonstration. There were a number of concerns on our part as people were responsible for the organization, recognizing that we did not know the attitudes and the health of many of the different people participating in it. We recognized that we had responsibilities to ourselves and to other veterans to be careful. Recognized that all of us had training in weapons and we didn't quite know whether or not everybody…how everybody was going to be showing up and participating. There were no weapons to be brought. Prior to this demonstration there had been personal threats upon my life, so I had received some, principally by phone call. So at a certain level there was

recognition on our part that we were dealing with something that was quite serious, and serious from the standpoint that it wasn't just a group of people walking along the road, and our main deal was to make sure that no car came down too fast. We recognized from the experiences that had led up to this, and from previous experiences that a demonstration of this nature unleashed a great deal of hostile and unpredictable behavior both by people who had participated in the demonstration as well as people who came to disrupt it. So as I recall—although a great deal of my time spent was kind of going back and forth, just keeping a pulse of what was going on—generally speaking, you know, the pulse was very delightful. It was…I think it was wonderful. It was a very lovely day of walking through Lexington, and I think the mood was one of jubilation and great support. It was really gentle.

INT: It was a beautiful day.

BC: It was a very gentle time.

INT: It was lovely. Everybody thought it was such a nice day. Do you remember how the Vietnam vets that day had their supper? Do you remember where you got fed?

BC: Well, I remember that it was the First Congregational Church—the Unitarian Church. Is that correct?

INT: Well, there was something right in front of the First Parish Unitarian.

BC: First Parish Unitarian. It's First Parish Unitarian. As I recall, the community turned out and had a large meal for all the people that were participating there. It had kind of picnic atmosphere. There was a great deal of exchange of ideas, and just people meeting one another. It had very much a church supper feel to it. It was like…

INT: Do you remember what you ate?

BC: It was a spaghetti dinner? I'm trying to remember if it was a spaghetti dinner.

INT: [Laughter.]

BC: It was a spaghetti dinner that we had, and it was so delicious, we've been trying to get that recipe. [Laughter.] But, you know, at that particular time I don't think we were really quite aware of the divisions that existed within the community. I think we began to become aware sort of at the suppertime that there was a mounting amount of energy with the Board of Selectmen who were opposing our presence there. I never went to Town Hall, was never invited to come to Town Hall to participate in any of the debate. As I recall we had a couple of members who sat as observers, but they may have been invited to participate in the debate; I just don't know for certain if that's true or not. I do recall that we would get sort of hourly updates as to the fact that it didn't feel like it was going to be a decision that was going to go in our favor, and I think we became much more aware of the split within the community that was becoming more and more apparent. All of us were encountering the community in a way in which members of the community now were sharing with us a sense of the split that existed, and this was not unlike any other community that we were aware of. The day had been so beautiful prior to this that one was a little bit unaware of the fact that deep down there were divisive feelings within the community regarding opposition to the war, and regarding one's participation in describing that opposition.

INT: We have seen some slides of your group sitting around in a circle, a large circle, and there's some agitated discussion or maybe arguments going on. The townspeople or those of us who were there or nearby don't remember having much of a sense of what was being discussed. It was only the Vietnam vets. Do you remember any of those sessions? I think there

was more than one. Do you remember what they were like, and what you talked about, and what you worked out?

BC: Goodness! You are now recalling something I haven't thought of since then, and I vaguely recall that actually this was a real town meeting type of discussion amongst the veterans as to what was going to be our behavior, depending upon the decisions of the Board of Selectmen. There was discussion; I don't think there was unanimous feeling at the time. We were looking to achieve the unanimous sense as to how we would work as a group and react as a group to the decisions of the Board of Selectmen, but there were a number of people who expressed various different points of view as to what we as an organization should do if we were found to be in violation of certain laws or codes. My sense was that the discussion was offering the platform to anybody who wanted to speak who was a veteran. I think we excluded ourselves to just being veterans who were members of the organization. I think there had to be a sense that there was a membership affiliation, although, frankly to be a member you just had to be a veteran. There wasn't any dues or anything of that manner. But people used it as an opportunity to articulate their sense of outrage and opposition to the war and the way in which we needed to communicate that to a public, and it really was a broad diverse view as to whether or not this was a group that would take dissent to a level of confrontation with political authority, recognizing that oftentimes many of the police were Vietnam veterans themselves, recognizing that for many this would be the first time in which they would acquire a police record. There was discussion about the context in which they wanted to express their commitment, and whether or not…was it possible for some people to have one particular manner in which they would deal with the confrontation, and could others not participate? I think ultimately what was decided was that it was going to be not a collective class action activity or organizational activity. It was going

to be left up to the individual as to how they would behave if there was going to be an incident. I think there was discussion about the manner in which you would deal with authorities if you were to be arrested, which was a review of non-violent techniques. Some of us had been trained in Connecticut and gone through a number of different course instructions, so there was a number of people who were quite sophisticated in understanding how non-violent activity can escalate to a point that it tests an individual's resolve.

INT: Did the discussion ever get heated, or was it very logical?

BC: I think the discussion was quite heated, actually. I think that people got mad, and I think it took a lot of courage for people to express their points of view because they recognized there wasn't an unanimous perspective, but in a sense it was a model for ourselves to recognize that we were displaying the dissent that we were in a sense trying to demonstrate as a large organization then.

INT: So there was some real tension with pushing ahead and taking a position and pulling back and saying, we'll accept a compromise?

BC: That's correct. There were some practical discussions as to whether or not this would cause a disruption to the rest of our march. We felt it very important to be able to continue the march so that we could be in as many communities as we could be, and we also had a time schedule to meet in order to make it to the Common for what we felt was the main focus of our demonstration. We felt all of this was leading up to the Common. We didn't realize that what was taking place at Lexington was actually going to be probably of far more significance than what happened a couple of days later.

INT: Were some of the vets affected in some way by the number of Lexington people on the Green? Were they surprised? Did they expect it? Did they count in some way, or was that expected?

BC: I don't think we ever had any expectation of how many community members were going to turn out in support. It certainly was a much larger crowd than we had encountered in any other community that we had marched through. And the organization of the community in terms of supporting us both locally as well as with support services that they were providing was at a level that we had not been prepared for or had anticipated to a full extent. It reinforced in many of our minds the fact that demonstrations, in fact, do involve people in an active process, and that we all moved a little bit further in our own thinking in our commitments. And it in a sense felt like an extraordinary amount of support from people that we really didn't know but who had welcomed us. That kind of support does give you courage. I think, as I suggested, it ups the level of how committed and how serious you are about what it is that you're doing, because you're recognizing that is having an effect. At another level it raised the tension in terms of the potential dangers that existed, not necessarily violent dangers, but just political dangers. The political complexity was getting much harder for us to find a common voice for, and it meant that some of us felt responsible for the organization itself, both to create an environment for the town atmosphere of expression of thought, but there also had to be quickly put into place a more autocratic structure that drafted a sense of an interpretation of the group. We were forming kind of organizational structures as the hours went by to kind of react and also to lead. There ultimately did become a time when it became strictly a reactive situation, but we were pretty much pro active until we felt comfortable with the decisions that we had made.

INT: When you say we—those of us who felt responsible—do you mean, yourself, John Kerry?

BC: John Kerry, Arthur Johnson, Christopher Gregory. I actually don't remember all of the different people that were there, but there was a small

band of us who knew all the players, and had been involved in making the arrangements, and had also kind of thought through at least some of the ramifications of any action that we might take, recognizing that there were a number of people that showed up there that certainly had no bail money to get out, didn't have any idea what the ramifications of the legal action could be, and we certainly felt the need to explain that, to have that out front. And as I said, there was also this underlying tension of just events that could get out of control, events where there's always a tinge of gun shyness amongst a bunch of veterans who are still trying to get used to guns not going off, are there standing in the dress of their war, carrying toy guns that look very much like the real thing, and in a sense have put them in a mind set that is very similar to the mind that they had when they were in Vietnam.

INT: Do you remember the moment of the arrest—that was about 3:00 o'clock in the morning, by then Sunday morning—after a long night on the Green with many people having gone home and gotten sleeping bags and bedded down for the night? Do you remember anything about any incidents or some of the players at that point, representatives or town officials?

BC: Well, I remember at 11:00 o'clock at night, maybe midnight, the Chairman of the Board Cataldo…I've forgotten his first name, but…

INT: Robert Cataldo.

BC: Robert Cataldo actually came out to the knoll on the Green. We had set up a microphone system, although I don't quite recall where we got the sound system from. It may have come from the community. It certainly was useful given the fact that there were an awful lot of people there that wanted to hear, and I think what had happened was that the Board of Selectmen had completed all of the hearings and discussions that were going to take place, and word had come to me that Robert Cataldo,

although he did not want me to be at the Town Hall, he wanted to come and address the Board. He felt it was his—not the Board. He wanted to address the veterans in camp at Lexington. And I think we had concluded all of our discussions at that particular time, and we were now in a sense…it was a fairly subdued party atmosphere. People were tired from the long day's walk, and I think there had been a great sort of discussion going on back and forth as to what would happen, and I know that we had also drafted a number of different proposals for statements that we were going to release that sort of justified the positions that we were taking. Cataldo expressed that he wanted to speak to everyone. So he came out and actually addressed the group. It was not a dialogue situation at all. It was essentially a monologue in which he in polite terms told us we were not welcome to be there. By then there wasn't any time for any discussion; I think everybody had pretty much formed their positions, and everybody was fairly entrenched into how it was going to play out. We had expected then that the police would arrive within an hour or so after that. Most of us, I think, got too tired, and had actually gotten fairly sleepy and I think it was really quite quiet when the police arrived and the police chief with a bullhorn announced that people were going to be arrested, and I think the fire engines were there and there were some buses that were brought to move people. As I recall during the arrest a number of chimes were sounded from the different church steeples.

INT: Yes. Somebody had gotten to the belfry somehow.

BC: Is that right?

INT: And we, in fact, talked to someone…

BC: Oh, wonderful!

INT: …who knows who they were. And locked themselves in.

BC: Oh, wow. [Laughter.]

INT: And the bells were heard all over town. You can imagine, at 3:00 o'clock in the morning.

BC: Was that understood as a signal by the community, what it represented?

INT: No. It was an independent action. I think some of the people in the community didn't know what was going on.

BC: Oh, wow.

INT: Some people were afraid, thinking goodness knows what's going on down there. Others were just startled. It was quite an interesting thing. So you remember that?

BC: Well, I remember that. You know, in a sense when the arrest took place, it was kind of…I think at 2:00 o'clock we were a little disappointed that it hadn't taken place. We thought, you know, gosh, to go through all this debate and discourse and all this expression, to go on, and then these folks to back down on what it is they said they were going to do, we felt, gee, what a bunch of wimps here. It's just not [laughter] it's not following through, and yet in another sense there also was a feeling, you know, as long as we were there a victory had been won. So when the confrontation did occur—I shouldn't say confrontation—when the arrests took place I don't recall the arrests provoking any incidents at all. There may have been some resistance although as I recall most people were quite compliant in going with the police and did not resist at all. In fact, I think once some people had been arrested you kind of felt left out if you hadn't been arrested and gone off to the DPW [Department of Public Works] to be with everybody else. I mean, why spend the night on the Green when everybody else was sleeping in the garage or at least hanging out there. You wanted to know what the next part of this whole thing was about. Certainly on my part and on John's [John Kerry's] part, and on some of the other people's part, we recognized that the arrest was a guarantee that the incident was not

going to go unnoticed. Although we had not planned for a confrontation that was going to provoke an arrest it became apparent early on in the late afternoon of Friday that we had nothing to lose in that.

INT: This was the late afternoon of…the arrest was on Sunday.

BC: On Saturday, I'm sorry. In the late afternoon Saturday or at suppertime we knew the negotiations were going on, and I think we had a small negotiation period ourselves. It's Saturday at the rally where we met with some different people, and I can't really recall what took place there, but I think that there were messages that were expressed and sent back and forth between [us and] the Board of Selectmen. At that particular time I think we were fairly—when I say "we" [I mean] we as a leadership group of VVAW—were quite firm in the fact that we wanted to stay at the Green. We're not autocratic in the sense that this was going to be a unilateral decision that's assumed to be made without participation of all the membership, so that's why those town meetings and circles took place, but it was apparent to me that the Board of Selectmen had many options available to them, and they had selected the one option which was going to insure that the true energy of the town of Lexington coalesced as a result of our presence there and was now going to be noticed at a fairly significant level; that's accomplishing our goal, so we weren't going to resist it. There was no reason to resist arrest. I think if there was any…there was some concern on our part that we didn't know all the members and how they would react to the arrests, and I was arrested fairly early and kind of lost contact with what was going on. It was also a concern that we were not all going to be taken to the same place, and we were going to be disbanded and broken [up] and that was going to create difficulty in terms of us negotiating what we were going to have to go through the next day. As it turned out I think all of us were placed in the same place. It was just another class in political education was really what it ended up being. I

think that the feeling was a sense of relief to a certain extent that now the anxiety of a potential confrontation that you didn't quite know how it was going to take place was going to occur. You didn't even know how the police were going to react. I mean, there was always the tension of not knowing exactly what the mentality of it was for people who were having to enforce something in which they were going to have to bodily move other human beings. Different people react and are taught different ways to react to that situation, so we didn't quite know how that was going to work, because as I recall I think it was a fairly tame event. Then it became a process of just figuring out, okay, how do we finish this march now? The news media had come there also. Cameras were recording the arrests; we had cameras that were being passed into the jail. I wasn't the filmmaker at the time. Different people took pictures and then passed the camera back out so there was a sense that this event had grown in its significance. There was a lot of discussion as to really, you know, how were we going to build upon this, and what should we anticipate in Bunker Hill? We weren't certain if Bunker Hill was possibly going to be a repeat. We were very well aware of the fact that the community at Bunker Hill politically was a very different community than Lexington, and we recognized that a great deal of the success of the events at Lexington was based upon the fact that the peace movement was a very, very strong, active resourceful group of people and that Charlestown was not a hot bed of liberal activity and as we planned the march early on we were much more concerned about what might take place in Charlestown.

INT: What did happen?

BC: What happened was we were all processed rather efficiently as I recall through the court system, and then we were taken back to the Concord court, if I recall correctly, and I think a bunch of five dollar bills were exchanged in a fairly individual and regular basis between the court

clerks and the bail fund, which I think was a combination of money that had been raised from the community as well as money that we arrived in anticipation of some need for a little bit of cash. Very few people saw opportunity in the courtroom to make a political statement although there were occasionally political statements that were offered. There was a not a great deal of cooperation and not a great deal of uncooperative behavior. Everybody was pretty drowsy and sleepy, and it was kind of a gray day, too, sort of. The event had taken place and now it was kind of let's regroup ourselves. The people of Lexington formed carpools and transported everybody from Concord most of the way to Bunker Hill by car. We had originally planned that we were going to walk from Lexington to Bunker Hill, which I think actually was a fairly ambitious task, but we never ever had to actually deal with that issue. By early evening on Sunday everybody had been processed through the court system, and one of the things we were quite concerned about was to make sure that we could get through the court system on a Sunday, and I still don't know how that happened. The court system was used to actually being called into an emergency session on Sunday, but that could have been actually…well, it could have been a very disastrous from our point of view in terms of being able to conduct the demonstration the way we wanted to. To this day, I haven't the faintest idea of what actually called it into session, but I think…

INT: They had the arrest warrants all typed up in advance.

BC: Is that right? [Laughter.] Good planning! Well, I have a feeling that they were also violating some corrections standards by holding this many people in the Department of Public Works garage, that they had to get us out of there fairly quickly. So, it did happen in an orderly process, and I think that many townspeople stood outside the courthouse and cheered and you know, congratulated the people who had gone through it, and as I recall it certainly wasn't just veterans who had been arrested. There were

many townspeople that were arrested, and there was a wide variety of ages, and a wide variety of people that were going through the whole court system, so there was a sense of solidarity with the community and then the community transported the veterans to…it wasn't very far away from Bunker Hill, because we didn't arrive there until about 6:00—no, it was probably even later. It was early evening, and we then walked to Bunker Hill. Before we got to Bunker Hill we heard that there was a large crowd of Charlestown townspeople there, and again, this was an area of concern. We did not necessarily have a feeling that this was a group of supportive people. As it turned out there were some supportive people, and there were some people who were galvanized to come there because the incident had now developed some publicity, and then there were some people who were very opposed to us being there, but none of the groups had a dominance in terms of their expression, or none of the groups were organized, and the weather was foul, as I recall, as well. So, it cooled things down a little bit, and I think everybody arrived and sort of makeshift group of tents was set up around Bunker Hill. There were some gatherings of folks and a number of…but generally a fairly gentle, quiet evening, and then people proceeded over to the Boston Common the following day, which there was a gathering of I don't recall how many people, but this was a gathering much larger than just…it was a gathering of the peace community in which a number of the veterans spoke; Pat Simon, who was a Gold Star Mother[5] spoke, and Gene McCarthy spoke.

INT: Now, a Gold Star Mother at that time was someone who had lost a son in Vietnam?

BC: That's right. A Gold Star Mother—Pat Simon was a very active person at that time—Gold Star Mothers, many of them chose not to be active, but she chose very much to be very active. It was interesting just in

terms of the activities leading up to that particular part of the demonstration. I think on Wednesday of the week Gene McCarthy had spoken, and I can't actually recall what it was that he had stated, but it was something that some of us had taken a great deal of opposition to. We were trying to push him to be even more aggressive in his articulation into the process of how this war was to be ended. I really can't remember what the disagreement was, but there was then a period of time in which the organization actually considered dis-inviting Gene McCarthy to this particular demonstration, but those things got patched up. I think these are the kinds of concerns that exist in all organizations and people wanted to make sure whoever is coming to their platform or expressing views that are closely aligned with their own. But the demonstration ended with an event that became an event that always took place at the VVAW demonstrations in which all of these Mattel M-16s, which we would buy by the caseload then would get smashed, and in a sense it was our symbolic end of the war.

INT: After that was all over and after this weekend, how much longer did you stay with the VVAW, and did you get involved in any more kinds of activities like this, or did you go on to different things?

BC: Well, I stayed involved with the organization for a number of months after that, but then passed my sort of position of coordinator on to Chris Gregory who continued to be active with the organization. I moved up to Vermont, and participated in non-veteran political activities. I did learn subsequently that the [Chairman of the] Board of Selectmen was [voted out of office in] the town of Lexington. In fact, someone called me in Vermont and I can't recall who it was, and I can't recall how anybody ever found my number. I was not particularly listed in any phone book but…

INT: Had you kind of tried to leave the world behind in going up to Vermont?

BC: I was a little burnt. I had spent a great deal of full-time energy to "politicalizing." I was in for close to two years, and I had reached a point, I think, where I felt it was important that other people be in the leadership—some leadership positions—and I felt the need to experience some other things. I think also on a personal level I had felt it necessary to make sure that I wasn't becoming a professional veteran, that I didn't see myself strictly just as a veteran who was going to live his life always with that as his foremost experience that was going to shape all the rest of the way in which I thought and which I created other things in my life. So I felt the need to get away from it for a while. We had been…as I mentioned, there had been some disruption by some of the political activities that were taking place. Our offices were firebombed; we were engaged in a great deal of providing social services for many veterans. It's fairly intensive, fairly exhaustive, and I think it was just time to leave. In my work as a filmmaker I've continued to do some veterans works. I have found, however, that I don't tend to belong to…well, I belong to one veterans organization, but I don't really tend to associate a great deal with a lot of veterans, nor do I find a great deal of need to recall a lot of the experiences of the Vietnam War, or of the protest of the Vietnam War.

INT: What happened to the VVAW after you left?

BC: Well, the VVAW I believe still actually exists today in a very small, but interesting manner. In fact, just a couple of weeks ago there was an anniversary of the founding of VVAW in New York where a number of veterans gathered together just to acknowledge that particular event. VVAW carried on a lot of different activities, particularly in the Boston area. It held its own Winter Soldier Investigations down in Faneuil Hall in which it was bringing to light a number of the different atrocities which in previous wars those kinds of things were never discussed. In previous wars, generally veterans they didn't offer opinions. I think probably the activities

of VVAW became more and more around providing services for veterans, recognizing that just two groups and the need for veterans to get together to express themselves to one another was as important as the work that needed to go on in terms of trying to change American foreign policy. The organization found itself also infiltrated by a number of people who were politically quite far to the left, and seized control of various different leadership parts of the organization and then corrupted it. At the same time VVAW was infiltrated by the FBI, particularly in Florida where there were a number of activities that were created to discredit VVAW and to put some of our leaders in situations where they then could be charged with felonious activities, too, and then create legal problems for them. The organization in 1971-72 really was at its peak in terms of what it was able to accomplish, and I think that it became…for a short time it was able to have a very focused voice, but then—like the experience of this war and how polarized people became as a result of this war—within this veterans organization like so many others the veterans were not able to have common thoughts as to their ideas about how the war should be ended or why they had fought in the war or how veterans should be treated, and so there was a great deal of dissension, just amongst veterans themselves. To this day that exists. To this day there's a high degree of intolerance amongst veterans of themselves, regarding their political perspectives as well as the ways in which they've dealt with their post-war traumas and experiences.

INT: The infiltration by the left, can you explain?

BC: Well, it occurred actually after I had left the organization myself from the standpoint of being involved in the leadership of it, and so it's really hearsay that I know about it, and I can't even remember the names of the organizations which…

INT: What were some of the ideologies that they were espousing or pushing for?

BC: You know, I just can't recall.

INT: You had already left the group?

BC: Yes, I left the group, so I really didn't experience this. It was quite…

INT: It was radically left?

BC: Yes, it was radically left, and the ideology became very…I can't really give you an explanation of what the ideology is, but as I recall there was a very strident and very narrow view. It was a People's Labor or People Socialist…People Socialist Party, I think.

INT: So, very socialist?

BC: PSP, does that sound right? People's Socialist Party, which I think is a Trotsky group. Consequently in a sense it ultimately alienated a great deal of the veterans.

INT2: I see that because I was aware of that in Minnesota when I was in college and it was between '71 and '74, and that was a problem for many of the peace groups.

BC: Yes.

INT2: And they were people who had a very dogmatic line of thinking that everyone was supposed to agree with.

BC: It was very intolerant, very intolerant. And as I indicated to you, you know, those organizations are hardly a cohesive group of ideas. So you were not going to get a group of people taking a single hard line at all. I think the only hard line they had was…I mean, I think most people are surprised at how easily the organization was disrupted.

INT: Were they mostly draftees? Mostly officers? A mix?

BC: With the VVAW?

INT: Yes.

BC: Generally speaking, most of the people were volunteers. I think there were a substantial number of people who were drafted. The number

of people who were officers, that was a fairly small number. But it embraced all branches: Coast Guard, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Army. There were a few women, but I don't recall very many women being a part of it. There was a fairly large contingent called the "I Support VVAW" group which was really the VVAW auxiliary, and that was made up oftentimes of family and wives and friends of the veterans and a number of political people who had no association, no connection to…I mean fought in the war, but recognized this was an organization that they could feel comfortable in supporting. My sense is, too, that during a period of time in which the voice of VVAW felt very credible is coming as a veteran being able to express first-hand his or her eyewitness to war. That actually enabled a lot of people who hadn't been able to be a part of the peace movement to now find a reason to say it's okay to now join the peace movement; who in fact had been adamantly or had at least expressed an unwillingness to be a part of the peace movement. This gave permission.

INT: Are you talking about veterans, or are you talking about people in general?

BC: People in general. I think this gave some people in general permission to change their mind. Now they found not a draft dodger or somebody that they didn't necessarily identify with, they could identify with veterans, and if veterans were saying that this war was wrong, well, gee, it must be wrong.

INT: Yes. That was part of the power of the incident, throwing back the medals. Boy, that was memorable, throwing the medals.

BC: I should say, too, we met up equally with other veterans who were probably the most incensed of all the people that we met: other Vietnam veterans who just considered us the most despicable Commie "pinkos" raving idiots that you could ever imagine, and extraordinary traitors who certainly didn't fight in the war that I fought in.

INT: And were they a mix of draftees and officers and so forth, or…?

BC: I'm not sure that I would have been aware of their rank, although I knew people of both groups that were, you know, very…

INT: We hear a lot about a disproportionate number of blacks and minorities that were in the Vietnam War. Were you aware of the attitudes among minority members of the service about the war?

BC: We were aware of it because this was an issue that was discussed in many of the groups of veterans getting together. It was certainly something that you experienced in Vietnam and could not be unaware of. There was not any affirmative action ideology of VVAW saying, lets make sure we reach out into all minority communities. It was [that] we were just looking for veterans, and I think that there was a very innovative…it was not a great deal of racial consciousness on our part in that regard. But the extent to which the minority community was coalescing its own view of the war was still in a sense not completely articulated at this time. There were ideologies that were being expressed which had to do with the brown man fighting against the yellow man for the white man's war. There was certainly the consciousness of having fought in Vietnam and then coming back and having to fight on the streets again just to gain and create respect, but in terms of where VVAW was at, we were not promulgating necessarily a set of issues that we were trying to address specifically racial things. We discussed very much about the racial imbalance and used that information very much to describe the way in which the war was being conducted, and was certainly…any minority person who was a part of the organization couldn't help but have to deal with all of those issues.

INT: You did have some minorities?

BC: Oh, yes. Oh, absolutely. Every activity and every meeting I can…you know, there were always minority members, and like I said a few women, but not very many women.

INT3: Can I ask—this was often a question, so I can bring up with you—was there any—in your mind anyway, or maybe speaking about perceptions within the organization—any awareness of the differences, for example, [of] class and economic position in society and how that affected one's experience in Vietnam and then coming back, and the attitude of some communities?

BC: Well, I think, yes, to answer your question of whether or not there was an awareness within the organization of the differences of class and how that was articulated by communities, I think that in preparation for going to Lexington and Concord and then on to Charlestown, we couldn't help but have to deal with and understand the distinctions between communities and how those communities had borne the experience of the war and how they reacted to the war. We were very much involved in demographics when it came to fundraising. We knew that we could fundraise at a certain level at South Boston, and we knew that we could fundraise at another level in Weston.

INT: Were you finding [that] your funding was mostly individual contributions?

BC: And most of our fundraising was done through already existing networks that existed within the peace community. So we were able to leap in, particularly through our connections through Mass PAX into a variety of networks that existed that helped create funding opportunities. As it turned out, the New England chapter ended up funding most of the national organization. We were able to be the most successful in our fundraising efforts. And a lot of that…I don't know it well. I knew where some of that money came from.

INT: A last question: Were you surprised by the fact that a first phone call from—I guess it was Eugenia Kaledin—that there was a group

[Lexington Oral History Projects] getting together to celebrate and memorialize what would mark the anniversary of this event?

BC: I had no idea that this was such an historical event from the standpoint of it being the largest mass arrest in Massachusetts, as she conveyed to me, and that startled me from the standpoint of trying to recall what that was about. Yes, I was quite startled, actually. I was most startled as it was explained to me that the legacy of this event is something that still seems to be quite alive in this community, and the notion of Lexington also being a representative of what might exist in many other communities in terms of the ongoing divisiveness that resulted from the experience of the war and the protest of that war. I found that as something quite intriguing. I really hadn't thought about that. I have felt that we as a nation never have actually found the proper grieving process to do with this war and bind our wounds to enable us to, in a sense, fully heal. I think that the Vietnam Memorial has provided that on an individual basis for people, and that's what's so extraordinary about that memorial, but as a group of people who were organized into towns and villages and cities, we pretty much kind of swept this one away. And it's astounding to me that such a significant event that has had such repercussions in all of our lives isn't continuously a part of the debate of the nation, but then Desert Storm [the Persian Gulf War] was not a part of the debate of the nation. I think we have quite a difficult time dealing with the fact that we don't agree with one another. So I think that the effort that's going on here is quite an interesting effort to try to think about that and understand that.

You know I travel a lot in my work as a filmmaker to other countries, particularly into Eastern Europe recently, and to Central America where the price paid for dissent is quite substantial, and it is always a reminder when I come back to this country that there is an extraordinary amount that we do take for granted. And the irony is our intolerance of dissent, which

supposedly is the foundation of this country, is astounding and yet the rest of the peoples of the world who look upon us as a free nation are struggling with their lives to imitate the freedoms that we have and to literally try to find ways in which to gain those freedoms, if not to even come here to live. We're a little out of touch.

INT: A paradox.

BC: Sorry I didn't have any spicy stories for you. I can't remember any of them.

INT3: There's one thing I would like to hear more about, that's the personal journey you set off on, curious about the war, and how your thinking evolved, and I'd like to hear a little more about that. What happened?

BC: Well, I think intellectually I was probably still quite an adolescent when I made the decision to join the Marine Corps, and I think I may have made it for a number of adolescent reasons. I certainly had not considered even the fact that there was much of a choice to be made about joining the military. It seemed a logical progression in my maturing as a man. And given the consequences of the draft in 1966 [when] most people of my age, if they had no deferments, were going to be drafted—that was something that you could be fairly guaranteed of. There was no lottery at that particular time. So, the process kind of happened, and in a sense it made it easy for me in terms of my post-graduate life. I wasn't concerned about what the next years were going to be when I got out of college. [Laughter.] What do I do now?

INT: "How do I get out of deciding how I'm going to…?"

BC: Exactly. I mean, there's a certain delay taking responsibility for one's life, I'm sure. But while I was going through officer training in Quantico, Virginia, I began attending peace demonstrations—march on the Pentagon—and began reading Howard Zinn, and began acquainting myself

with the literature of the anti-war movement, and reading Noam Chomsky and other people, and picking up independent newspapers and recognizing that there was a much larger world out there that was thinking about this war [more] than I had ever acquainted myself with. I don't suppose that made it easier for me to go to Vietnam, but I think that I had certainly embraced the notion that I had made a commitment. I had said I was going to join the military; I was going to be a patriot to my government and nation, and so I willingly went. There wasn't any specific incident that took place in Vietnam; there wasn't a moment of insight or a moment of terror, or a moment that made me just decide that I didn't support this war any longer. It was a gradual process of being honest in my thinking. To some extent it also I'm a bit of a risk taker, so being in the Marine Corps sort of fulfilled some of these risk taking, adventurous desires. There are other ways to do that, but I just…you know, I'm sure there are some personality traits that were being acted upon here.

It ended up being actually a lonely existence when I was in Vietnam, as my thinking became more and more coalesced because I was…you're somewhat isolated as an officer to begin with, given the structure of command that you're set up with, but my thinking was not in concert with other people there, and as I became more and more convinced and more vocal in my ideas and attitudes I wasn't necessarily ostracized, but I certainly was seen as being a little "out there." The people that had the greatest difficulty, however, dealing with me were the people that I met when I came back from Vietnam who had to deal with me after I'd formed a CO claim. There just was no comprehension on their part that somebody could go to war and then come back and be a Conscientious Objector, and the interesting experiences that I had in that I was constantly being tested by the command who would throw me into situations where they would try to break my resolve. For instance, being stationed out at Camp Pendleton

there were a number of demonstrations that took place outside the camp in the city of Oceanside, and I remember one particularly which had been organized jointly by the Black Panthers and another group which essentially was going to be a concert event. I was ordered to be the security guard that was to carry arms to go out and supposedly lurk in the shadows to insure that if things got out of hand somebody could react to this, and it was kind of they were constantly testing me to put me in a situation where I had to disobey commands, and I would disobey these commands, and then they would back down and recognize that they really couldn't…they would have a hard time holding up on this, and if I was to press this…and I think lurking out there always was the fact that they did not need to make a martyr out of a Marine Corps officer who was saying no. I just tried to…they had to learn. They learned after a while.

INT: You said you made an odd statement about your discharge. Was it a general discharge or…

BC: Well, an honorable discharge, but it was called "Convenience of the Government," which meant that they decided not to award me a CO claim. I had asked to be discharged as a Conscientious Objector, and rather than award that, which meant that then they had acknowledged that there was validity to a select war theory. "Convenience of the Government" is kind of a way in which you get rid of all of your degenerates. I mean, it's just like…

INT: It's not a general discharge?

BC: No, it's an honorable discharge. It's just "we don't want him; let's get rid of him." But I mean, I had pretty much fulfilled my contract, so there wasn't much time left.

INT: But you got out a little earlier?

BC: I think four months earlier than what I had planned on doing.

INT: Any thoughts about how we can use this documentary?

BC: Well, I think you must be amassing some interesting information. I think that from the line of questions that you've all had it seems clear to me that you are in a process of trying to understand what is distinctively different about what took place here at Lexington, but at the same time also trying to understand the meaning of it that can be understood by a larger population so Lexington doesn't seem like an aberration, and a group of personalities that all coalesced into a certain series of events, and sparks flew and then, whatever. I think this issue of dissent and the whole notion of us as a local population, but as a national population as well…so whether or not we actually welcome protests is really a very fascinating road to follow. And we have an interesting backdrop of a war and demonstrations; it enables you to then carry on in a fairly intellectual manner without losing everybody. What I mean by that is I think it's a fairly provocative but fairly deep set of issues that you're engaged in, trying to uncover that cannot be discarded by a great deal of people who just would initially look at it as a an exercise of principle, when I think you know you're really possibly struggling with understanding a certain character that exists that may be something that's part of our democratic disease. I don't know.

INT: Well, the fact that when Eugenia [Kaledin] began to generate this as a thought herself, and brought it to the local library—did she tell you this story?

BC: Yes. They…

INT: It was going to be displayed with the…?

BC: Right.

INT: And then Desert Storm [the Persian Gulf War] came along and it was rejected. That was a crystallization of that theme.

BC: I remember her telling me that. I was astounded at that.

INT: She was astounded at that.

BC: Well, actually, I've attended occasionally some of the churches here in Lexington. I live in Arlington.

INT: Oh.

BC: My wife and children come up and go to the First Parish Unitarian, and I'm trying to remember…There was one person I was talking to there recently who acknowledged what a great deal of divisiveness had occurred within the church as a result of this event, and that to a certain extent today there are still groups of people who just don't want to talk about this set of incidents and the way in which the church behaves, and I guess the pastor of the church ultimately left, to a certain extent as a result of his support. I think it was a man.

INT: John Wells. There was an Interim Minister who actually got arrested, but one of the reasons he left might have been his activism. Reverend Harding was the one who was arrested.

BC: I knew Wells, who was very active. In fact, he was the one who introduced…he worked with other people to introduce a bill to declare the Vietnam War unconstitutional [Shea-Wells bill]. He was very much of an activist.

END OF INTERVIEW