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Interview
Christopher Gregory
March 14, 1995

Interview conducted by Lenore Fenn
Videotape length 116 minutes

CG: My name is Chris Gregory. I was born in Maine. I grew up along the East Coast in New Hampshire and New Jersey. I went to school, I was educated mostly in New Jersey. I went to public schools, local high school from which I did not graduate. I had a troublesome youth. I'm from a large Irish-Catholic family. When I was 17 or so I decided that it would be a good thing to leave, and shortly after my 18th birthday I joined the service in 1964.

INT: What were the politics of your family of origin? How did they feel about the Vietnam War at the time that you joined? About the resistance, although you might want to talk about that later. Also, was your dad…?

CG: My father served in the Navy in World War II, and was a conservative—moderate to conservative—Republican. A hard-working man with a big family who believed nothing was free and [had] the notion you should work for what you got, and that life was a disciplined affair. You had to maintain a lot of order and a lot of self-discipline in order to participate. When I joined the service there really wasn't a Vietnam War. It was April, and very early in 1964. There was a police action, I think, and I would read about it. But I thought, "This is very remote." There were probably not 10,000 people, Americans, in Vietnam in 1964. It was in the news frequently, but I never thought it would amount to anything anyway. At the time I joined Vietnam was not on anybody's map. The draft was functioning, but the people weren't being drafted to go to Vietnam. You had to register for the draft. In 1965 it started to heat up quite a lot. And then of course, in 1966, it was going full. But in early

1964 it wasn't much of an interest to anyone that I recall. I was 18 years old, so I was not very astute. My own politics were exactly like my father's. I had grown up in this sort of middle-class community, and my parents had ambitions for me to be in the mainstream—initially to be a priest, and then later to be involved in some kind of work, family business, and so on. It was very uncomplicated politics.

INT: At the time we're talking about it isn't really pertinent to ask how they felt about the war because the war hadn't become an issue yet. As a young man did you have any particular political interests or affiliations other than those you've described, your family?

CG: No, absolutely not.

INT: How and when did you get into the service, and how did…Maybe we need to know then what you trained in, where you were posted and stuff. My next question would be, how did your family feel about your going to Vietnam? But you obviously didn't do that right away.

CG: Right. I had been in for two years, really, before I went to Vietnam.

INT: So tell us about your training and induction.

CG: I wasn't inducted, I joined. I joined the Air Force in 1964. I wanted to join something. I went to the local recruiter's office. The guy from the Navy was not very nice. The Marine Corps guy was out to lunch, and the Air Force guy was there, so I joined the Air Force. It was really the only acceptable way to get out of the town I was living in, the situation I was in. I really felt little relationship to the people in the town. I didn't feel really I especially belonged, and I wanted to get away, an urge many 18-year-old boys had, and I was able to and did.

I was trained as a medic. I was trained in Texas, went through basic training, and then I went through specialty training as a medic. I learned a lot. The training actually was pretty good, and holds me still in good stead

for any sort of injury or a lot of medical things, not really complicated medical things, but trauma is something that I know how to deal with. I was pretty well trained, and then I had a lot of practice. I worked in hospitals all over the country, really, but predominantly in Florida. I was stationed in Fort Walton Beach at an air force base for a couple of years. I was well trained when I was there as well. I went to work on every ward in the hospital. I was there for almost two years. I was on every ward in the hospital. I worked in the Emergency Room. I worked in Surgery. I worked in Orthopedics, and finally settled in the Intensive Care Unit and worked there for about a year. I became proficient with machines, monitors, all sorts of limited electronics that they had in 1965, and most people were afraid of them. I came to understand them, and did good work there.

The only reason I really ever went to Vietnam is because they put me on the night shift, the graveyard shift they called it, from 11:00 to 7:00 in the morning. I worked on that shift for about a year, very uncomplainingly, because I liked it, actually. I was on the tail end of a small group of people that got promoted. I felt I should have been promoted, and so I confronted the sergeant. Not confronted, I mean, I went to speak to the sergeant who was running the ward. And he said, "Well, I wasn't able to promote you because somebody was ahead of you. But I think what I'm going to do as a bigger favor for you; we're going to let you become an Air Evacuation Medic. There is a slot available to the school. Would you like to try it? You get more money if you're flying planes." I said, "Sure, I'd love it." So it in fact occurred, and I went to the school and I did well, and I became an Air Evacuation Medic. It's a little different than working in a hospital because people are traveling, and altitude does strange things to certain medical conditions, and there are certain things you have to know. It's sort of a hospital in the air without a laboratory, without an x-ray machine, with

a limited number of resources. You have to plan, and you have to know certain things. You have to know how the airplane works. So it was a little more technical. I liked it because I was with professional people. It was different than many other veterans' military experience, because you were around professional people, and you did actually have a job which was a day-to-day job, you know what I mean? You weren't waiting to do something; you actually did it every day. And you get treated fairly decently, because you did have some skills, and you traveled around and got to see quite a lot. I mostly stayed on the East Coast where I was stationed. But as the war heated up, I moved gradually further and further away.

In early 1966 I started to—no, maybe earlier; the dates are now confusing to me—I started to go to Alaska. The quickest way from Vietnam to the East Coast, or even to the Central Plains, is through Alaska. It sounds strange, but that's the way they do it. It's because—never mind—the winds, and so on. I would go to Alaska, meet planeloads of wounded soldiers, and distribute them around the East Coast. It was a lot of flying. I did that for a year and a half or so. Then gradually I got moved further and further along. As the Tet Offensive came along, I went to Vietnam in late 1967. I was assigned temporarily to Vietnam, and was there only for about four months. I actually wasn't there for a great deal of time because I would pick the patients up and take them back. I would take them either to Chicago, New York, or Maine, or wherever there were hospitals and spaces available for them. Occasionally I would take them from Vietnam to Japan, from Vietnam to the Philippines, from Japan to the Philippines, and so on, sometimes to the West Coast. But as a general rule, from Vietnam, to Alaska, and back. You know what I mean.

INT: And then what happened?

CG: Well, the Tet Offensive occurred and so I stayed some more time in Vietnam, but I was basically an Air Evacuation Medic. I wasn't a Medic

in Vietnam. When the Tet Offensive was really going we got people who were quite badly hurt and quite recently hurt,who had not been in a hospital, who had only been triaged. They still had battle fatigues on, and were very recently wounded, but there was no place for them. There were no medical facilities capable of dealing with their injuries, so we would take them somewhere—Japan or the Philippines were the closest places—where there were secure major medical facilities that could deal with their injuries. It was quite a while. Of course, planes are big. We had a couple hundred. You'd have a hundred or a hundred twenty or so and you'd have another hundred ambulatory patients.

INT: What was that like for you?

CG: It was hard work. It was very hard work. A lot of heavy work, carrying all of these guys. Also, the people were quite emotional and not forthcoming. These men were still very much a part of what was going on. Their injuries had not been…they just realized how badly they were hurt. Some of them were pretty emotionally wrecked. A lot of them wanted to get out of the country so badly—it happened only occasionally—that people wanted to get out of the country so badly, they would conceal the seriousness of their injuries. They would actually be bleeding and hemorrhaging and not say anything, because they thought you'd take them back. So you'd end up having big, big problems when you got off the ground, because there was no physician. Even if there was a physician, you don't have an operating room or anything. You can do what you can do, but it's not the same as a hospital. It was very, very…it's very hard to describe because you're so passive. One is so passive at this time. This is happening to you and you can't affect it in any way; your imagination doesn't work as well as it does when you're actively influencing something. My reaction to it was that I became part of the job. I mean, you become very tough, and you're not necessarily sympathetic with people. You see

their injuries, and you have to deal with their injuries. You don't deal with the person who has the injury. Do you know what I mean? You have to try to understand what the potential [is] for them getting sicker or what they need at that particular time, and it's a lot of work keeping up with them. So you get very tough. You see things that…now I still think about some of the injuries that I saw. People were very badly burned or very badly wounded, losing more than two limbs and so on. You think, "Wow, how could I not have related to the person in a more gentle way!" But at that time I suppose it wasn't possible; it wasn't possible for me. But these guys, we ferried them across, and that was that. Our job, we got them off, and now our job was done. We got to sit down for a while, and then we went back. It was a great deal of flying. I figure in the two years I did it I logged over 10,000 hours of airtime. It was a lot of time in the air going back and forth.

Once a Marine Corps General came on board to present some medals to a guy in Hawaii. It was very stirring because the guy was so conflicted about the medals and what they represented. He was very badly hurt. And the Marine Corps General was dignified, an older man who was probably forty. He gave the medals to the fellow. The man couldn't stand, he was on a litter in an airplane, a big airplane. He read this little statement off a card, presented the medals, a Purple Heart, Silver Star, maybe another medal. The fellow was in tears and didn't say anything. He was going on another leg, you know? The General just got on to present him this medal. People sort of stood around and patted him on the shoulder, said "Congratulations," and the little ceremony was over. He just sort of took the medals and let them slip out of his hand and let them slip onto the floor. Tears were pouring down his face. It was stirring, you know? It's hard to describe what it meant, what happened. It was one very, very good memory from this time. But mostly it was work. A lot of people with

minor injuries, and a lot of people who had injured psyches as well—people who were not in good mental health as a result of their experiences.

INT: At what point did you become aware of anti-war sentiments, either here or among American soldiers in Vietnam?

CG: Although there were a lot of questions about the war I don't remember an explicit anti-war sentiment by any soldier or airman. People had questions about it, but explicit anti-war talk didn't go on. When you're involved in something like this it's quite different than not being involved. You have no perspective. You see all these people hurt, and it's hard to think that… It's very immediate. You don't stand back and say, "Is this right, or is this wrong?" Maybe some people do, but I didn't have that kind of perspective. You felt loyal to the people who were being hurt. That was the predominant emotion. "Gee, these good guys. It's so terrible they're being hurt. They're being shot and blown up and burned." That was the predominant thing. There was a lot in the press, and I remember reading most of it because I had a lot of idle time because when you go to Vietnam you're flying over to Vietnam, and there is nothing to do. I read books by the carton, and I read all the magazines. You're in the airports all of the time. The first thing that really opened my eyes, a sort of legitimate, intellectual basis for anti-Vietnam sentiment, was an essay in *Esquire* by Susan Sontag. It was a long essay; it was ten thousand words or so. I actually don't remember the name of it. It was "Letter from Hanoi" I think, a name like that. It talked about the war. It seemed to be very clearly thought out, very lucid. It caused me to think for a while whether this was right or wrong. But the notion of whether it was right or wrong had no effect on me, because there was nothing I could do about it. I was still a young man, I was only twenty. It's an adventurous thing, and very dramatic thing, something like this. That becomes so overwhelming, so

compelling, that the notion of whether it was right or wrong didn't occur to me. It didn't occur to me indeed for years, more than a year after I left.

INT: Were you serving with friends that you trained with, or did you move around?

CG: I moved around. I did have friends who were also Air Evacuation Medics, but it was a different crew, and it was a small crew every time, and different crew members. So every crew was different. There were people you liked and didn't like. It wasn't a coherent feeling of a unit.

INT: When and how did you come to leave the service?

CG: My time was up. My four years was over, and I got out. I actually came from Vietnam and was out less than a week later. Really, I came from Vietnam and was able for several days to go away. I was in Vietnam, and twenty-four hours later I was wearing a sports shirt looking at people swimming in a pool in suburban New Jersey. It was quite remarkable. It takes about a week or so to process you out of the service, so that's what I did, and went right to work. I had a job, I was twenty-two and wanted to work. What do you do all day? It was spring, and school wasn't starting. I had thought about going on to school, but I wouldn't until the following September, so I just went right to work.

INT: And you were doing?

CG: I was working in a foundry, heavy lifting.

INT: Which you were already good at. [Laughter.]

CG: Right.

INT: Then what happened?

CG: I came to school. I applied to college and was accepted. I was accepted on sort of a program for veterans. I applied to Brandeis. A very wonderful man who was a Marine Corps veteran himself, not of the Vietnam War but had been in the Marine Corps, had some sympathy toward me, and allowed me to go there. I was not really an adequate student. I

probably was an inadequate selection, and he stuck his neck out on my behalf because I think he thought I would be a settling influence on the school, or something. He was a very sweet man to do this. So I got admitted to Brandeis, and went there in the following September.

INT: What did you study?

CG: I studied Philosophy, and English, and Sociology.

INT: Going back a moment. From your perspective, what role did drugs play in military life?

CG: I never saw drugs when I was in the military. I had heard they existed, but I never had any experiences with drugs.

INT: It doesn't sound like you were exposed to Agent Orange, but were you aware of its hazards?

CG: I was not. I take that back. I knew that people were taking pills, and you know, actually, there were diet pills going around and stuff like that. But really, a sort of drug culture, did not exist. In my experience, no.

INT: When you came back to New Jersey, did the country seem different, seem changed?

CG: Yes, everything seemed very different.

INT: Tell us about how it was different.

CG: First of all, just the notion that life was so normal. Things went on so much as they had. The notion that this was still going on. When I got out it was in April of 1968, so the Tet Offensive was really at its height. I think the Offensive was over, but a lot of land had been claimed by the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] so the battles were raging, and we were trying to recover. And the numbers were higher than at any other time in the war. There was the Siege of Saigon. There was Hue City had to be re-taken. For the first time in the history of the war there were actually pitched battles and casualties were very high. These numbers would come

over the television, on the radio, how many people were hurt, how many people were killed, and it was very startling to me that this was going on.

Then I began to notice protests as well that summer. There was a lot of political activity in this country at that time. There was a huge amount of racial strife. That had to be looked at as well. There was a much greater percentage of black people in the service…they comprised a greater percentage of the population of service people than they do generally, because it's a fairly good job, and there is equality, largely. I was impressed by the extent that people didn't differentiate. That black people weren't treated badly, black men weren't treated badly. There was some racial tension that existed. But I think it was the ambition of a lot of black people to be in the service, and there were a lot of good soldiers, patriotic guys. This was something that was an eye opener for me, being around this kind of society. I had never had a great deal of experience with black people, living close with them. I had a black roommate and I worked with black people all of the time. I had black bosses, and so on. It was not uncomfortable at all, but it was an eye opener to see that part of life.

INT: How were you treated?

CG: In the service?

INT: When you came back to New Jersey?

CG: I just had a job. I had no real society to return to. When you're gone for four years there is not much to look back on. I was looking to the future. I feel now that for a long time I was sort of numb and I don't know how I was treated. I went to work and I went home. I was free. I was mildly exhilarated when I first got out of the service. I was happy that I didn't have the constraints that I had when I was in the service. I didn't like it. I didn't fit in very well. I wasn't a bad medic, I was fairly good at what I did, but I never was really comfortable. It never had any appeal as a career or anything for me. So I was happy the constraints were lifted. But

I didn't feel anything special. This was a remarkable part of it. You can become very inured. You can become very tough.

INT: And you didn't experience any particular stigma as a Vietnam veteran?

CG: Nobody would know. Nobody was interested. My parents and people I knew, nobody ever really asked me about this, what it was like or anything. You seem like the same person. They thought you were sort of in limbo. They never asked, nobody was very interested in this. I wasn't especially interested in talking about it. I didn't do anything to be ashamed of. I didn't do anything necessarily to be proud of. I did my job, and I felt completely neutral about it. Later I began to think about what it all meant. But at that time I don't think I had many thoughts about that. It's sort of alarming when you think about it, but I expect that's kind of an experience.

INT: Actually, you had quite a lot on your plate it seems to me. How and when did you connect with the VVAW [Vietnam Veterans Against the War]?

CG: Well, I connected I think some time in early 1969, early in the winter or late fall. I was living a very isolated existence at Brandeis. I was a good student, and I was interested in academics and academic pursuits, but I felt very different than the people on the campus there. I was a freshman, a twenty-two-year-old freshman. I don't think I looked that different, because I was a young looking twenty-two-year-old, but I had very little in common with eighteen-year-old freshmen, nothing in common. So I lived alone. I lived off the campus. I lived predominantly alone. I lived in sort of a group apartment for a while, but I was still quite isolated from the other people. The first year I was there at Brandeis I actually had found that I didn't have to communicate with people very much. I had a lot of trouble learning how to write effectively, and my academic skills were way, way behind. I had never graduated from high school, and I had been a very

rebellious youth, so I had a lot of studying to do, a lot of catching up to do. I found I really couldn't write a paragraph very well. I could read a whole book and really not know what that book said, and have to read the whole thing again. I didn't have the tools, so I immersed myself in that. I found that I didn't have to talk to people very much.

I told my wife about this recently. That once I went on a couple of, what I called at the time, silences. I found that I didn't have to talk to anybody. First I went a couple of days without really saying anything to anybody. I would give them 50 cents for the paper in the morning, and buy my coffee. Really, nobody wanted to talk to me, I didn't want to talk to them necessarily. I had nothing special to say. So a couple of days went on like that. I thought, "This is interesting." I was certainly able to write, and I was able to read, and I did my work. Then I went on one silence for two weeks. A couple of times I did have to not answer people when they spoke to me. They seemed a little disconcerted but not especially, they weren't especially concerned that I didn't answer them. They thought I was a little hostile, or having a bad day or something. But then I found actually, that I couldn't. I thought it was kind of dangerous. It was hard for me. I would pause and pause and pause before I answered somebody, even when the silence was over. It got harder. I thought that was kind of an interesting time for me, that I was inward dwelling at this time. The whole superficiality of the life I saw around me was sort of disturbing. I also felt a need to reconnect with the soldiers I had liked. The one thing about being in the service is there is already comradeship. Having been in four years and having traveled so much I could go anywhere and find a drinking buddy, or somebody to have a hamburger with, or somebody to talk to, or somebody who had some interest that I had. Any base, really, in the country. Of the ten or twelve that I went to, I knew people at every one.

The companionship of the fellows was good, I had always felt, and I missed it.

There was something that people had put together—Bestor Cram and Art Johnson and a couple of other people—had worked on putting a thing called the Legal In-Service Project together, which was a predecessor to VVAW. They had a connection with Fort Devens. They had an underground newspaper called *The Daily Report* that they put out, and we had a bookstore, "Common Sense Books," a reference to Thomas Paine. So I got involved with these guys, just hanging around their office. They were counseling people out of the service, [including] how to apply for conscientious objector status when you're in the service. They actually had some lawyers they sent to Vietnam. We raised some money. We had a little sort of newsletter that we put out among interested liberals. A guy named Jerry Grossman helped us start it. So I was with them. Bestor was one of them, Art Johnson was one of them, and some other guys I'm still in touch with, John Frank, Peter Haggerty.[1]

Jerry Grossman said one day to us "Listen, I want you to meet this fellow John Kerry. He's an okay guy. He wants to talk to you about Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Do you want to go to lunch?" Well, it was a free lunch, we knew. I said, "Absolutely, I'd love to go to lunch." So I went to lunch and listened to this guy. Kerry came and he said, "We want to start this thing. We want to put together a chapter here. We have a thing in New York. We've been working on it for a couple of years. We had one demonstration; it was great. We offered some services. We have these rap groups where these people can talk about their experiences, the VA. We put together a pressure group, a method of pressuring the VA into giving better services. Some of these guys have readjustment problems, we help them deal with them, but basically it's a political effort." We said,

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[1] Of all the people mentioned here, Bestor Cram, Jerome Grossman and Arthur Johnson were interviewed.

"Terrific." We were involved in that. This is what we wanted to do. We said "Okay, great." Soon after that they had a demonstration, Dewey Canyon III[2] in Washington.

INT: This was when, roughly?

CG: The fall of 1970, I would say. In the spring, we had the first demonstration on Washington. We had New England; the Boston chapter was the center of New England. We put little advertisements; we paid—I don't know what, some ridiculous amount—$2.50. We put a little box in *The Real Paper*, a little box in the personal section, "Top Secret, VVAW, Dewey Canyon III, call this number." People started to call. Dewey Canyon had been a famous [military] operation. I don't know if people knew what VVAW was, but word got around. I think there were other men like me who felt some need of companionship and had some need to process this experience and get back to what had happened to them in Vietnam.

People did feel alienated from their parents. They did feel that any constraint was too much. They thought the imposition of authority in Vietnam had been a terrible thing. That they had been caused to do things that they didn't want to do, and that they found later when they looked back at it that they regretted it, and that they had been coerced into this, or that all of the incentives had been lined up—maybe coercion is not the right word—but that they had willingly done something that they oughtn't to have done. So they started to call up, and we started to talk to each other. This thing just started to build. Certain people in the Democratic Party made it possible for us to have the resources to do this. To have phones and office space, that was really about it. I had a job, and everybody else there had a job, but I had a part-time job. I was a student, then I had a part-time job, and then I had a big interest in this endeavor. We tried to pull this

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[2] Dewey Canyon III was a weeklong rally, lobbying effort and encampment by the VVAW. Their publicity called it "a limited incursion in to the 'country of Congress,'" an ironic reference to Dewey Canyon I and II which were military operations in Laos.

demonstration together. We planned it. We went to meetings. We talked about it. We wanted to know what we would do, where it was going to happen, a lot of communication back and forth, and a sort of national structure evolved. It was some time in April, April 11, something like that, when we had this demonstration. I was in charge of the transportation. So I signed up a lot of guys. We signed up. People called up. Anybody who had ever called us, we called them back and said, "Do you want to go?" We put these ads in the newspaper. We asked people for $10 and people from suburban areas were sending in some money. Then a newspaper reporter, very kind newspaper reporter, came by our office and asked us some questions like, "How are you going to be able to afford to take all of these guys?" We said we didn't really know. We weren't really concerned about it. The buses were going to show up, and how we paid them, well, we'd figure that out later. So he wrote an article [saying] that we can't afford it. "They have people who want to go to Washington, and they can't afford the transportation." The next day the checks arrived. It was a wonderful thing. Because I had rented, like, eight buses and a train to go to Washington—a train. You know, it's a remarkable thing to get on the phone and say, "I'd like to have a train." They say, "How many cars?" And say, "Yes, we have this…" [Laughter.] So we canceled the train the day before or something, and sent back a couple of buses, but I think we had six busloads of guys, and plenty of people going by car. We were able to pay for that. Money wasn't really the issue, but we were able to get enough supplies so that we would be able to sustain ourselves. We had thick plastic for the ground so you'd stay dry. These guys all knew how to take care of themselves, but they didn't have… We had all of the ready supplies, and we started to work on a political agenda, what we were going to do down there, and so forth. We became very, very compelling. It became—so this is what you wanted to do, from the time you woke up in

the morning until the time you went to sleep at night, and this is what we did do.

Although I didn't sleep in the office, I did everything but. I never got there later than 7:30, and I never left before 9:00, 10:00 or 11:00 o'clock at night for months, and neither did anybody else. But there was a lot of fellowship, and a lot of very, very dramatic and astonishing things happened during this time, where people would come in with stories, with information, what was going on. We'd have a network to kind of process all of this stuff. It was very interesting. We had a visit by the FBI, everything. People set up cocktail parties for us. "Leonard Bernstein and the Black Panthers"—we were the Black Panthers. But it was very compelling. It's hard to describe how invigorating all of this was, and what a heady thing it was. Because not only was there some acceptance for these ideas, but as the ideas developed we found that the peace movement was very well informed, very well intentioned, but somehow it was abstract for us. Also, we found that here these people had been working for peace and done a lot of good things, done a lot of good work. They were also looking to us for some kind of guidance. We felt respected and honored by this. I'm not sure we were as gracious as we probably should have been, but we felt needed and essential. Also, we felt that there was some truth to the things we tried to say in this demonstration, which was a big compelling reason to stay involved. And you make very, very important friendships as well.

The truth of this enterprise was very profound. You started realizing more and more when these fellows would come in how many of them there were, how many people had been hurt, how many people had something terrible happen to them. People would come—it was odd—but people would come in… A fellow came in one day from Harvard Square, who lived just on the other side of Harvard Square. Our office was in Harvard

Square. He lived on the other side, but he couldn't walk at all. He had taken a [hit] in the head. He walked on crutches and he couldn't speak, and it was freezing cold in the winter. He came in. He was dripping with snow. It was very agonizing to watch him move. He moved very, very slowly and very precariously. He had come six or eight blocks and made it into our office. He came in and he just stood there. You'd talk to him, and he could try to answer back, but you could tell… You knew his brain was working because he made eye contact in a way, and he made non-verbal communication in a way that you knew he was sentient, and he was there for a reason, a very important reason to him. He just stood there. He stood there against the wall, then he'd stay there for a couple of hours, and then he'd go back. He'd leave, and he'd come the next day and stand there, watching. Eventually he married his physical therapist at the VA. He was able to walk and able to talk, and he got much, much better. But to watch this go on, to watch all of these guys… People would come in in wheelchairs all of the time. We'd be hauling somebody up the steps in a wheelchair. So there was a purpose. There was a very clear purpose to what we were doing.

Now I don't think we were really organized. At the time I think we felt it was politically very heady. But now I think that wasn't really the basis of what we were doing. That's probably why we didn't establish a permanent…we didn't have a shared ideology. We didn't establish a permanent organization. Because what we shared was an extremely painful—extremely painful for many people—experience, in the past. Not just that. That was what we had in common. It's not a good basis to build a big organization. It was an ephemeral type organization, but very respectful. The connections were very deep, but it was not made to be a long lasting thing, I don't think. Also, that type of rebellion is very hard to sustain. That type of agitating and rebelling against the norms of the

government and the norms of the people around you, it's very hard to sustain. It takes a lot of endurance. It's quite different than politics in the Democratic Party. You're an outsider, and it becomes wearing on many people.

INT: You mentioned that part of the early momentum was enabled by some members of the Democratic Party who had some space available. Can you tell us who they were?

CG: Jerry Grossman was principal among them. He was a Democratic National Committeeman. He was a businessman from here who owned Massachusetts Envelope. He's still around, and is still the most wonderful guy that ever lived. I think he is almost eighty now. I still see him and he's doing fine. He's a very, very sweet man. He reached out. He had questions about the war. He had people around him…Jean Rubenstein was a person who now works in rare books with a rare book collector and trader; she was a woman who helped. There were a lot of others. There was the campus to the left community that supported us. Sid Peck, you know. A lot of people from north and west of Boston who were involved in the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Mass PAX [called CCP or Citizens for Participation Politics in 1971] was the organization that Jerry put together that helped us. He said, "Get a phone, I'll sign. Do this, I'll sign." But there weren't vast amounts of money involved in this enterprise; it was modest, but very significant. I don't want to say it wasn't. It was.

INT: Well, you had a rallying place and a focus for energy.

CG: Right. And also, the Drinan [Father Drinan who ran for Congress in Massachusetts] campaign was also a focus. Because he was a staunchly anti-war candidate and also such a stern moralist, and so sure of himself, so confident in his judgments that he was a person you could rally around. Part of what we did came from that campaign, from his initial campaign for Congress.

INT: Is this a time to talk about the other vets you were working with like Bestor and so forth? Tell us about that.

CG: Bestor and Art Johnson, who is now an attorney, were working at LISP, Legal In-Service Project; I forget the exact name of it. They were good friends. Bestor had been a Marine Corps engineer who had had a fairly difficult war. Art was in the Navy, and I think became a CO while he was in the Navy, and became interested in this. They were the people who initially thought this thing out and put themselves forward in this way. I don't think either came from very political backgrounds or had political ambitions for themselves. They were very egalitarian type people. They were very "with-it." I think they both enlisted. An amazing thing about the whole veteran's anti-war movement or organization, whatever it was, was that most people were enlisted. Most people were quite patriotic when they went to Vietnam. The process of disillusionment was powerful. That's one of the strongest lessons I gained from this, the conversion, the power, of having your ideas converted by the facts in front of your face is very profound. Anyway, these fellows, they had a very open process for how people did things. You did what you wanted to do. They would ask you. They were sort of elected in some nominal way, but there were a lot of jobs to do.

One other thing is there was a fellow who was a fundraiser who worked on the Drinan campaign named Marty Gross. He is now a rabbi out on the West Coast who Jerry Grossman just gave to us as an employee. He said, "Here is Marty. Do you have anything you want him to do?" Marty was our age and a recent Amherst graduate, and a really sweet and wonderful guy. He had quite a lot of energy and a lot of ideas, and knew how to do things within the Democratic Party. Knew how to structure things, knew how to get what he wanted. So projects sort of came forward. Some guy comes up with a truck and wants to put together an exhibit that travels

around, has veterans talking about Vietnam. So they come to us, "Do you want to be on this truck?" which we do. We have this truck that goes up and down the East Coast stopping in these city squares and stuff. These veterans with their fatigues on show little videos and slide shows and give talks and hand out papers on street corners all over. They really were traveling all over the country on that. A ton of fun. Different projects like this came in the door and people with exciting ideas started coming around. There was a lot of energy.

INT: How was that truck received in these squares?

CG: The truck was strange.

INT: Or how were the vets received?

CG: Very well. Because you know, it's sort of shocking. Here are all of these guys, this truck. These guys come out. They hand you a piece of paper. They start talking to you, talking to you, talking to you. We went to high schools. When high schools would get out, we'd try to talk to the kids in the high schools. We'd go to city squares at lunch hours. We had a regular itinerary that we went up and down the East Coast. We went to Hartford, Philadelphia, Washington, places in Maryland. We worked out a whole itinerary. We were well received, very few arguments. Veterans would argue with you. There were veterans who would come up and holler at you, but really very few other people would ever really argue with you. Because you didn't really talk about the war in a theoretical way. It was not an argument about the theory of the war; it was what actually is going on there. People would try to argue, and even if people did try to argue with you, you had the benefit of your experience. Fundamentally, I don't think when confronted with a person who actually had suffered, or who was telling about real and genuine suffering, that even most veterans would say… Every veteran really, I think, has profound misgivings about what goes on in a war. It's not a one-dimensional thing as you would see on TV.

The argument against us would be "You have to stick with your country. You have to be loyal. You have to be faithful." We'd say, "We are loyal and faithful. Nobody can really accuse us who have just served and come back of being disloyal or unfaithful. This doesn't make sense." So it's very tough. It's hard to reconstruct but it was very hard to argue against us on this, because we had the weapons. And the public sentiment was really at a low at this time. There were a lot of people dying for very little, for nothing, really. It's a hard thing to say, but I really do, I actually think that it was for nothing. And it was very hard to defend on any logical grounds. Politically it could be defended in the White House or in the Pentagon. People could say, "Well, there will be a backlash if we pull out." But this is not an argument that anybody heard on the street. They would say, "Why don't you do your duty?" "Well, we have done our duty. And we're here to tell you that you're not being told the truth by your government, that there is nothing to gain there. There are a lot of good men who are not coming back. Can you give them a reason? What is the reason? Why is that happening?" When faced with a question like that, a reasonable person doesn't argue anymore. After the Second World War maybe you could, during the Second World War you could argue, you had a response. But in the Vietnam War you really did not.

INT: Do you want to talk a little bit about Operation Dewey Canyon in Washington?

CG: Dewey Canyon III was a thrilling thing. We left from here. We had all of these buses. We had all these guys. People brought musical instruments, bottles of wine. Somebody probably brought some food with them, but very little. Tents, and stuff. We got down there. It was evening when we arrived. We probably had two hundred fifty people at the most from Massachusetts. I thought, "Wow, we've done a lot of work here. If

we have only got two hundred fifty people, there is not going to be anybody there. This is going to be a bust."

We got down there. This was a politically charged area, do you know what I mean? There were a lot of students. You think, "We've only got two hundred fifty from Massachusetts. How many are going to come from Nebraska? None." We got down there to find a thousand, twelve hundred people, something like that, and it was very exhilarating. All of a sudden we said, "Oh, this is enough people." It was pretty well organized. They had a decent sound system so they could communicate. They had a notion of where people should go, so it fell together. It was very straightforward what we did all day. We went around the halls of Congress. There were a couple of hearings. We were amazed at the access we had.

INT: Who had set that up?

CG: Nobody. Washington responds to the press. This was not a big revelation. When we arrived there were a bunch of front-page stories. This was not wasted on the Congressmen and Senators. So we got in pretty much anywhere we wanted. Also, the Massachusetts delegation was wonderful; particularly Senator Kennedy was wonderful to us. He offered his office to us. Actually came out to the Mall where we were staying at night, the second night or third night we were there. There were some security problems. We knew that there would be people there trying to start trouble and so on, and who knows where they would come from? Whether they would be crazy? Whether they were…who knows, provocateurs, or whomever? So we had security. Veterans are generally concerned about security, and putting up a perimeter. There was also talk about weapons. A lot of veterans when they came back from Vietnam did not feel comfortable unless they were armed. That's the common thing, I think, among veterans. If you spend a lot of time with a weapon, you feel that your security lies in that weapon and it's sort of hard to give up. So we had to deal with that

issue, but we felt perfectly safe within our little perimeter. It was just like a sort of grid on the outside of these trees, you know? It was quite a big area, bigger than a football field, but not huge. So Kennedy came out one night. He came out with two or three guys. We had a tent, a little Massachusetts tent. Everybody slept out of doors, but there was a sort of office. And he came into the tent with two guys with him, one guy with a cardboard box. He said, "Who is in charge here? Is anybody in charge?" Somehow he knew Kerry. So Kerry comes up and they shake hands. They talk. So then he said—it was like 11:00 at night, 11:30, 12:00 o'clock at night; a lot of people were sleeping, but I was sort of up milling around—so he says, "Hey," to whoever was with him, "Show him what's in the box." He came into the tent, and he introduced himself around. He was very happy, very jovial, and very light-hearted. "It's great to see you. It's good that you came down. Are you all comfortable? Is there anything I can do? What do you need? Is everything okay?" and on and on, introduced himself to everybody. He was very energetic, very happy. He was very welcoming. Then he says, "Show them what's in the box." Here are two bottles of whiskey, and I don't know what else, a bottle of wine, a six-pack of beer, or something. "Let's pass this around." So this goes on. Then he says, "Can any of you guys sing? Are there any instruments or anything?" So pretty soon here this man is a one-man party. We're singing Irish songs. [Laughter.] People are dancing around, and it was terrific. It was really a wonderful, wonderful thing. The guy really knew what we were doing there. You felt, "This guy knows what we want." He was wonderful. He said, "You want to call home? Just come to my office. I think you guys might need showers after a while. If you do, you come. This is how we're doing to do this. Here is the contact person on my staff. Anybody need money? Any medical emergencies or anything? Call me, I'll have somebody come down here and get you." It was as if this guy was one of

us. There was a lot of that kind of thing. He was a standout, but it was not that unusual. There of course were people who didn't like you, wouldn't see you, and so on, but not many.

So we walked around the halls of Congress, and we tried to say what we were doing here. "We're here to tell you we want you to vote against this war. We want you to vote against appropriations." We had meetings and Kerry, of course, had his hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, the Fulbright Committee, and made his now famous speech. There were several other activities that we had going on all over town. There were the medals. We threw away the medals, which was very… It was the first in a series of demonstrations that were going to happen sequentially which we…we were the first. May Day was coming. There were a bunch of sort of radical demonstrations. As we were there they started to nail up fences and park buses strategically across all of the entrances and stuff. But we were going to take the medals originally. We had to collect all of the medals and put them in a body bag, and deliver them to the floor of Congress. But that got iced. This was too dramatic for them, or something. Somehow, that fell through. So they put up a fence. We were going to do it right in front of the Capitol building, [but they] put up a fence in front of the Capitol building. They put up a high fence, a wire fence in front of us. So we decided they're not going to deter us. We're not going to get into any game about what we can do and not do. We were in charge of this news, and so I got out there early. I was a Medic, you know, so I wanted to figure out what was going to happen, who was going to get hurt, and how it's going to happen, and where I should be, where I could do the most good, because I felt responsible in some way for these things. I got out there early, and I met [journalist] I.F. Stone early in the morning. It was like 7:00 o'clock in the morning, and I.F. Stone, this old man, he comes up to me and starts chatting. All of these important

lessons that I'm sure, about Patton, [the] Army, I don't know, historical precedents for veterans doing this kind of thing. We were really in the mainstream. There was a little kid, a grandson, son or grandson, I don't know. Early in the morning, at dawn.

These guys, we lined up. People started to throw their medals away. It was very, very powerful for these guys, because these medals [had been] presented. To do something like that, it was very powerful. They represented the pain, the suffering, the reward that they were supposed to have, and to say it's false, to say it's hollow in this public vehement way. Everybody was in tears. Everybody was in tears. They went up and threw the medals away from one place. They were all…every one of them… It was very affecting. A lot of wives, widows threw their stuff. It was very profound.

INT: Tell us more about the women.

CG: The mothers?

INT: The wives, the mothers, and sisters.

CG: It was harder for them really. They had some women who had come, mothers who had come with… A mother came with a Congressional Medal of Honor who just stood there and held it and couldn't really, didn't want to pitch it over the fence. Didn't want to heave it. Didn't want to, you know…felt it was somebody else's memory connected to the past. Very sad, you know? Very sad. But it was such a rough and tumble thing. It was quite dramatic. I had my hands full with the guys. The women were really very much peripheral to this event. There were no women with us. And they were, you know…your people tried to talk to them about their sons, and so on. I personally made no real connection with any of these women.

INT: Is there anything else about that particular expedition—protest—that you want to tell us?

CG: It lasted four days, and I slept on the ground. I actually found the ground to be comfortable after four days, an amazing fact. I came back on a bus, although I went down in a car. I felt coming back as if I had been in another world. It was so peaceful and so calm, and so perfect coming back from this thing. Because I was so justified. It had gone so well. Not just the newspaper stories, but we followed every newspaper in America every day. The whole feeling that this was something that had been right, and adventurous. I can't find words to describe this, really. A feeling of really great, great satisfaction to be a part of this. I felt so much respect for the men and boys who were down there together. This was an extraordinary feeling. So I remember most of the bus was asleep the whole way. One guy picking on a guitar. There was nothing to think about, nothing to describe. But it was just an overwhelming feeling of love for these people, and respect for what we'd done.

INT: Integrity is a word that comes to mind. To be living in such an intense way, in terms of your integrity.

CG: Right.

INT: And your patriotism.

CG: Well, we felt it was patriotic then.

INT: So then my next question would be about Operation POW, the "reverse march," but there may be other things in between that.

CG: We came back from Washington in the early spring thinking, "Well, we ought to do something up here." There was a chance to make a statement here, and to also talk to people. So we casted around. That's sort of just Paul Revere's march in reverse. [Naming it]"Operation POW" said, "We're all prisoners of this war. This war dominates our lives, dominates our thoughts, dominates the entire political discussion of the country. This thing is just a monolith that's just grabbed everybody, and is dominating us. We have to fight this off. We have to control this." It was an essential

motion. I thought it was very smart, very pressing. Anyway, we started to think about how we'd do it and how we'd make this statement. Somebody, I think Jerry Lund, came up with the idea that this was a good chance to put [out] ideas as opposed to just the demonstration, that we could issue broadsides—I don't know if any of them survived, but that we could do what Tom Paine did. At different stages along this march we could bring out different aspects of this war and talk about different things.

By this time we were having pretty regular meetings, and a hundred people would show up. We'd have meetings on Sunday at 2:00 or something, out of doors. We had them in a church, but it didn't work out because they all wanted to smoke and stuff. They'd smoke in the church, and the janitor would come and scream at you, and the priest would scream at you. They'd give the finger to the janitor and throw stuff at him. He'd say, "This is a church. You've got to respect this church." They'd say, "Fuck you!" [Laughter.] It was terrible. It was unbelievable. It was so self-righteous and so smug, but that's the way it was. So we had our meetings out of doors after that. [Laughter.] We went from one church to another, actually. The worst experience we had was with the Quakers. They had a fit. We weren't orderly and stuff. It was awful, just awful. They were so well meaning. They wanted to have a nice little discussion in their church. They thought [the discussions] would be civilized. Of course it wasn't civilized. [Laughter.] There was a lot of exuberance. Also, there was not a willingness to tolerate anybody telling you what to do. It was really asking for trouble. So that was considered a major [issue]. "You can't smoke here. You have to put that cigarette out." Now you're going to have a real problem anyway. Then the meetings were out of doors, and we would vote on a lot of things. It was sort of a developing discussion which was not political. It was political in an essential way, but it didn't have to do with a line of politics. All you would say [is that it] went as far as to be

anti-imperialist, and that's as developed as it got. It was an anti-war discussion, but it was not "We embrace Ho Chi Minh" or anything like that. People hated Ho Chi Minh. Many people would want to shoot Ho Chi Minh. Some people thought Ho Chi Minh was a great hero and a great guy, and a great leader of his country. Other people said, "No, I'd like to shoot that sonofabitch." There was no clear political development, but a lot of cooperation as veterans, you know, as people who [suffered] this together. So we started to work this out. By the time it came time to have it happen, it happened pretty well. We camped out the first night. There were only a few guys, forty, fifty, sixty guys camping out by the bridge [Old North Bridge, in Concord].

INT: How did the word get out?

CG: We wrote to people. We sent little postcards which we cut up on a machine. We called people. There were some students around, although not many veterans were students. The VA hospitals, VA clinics, and so on—we always went to them.

INT: I didn't want to deflect you too much.

CG: No, it's an interesting question, because hundreds of people showed up, ultimately.

INT: Yes. So tell us about that first night at the bridge.

CG: The first night was quiet, a very peaceful, quiet night, beautiful night.. Somebody brought a horse.[3] We did dinner, and some people made a bunch of dinner, spaghetti or something, huge pots of spaghetti. We sat around and had a nice, quiet discussion. People went to bed early.

The next morning, guys started to arrive. Most especially the guys arrived who were hurt, people who had taken rounds [of ammunition; i.e., been shot]. People in wheelchairs, guys on crutches, paraplegics, quadriplegics, people with prosthetic devices showed up. When we moved

out that first morning, those guys went first. It was Bestor's idea. "These guys should go first." We moved out, and we lined up. It was something to stand there and watch these guys. You see a bunch of eighteen-year-old, twenty-year-old guys on crunches and in wheelchairs—it's astonishing. All these guys behind them, all just walking down the street quietly. It was a powerful thing. It started to pick up steam. More people started to arrive. Every night there was more, and more, and more. Some guy arrived from Australia and announced his presence. People were coming from Alaska, and all over the continental United States. People were coming from everywhere. People came up from New York. It got to be an event in itself. By this time there were some fairly sophisticated ways of responding to the media and so on. We had [those] who would do interviews and this sort of stuff. We also had a good notion of security and how this would work.

INT: Tell us about that.

CG: There was a healthy—maybe unhealthy—degree of paranoia among veterans. People who have recently witnessed violent things tend to be nervous about sudden loud noises, you know? Weapons appeared at various times. I threw one in the Concord River. I got the guy to give it up. I think he wanted to keep the piece, but he gave me all the rounds. I threw them in the river. Once there was a gun around though somebody would come to you right away, because we knew. Also, there was an anti-gun…there was a notion to try [to stop] this. We had all of these plastic M-16's. But the notion that a guy had a real gun, this was an offense. This was a violation of the ethic that had been set up by this group.

INT: I'm interested in the fact that people were coming from so many different places, didn't know each other, and hadn't been part of the

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[3] He refers to a figure, said by Bestor Cram to have been Father Drinan, who rode a horse to the Concord National Park encampment in imitation of Paul Revere's journey in 1775.

VVAW—or some of them hadn't been, anyway—and how the sense of the ethic was communicated.

CG: This is highly emotional. I don't think you can describe this in any rational way. But if you came, if you were a veteran and you claimed yourself to be a veteran, you would be fed, you would be clothed; if you needed clean clothing, whatever you needed, you would get it. There was just no question about this. You were there for a purpose, and the purpose didn't have anything to do with worrying about these things. Anybody could be welcomed in. Any veteran was welcome. These guys, many of them had terrible experiences. I did not really have too many terrible experiences. But many of them had very horrible experiences as you can imagine. They were starting to live through this. They had been living through this. So if somebody showed up who may have had that same experience, or had a similar experience, there was a feeling that he would be welcome. There was a real group. There was an "us."

INT: So the contentiousness about smoking or whatever that occurred in a church did not happen about the organizational-regional aspect of the VVAW's operation?

CG: No. Well, there was some contention, but it was a very different sort. If somebody came and tried to impose order on this group, they would not accept it in any way. It had to come from within, and it had to come bottom up. It had to be participatory.

INT: So how was that organized, getting that kind of consensus?

CG: A lot of discussions, discussions constantly. Bestor was very good at this. There was, "What do we want to do now?" There were constant choices being offered to people. Also constant steering in some sort of direction. When it came time to go to the dump [4]they said, "Hey look, this is a real opportunity. They want to put us in a dump. We're obviously not

going to any dump." "Maybe they'd be stupid enough to arrest us, you know? Wouldn't that be great?" Probably said, "Good, yeah, yeah, that sounds good, yeah." They said, "These stupid…" "The one who was in charge was who? Boy is he dumb." "They walked right into this—whew." It was fun, you know? When you get these young guys…I don't know. People ask me, "What was so fantastic about that? Why do people now still relate to Vietnam veterans as people who are different than others, as separated?" It is this notion of shared suffering that separates these people from others. People recognize that those people suffered together in some way. Even if they weren't in the same place at the same time, they did suffer the same thing. That suffering, even if their understanding of the suffering is…they still know enough about it so that they know what was the nature of their suffering. It's not that well defined, but it's defined well enough so that people can say, "Maybe." If you wanted to define it and you said, "Well, what happened to these guys was they were given a very different and amoral job to do, and they were unable to make any preparation to do it." Do you know what I mean? They didn't feel they were right. They had no feeling that they were right when they were sent there to defend themselves. They obviously weren't there defending their country. That's patently ridiculous. But they were in a position where people were shooting at them, and the people who were shooting at them knew why they were shooting at them. The people who were shooting back [at them] did not know why we were shooting back, except that they shot at us first—do you know what I mean? This is really a pretty terrible position to be in. I think people innately understand this. [Laughter] Anyway, that's sort of the ethic that informed the group, that we had been through this thing together. And that many people had been through very terrible things, and wanted to talk about them in some way. Wanted to be with

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[4] This refers to the Lexington Board of Selectmen's offer to the VVAW to bivouac on the former town

people who could understand them, even if they didn't want to talk about them. There was a silent understanding around many of these guys, and some people did actually want to talk about it. We set up structured ways for them to talk about it.

There was a Yale professor—I want to say Robert Lifton—who wrote a bunch of wonderful books about war, who sort of evolved a model of how to do this. This had been developed at the original VVAW in New York, that they had had these groups of people who sat down to talk about this to try to expiate, or whatever, the horror of what they had gone through. We had been in regular touch with him and talked to him, read his books, and tried to figure out how to do this, and so we did it on a regular basis. That was ongoing. That would be a structured time, though. That would be 7:00 to 9:00 two or three nights a week, or something. It wouldn't be all the time, but people would come in and bubble over: "This is what happened to me." You know yourself if you've ever been really frightened, not just frightened of an uncertain future or something, but in a car where it's skidding around and around at a fast speed. If you think about that now, try to concentrate on that moment when you were really afraid. You'll find your heart beats faster, and that your nerves are not so steady. But these guys, what happened to them, this happened to them for hours, for days, for weeks in some cases. You're really not so right after that. So you want to be around people who can understand that. This is not like a movie. You're changed. You're not so certain what your position is anymore. There was a natural homogeneity or whatever about this group that was mostly unspoken, but was very powerful. People like Bestor with his bright eyes and his sort of winning, gentle ways could promote [it]. He was a natural leader of this group because of his personality. People knew what was going to happen, had a good idea what was going to happen. So

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dump site after refusing their request to bivouac on the Green.

we camped one night in Concord, and then we camped here. Then we camped at Bunker Hill, and then we were done. That sounds right to me. We made various speeches and issued broadsides. Much of what we did was not taken too seriously. But the visual aspect of it was taken very seriously. The guerilla theater stuff that we did was taken quite seriously, although it was, in a lot of ways, the weakest thing that we did.

INT: Describe the guerilla theater.

CG: The guerilla theater was a gas.

INT: Also about those broadsides and other things that you think were more effective.

CG: I don't know if the broadsides were effective because they were written you know? They were so static.

INT: These were press releases?

CG: Yes. Well, they were press releases, but we'd talk about aspects of the war, that actually chemical weapons were being used, that civilians actually were being bombed, and villages were being systematically destroyed. That cropland, animals, were being killed. That this was really a devastating thing. It wasn't a war in any proper way that normal veterans had come to understand war. It wasn't that sort of a deal. It was a war against mostly civilian targets. The strain that that put on the soldiers, and how terrible it was. We published these broadsides. I think it was a good idea for us, even if nobody took it seriously. But I think it's too powerful a thing to put on paper. It's so hard to describe this sort of thing and make it real on a piece of paper. Whereas the guerilla theater was a much more lighthearted less serious thing and worked out much better, conveyed the ideas much better. First of all, we had all of these plastic M-16's which everybody was carrying, or a lot of people were carrying. We'd have people who—all the veterans looked like veterans—so there would be a group of people who were the Vietnamese [and] they'd be the VC [Viet

Cong]. Everybody ultimately wound up being the VC, but some people had to be bad guys. The bad guys were the GI's. It was girlfriends, and sisters, and brothers, and mothers, and so on. Suppose we were walking into the center of Concord. They knew we were coming, and there would be a crowd across the street. These people who were the VC would sort of go into the crowd. We'd know who they were. They were our friends, people who were with us. So a bunch of veterans, we'd look around, and a group of guys with these weapons would look around, and they'd grab "somebody" out of the crowd. "You come with us!" "No, no, I'm not going with you!" "You come with me!" And you'd make like you were hitting them with a gun. "You come on. You're a VC!" Grab them, knock them around and stuff. The people were saying, "What are they doing?" "Did you see him attack that lady?" [Laughter.] It was effective because they'd say, "What is this?" We'd say, "This is what they do. This is what they do." You'd see somebody with a wound, a man of military age with a wound. "That's an enemy soldier. That guy takes his life in his hands if the wrong GI sees him. You know what I mean? Do you understand this?" That's what it was. You'd take people to ask them questions. You're terrorizing the population. That's what you do. It put people really on edge. It was effective. Now it seems a little naive, but it was a very effective thing to have this happen. People would really…their eyes would open up. The guys did it, it was an unbelievable thing. [Laughter] We had a lot of fun. There were other things like that. Then what did we do? All sorts of crazy stuff. We mostly just walked and talked. We went in the stores, talked to people. "You know why we're here? Do you know who we are? Do you know what we want?" Sometimes they'd yell at you, but often they wouldn't. Some people would turn away. "Take a bath, buddy." [Laughter.] "Get a job." Most people would talk to you. They'd say, "What do you want? Who are you? Oh, yeah." If you'd go up and look

people in the face and say, "Well, I… and this is what happened to me. This is why I'm here." People respond to that. That was the idea behind the whole thing. That was the whole deal, to try to tell people as we went along what we were doing, and why we were doing it, in some way that they could understand, as well as having a lot of symbolic stuff.

INT: Tell us about your reception in Lexington, and what happened on the Green.

CG: The reception in Lexington was great. There were people who had volunteered to feed us. The reception on the Green was terrific because it was a beautiful gorgeous sunny day. It must have been eighty degrees. We had been walking along the road—it's not that far, but it's a hike. So we got to the Green early in the day, 1:00 o'clock, 2:00 o'clock. People were sort of hollering. And then a sort of spontaneous dance broke out.

INT: What were they hollering?

CG: Just, "Hey, how are you doing? Hello." Somebody was playing music on a loudspeaker or something, and a sort of dance broke out. Long lines of people. Lenny was one of the leaders of the dance. He was out there without a shirt on with his hat on. There were a lot of people going back and forth. So Lenny went out in the middle of this big group of people and took the M-16 up in the air like this, held it up for everybody to see. Everybody cheered. You know, they'd say these simple things, but when you see them you think it's creative. There is an idea that is trying to be communicated by these things. No matter how unpracticed or theatrically unprofessional an idea is, the idea is compelling. This went on for a while. We talked to other people, went around and so on. We made arrangements for where we were going to stay. The Chief of Police contacted us and said, "Hey, fellows, this is a special place here. This is the battleground, this is a special place." "Yeah, yeah, that's why we're here." They said, "This is the only place in America…the flag…" and so on and

on. We said, "Sure, great." Well, you know, I don't know about it. We had a meeting. "I don't care where you stay, but I don't know what's going to happen. You may have to get off here." I said, "Well, you just come back and talk to us. We're not going to do anything weird, you're not going to do anything weird, everything is going to be fine." He was good. He was a pro. He said, "I'm with you guys. I'll let you know. Let's keep talking." I forget his name, but he was a nice man, and very respectful of us. He did not want trouble. So this meeting happened, and we were hoping on hope that they'd say, "You're allowed [to stay]." They came to us with their compromise which was the dump, which was recently renovated or they'd put sod over it or something. We said, "We don't think so." [Laughter.] They said, "Well, we're probably going to have to arrest you, because the Selectmen had a meeting, and they made a vote. The majority said you couldn't stay here so we may have to enforce the law." I said, "Do what you want to do." Then people started to show up. Everybody from around here started to show up, and the guy started to ring the [church] bell like crazy over there, until you'd think you'd go out of your mind. They started arresting us after dark some time, and they arrested us until… At probably 10:00 o'clock or 11:00 o'clock[5] at night they started arresting us. Because after the TV cameras went away, after the 7:30 news some time, they started when it was late. They arrested Kerry. I know they grabbed him right away. Some people were upset. People don't like to be arrested. I don't remember any of the veterans getting upset, but I do remember one guy went sort of crazy, and started screaming, and fighting with the cops and so on. Everybody said, "Don't resist. Lie down." I said, "We're not like that. I don't want to get lugged, dragged across the ground by some cop. If they want to arrest us, we actually don't object to being arrested here, so I'm not going to; please don't

[5] In fact the arrests were not made until the early hours of Sunday morning.

be stupid." Most people said, "Come on, get on the bus." They said, "Okay, in we go." They got on the bus.

INT: I've heard various stories about whether or not there were drugs and alcohol.

CG: Yes. I'm not going to get in any trouble for this… I still do occasionally like a cocktail. It was well past the cocktail hour and there were cocktails there. But insofar as serious drug abuse, this is not what this was all about. But you know, Vietnam veterans, as a general rule, at this time liked to have a party. When any large group of people was together, parties occurred. I don't think it had much to do with anything. I don't know if that answers the question.

INT: What kind of people joined you on the Green?

CG: Every kind of people. Ministers, pre-school teachers.

INT: Describe the range.

CG: You know, young mothers, people with kids, grandmothers, Gold Star mothers.[6] Men and children of all ages, all descriptions. There was no way to describe them, just everybody. People from all over the town came out—in their bathrobes, some of them.

INT: What were they concerned about? Why were they there?

CG: They couldn't believe this was happening, was my impression. They thought this was awful. "We can't do this. We're going to go down there. We're going to talk to the police. We're going to call up the Selectmen. We're going to make life miserable for these guys. Who are they to do this? This is perfectly proper what these fellows are trying to do. We elected these dolts who have made this incredibly stupid decision and we don't like it. We'll go down there and get arrested with them. We want to see this. This is happening in our town. This is fantastic." I think that was generally the impression I got.

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[6] Gold Star mothers were mothers whose sons had been killed in Vietnam.

INT: What do you think the Selectmen were concerned about?

CG: There were a couple of quite conservative people. I remember going to a meeting and they were just really yelling. There was a lot of posturing. A lot of sort of macho "We're not going to take this. We're not going to let these people tell us what to do. We run this town, not them. They're not allowed there. This is a sacred spot. They can't go there. We've offered them alternate accommodations and they are intransigent, won't accept them. We have to maintain order." There was a guy who owned a liquor store [Selectman Al Busa], and some guy who owned…I don't know…this was who the Selectmen were at that time. Our impression was just they were kind of mired in this local parochial ethic that didn't really apply to what we were doing, and they were too dense to listen. We were happy that this occurred, because we were seeking publicity for our effort, and this was a way to get it. We generally thought that this was a very good thing, very fortunate that these guys were so concerned about public order.

INT: What was the mood on the Green that night, when it got dark, and leading up to the time…

CG: Everybody was happy and singing, or drinking beer, kissing and hugging each other. It was terrific.

INT: Did it change as the night wore on?

CG: It got a little tedious waiting for these guys. I mean, they didn't have enough buses, and they didn't seem to know what they were doing, but it wasn't terrible. It was a little chilly, as I recall.

INT: What do you remember about your own arrest?

CG: I got arrested. I was with a very dear friend, Pat Simon, who was a Gold Star mother. I wanted to make certain she was okay. I got on the bus. She said, "Should we get dragged or something? Should we resist?" I said, "No, I don't think we ought to Pat. I think we just get on the bus." I

made certain our attorney was standing by. A guy named Lou Gerwitz was doing all of the legal work for us. We made sure that we talked about the notion of how we plead, how much it's going to cost, what the court costs are going to do. We tried to get general agreement among the veterans and people who were getting arrested of how we wanted to deal with this, which we did get. Lou did a very adequate job, a very competent job, went around talking to people, making sure the papers were all processed. They met us down at this garage. I had the good sense to bring a blanket with me. I went to sleep for fourteen hours. I was quite tired. But that's all I remember.

INT: So you were asleep at the Green. There is no point asking you…

CG: No, no, I was in the DPW. [Department of Public Works garage]. I was in the middle of the floor, sound asleep. But it was a very quiet time. People were just sort of sitting there, talking to each other, and waiting.

INT: So the scene was orderly.

CG: Yes.

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

CG: I don't think there was anything to really clean up. All of these conveniences weren't here then. [Laughter] We didn't come here to eat or anything either. It wasn't like we had these field bags or anything lying all over. There was nothing there. There were a couple of hundred people who had sleeping bags. There was no waste or anything. The people, the town cleaned up. People came out with bags and stuff. I don't believe we left a mess anywhere we went. People were very conscientious about that at that time. We were trying to do a decent thing here. We're not there to make a mess.

INT: Do you remember about the court processing on Sunday morning?

CG: I didn't go. I don't think anybody else did. We sent a lawyer only, I think. Maybe a couple of people went, but we had to go to

Charlestown. And that was quite a walk. If you've tried to ever walk to Charlestown, it's not that easy, to move several hundred people from here to Charlestown. It involved going through Harvard Square, so that was a pain in the neck too, because there were all sorts of loonies down there.

INT: How did that go?

CG: It went fine. But there was a guy, NLF supporters, and so on. It was a little disruptive, so it was a little…

INT: NLF?

CG: National Liberation Front, which was the actual name of Ho Chi Minh's organization. They came out with a flag. That's the flag of the opposition. That's the flag of the people who shot…you know what I mean? It's a complicated symbol. Somebody wanted to cheer, "The NLF is great!" or "Ho Chi Minh is going to win!" or whatever they wanted to cheer, nobody would pay much attention. But they're not going to march behind that flag; that they're not going to do. So how to get rid of this flag, and how to deal with this was troublesome. There were other people. Harvard Square, there were fringe people there, so you had to be alert. We went through downtown. We went through Quincy Market, and there were some skirmishes and scuffles there. It was a market day, wasn't it? Was it a market day? I thought we spent the next night on Bunker Hill.

INT: Yes, you did.

CG: We got there on a Monday or a Sunday.

INT: Sunday, right.

CG: So it was Friday night, Saturday night, Sunday.

INT: Saturday night in Lexington, Sunday on to Bunker Hill.

CG: Monday onto the Common, right.

INT: I also wanted to ask how you were received at Bunker Hill.

CG: Bunker Hill—it was a startling thing that we were very well received, and we were quite worried. Because this is a tight-knit working

class community, also hugely represented in the service. People were very proud of military heritage. A lot of Marines come from there. Everybody in Charlestown is a veteran. Every grown man is a veteran. Most all of them go in the service. You don't know sometimes about these communities. When we went through Quincy Market the problem was the people from the North End. Not the market, but there were some people yelling provocative things at us and stuff. There were some sorts of skirmishes back and forth. Nothing serious, but people came rushing out of their stores screaming at us. Rushing between the cars yelling, and stuff. Nothing, not a big deal, but it was enough to upset you. What's going to happen next? But it wasn't a big deal. In Charlestown we were wonderfully received. People came with food. People came with blankets. And it was a nasty night, too. It was foggy and cold that night. They were very nice to us.

In the morning people came, individuals, guys walking their dogs, came with ten cups of coffee. "Here is some coffee, boys. Here are some donuts. What do you want?" Really, it was extraordinary, stuff like that—the whole trip. I think the notion that you're a soldier: "These people, they deserve respect. That's their patriotism. That these guys were soldiers, and agree with them or disagree with them, I'm going to listen to them. I was one of them. Look at those skinny-necked kids. They've got long hair and stuff, but that's a twenty-year-old kid, and I can relate to him. I know who he is." They were wonderful to us. No trouble at all in Charlestown of any type. It was amazing, because that's a tough town. That's a tough community. Then onto the Common.

INT: And at the Common?

CG: By the time we got to the Common I think everybody was pretty exhausted. I walked out of Charlestown, and then I went to write this speech, make sure that everything was set. It was a lot of work getting that

organized, because there [were a] lot of people speaking. Eugene McCarthy was a speaker. Bonnie Raitt, a musician, she performed, gratis. I can't remember who else was the speaker.

INT: Do you still have a copy of your speech?

CG: No, I don't really, no mementos from this era. I think it was a very plodding sort of speech, not a ringing speech. It went over the basics.

INT: What do you think was accomplished by all of this locally and nationally? Do you think these protests had an impact on ending the war?

CG: I'm not sure they had an impact on…well, they changed the way the war… It's a fluid thing. Who can say? I think it did change. They made support for the war much more impolite than it previously had been. The sentiments around the war changed a bit. I think the biggest change was among the people who were serving. The big change was for the soldiers. That was partly the idea. That once we got started, and once we sort of set up a network and made certain that what we were doing was communicated to the world at large, and specifically to soldiers, to a base of people on active duty, it became not as amenable a force. It became impossible, really—not impossible, but it became much more difficult—for commanders to move their troops around and expect that they would do certain things at certain times in certain ways. Because they wouldn't. They would go beyond the perimeter and sit down.

INT: I didn't know.

CG: I think this is what we were trying to do. This is much of what we were trying to do, to try to build a movement of resistance within the military. This is who we were trying to speak to, or a good part of who we were trying to speak to. I think we moved the war. It became a much more mechanized war, much more bombing. They planted sensors. It became not a war fought by men, it was much more dominated by machines, and that sort of distance strategies. We actually looked at this

later and I think there was a clear turning point. I don't know whether the government found that the population would no longer accept the number of casualties that were occurring. I think that undoubtedly entered into the equation. But I think also that people were saying, "Hey, if you protest, if you disagree, if you physically in some way oppose this war, that's perfectly legitimate. That's an honorable, respectable thing to do." You can look other people in the eye and lots of soldiers, former soldiers, are indeed doing it. It made it hard. We were trying to tell people, "Don't go out there and take too many chances. You'd better think about what you're doing. This is not a game. This is a very serious thing what's going on here, and you should look at it." I think we made it harder to fight the type of war that they had fought previously. I don't think we got much satisfaction out of this effort, though. We didn't dramatically shorten the war. It went on for years. It just kept going on and on. It was an endless nightmare. On the other hand, we didn't really give up protesting either. We kept going long after that, Operation POW. What we tried to say was [that] people who get sent to Vietnam are being asked to make a sacrifice. That sacrifice should be justified. Not partially justified, not almost justified, but completely, perfectly justified before you do it. That's the sort of dues a democracy [owes] to its people, you can't just send people off into this gristmill without a very good reason. We said, "The reason is not good enough, and it shouldn't be tolerated. The populace should rise up with us and stop it." Just the airing of that sentiment did have an effect. It made it unacceptable for many people. Many people had not been reached by the peace movement, which was so different from them, so different from their own experience. But soldiers—it's different.

INT: Do you think that what you have been talking about has influenced subsequent wars and incursions? I guess I'm thinking

particularly of the Gulf War, the way that we think now about conducting war and operations.

CG: Yes. There is no question that foreign adventures are not so… It's very dated, though. I think it's a mistake to go and say, "You influenced…" The reason they got into the war in Vietnam was because of the feeling that we had an obligation to oppose Communism. It was really a sort of sickness that lasted in this country for years. That this would take us down, we'd all be enslaved by Communism. People just felt this way, and a lot of people felt this way, and got involved in this extreme—these extreme activities as a result of it. John F. Kennedy felt this way. This was the logic that informed that activity. Once that's gone… Certainly nobody felt that way about Iraq, that we were going to be enslaved by Iraq, or that this represented a global threat in the same way that people felt Communism represented a global threat.

INT: I was thinking about the mechanization of the bombing. You said that the Vietnam War evolved in a way that was now less fought by troops and more mechanized.

CG: Yes.

INT: That's what I was thinking about in terms of the Gulf War.

CG: The Gulf War, the territory, is very different. You could really dominate the whole entire area with airplanes, which you could never do in Vietnam no matter how many airplanes you had. It would seem to me it would be clearly shown that an air war is not going to be successful [in Vietnam]. The books are closed on that, unless you really want to drop several nuclear weapons. Even then you can't be certain that you would have subdued this country. You have to have men go in there and subdue it. That's what has to happen, and there is no other way. If you have cities, and so on. You can't do it by simply dropping bombs on them which they tried to do. They did it to several towns. They bombed them, and bombed

them, and bombed them, and people went underground. When they stopped bombing [the people] came up again. It's very hard with a resilient agrarian-based people to dominate them if they really have the will to resist. You brutalize them enough and they'll gain the will to resist if they didn't have it before you got there.

INT: Looking back, do you see any of these issues or events differently than you did then? What thoughts do you have looking back on your involvement and your behavior during the protests?

CG: I think it was a very noble thing. It was a very wonderful thing. I have absolutely no regrets about doing this. I wish it had been more effective, we had been able to stop the war or brought it more quickly to a close. It's not often that you know you're right about something that is such a big and important event as a war. You're both right and in the minority, and surrounded by people—your peers—who you respect and you love. It's a very exhilarating thing. It certainly changed me. There is no question that war changed my politics, the way I look at life. Actually, being against the war changed me more than the war changed me. I think the war set up a change. I think it made a lot of people much more thoughtful. A lot of veterans are much more thoughtful than they would be [otherwise]. I don't believe there is much of a possibility that I would ever send my kids to war. I feel very estranged from what goes on [in] the current political scene in this country. It seems very crazy to me. I feel very outside of it, and have since the war. I don't think I ever will feel part of it in a way that I might have had I not gone to Vietnam and not participated in anti-war activity. But mostly I think these feelings are personal. They're too important. They're too real to be a part of your political life or part of how you relate to other people and what you want out of your life and what you want to succeed in doing. I think it gave me a lot of direction, actually. It made me feel that there was something to stand for, that there was some hope that

you could redeem your circumstances, and you could really help other people in a way that I don't think I would have understood had this not happened.

There is something about the modern world, the notion that people are in pain—that there is a lot of pain—is not around. It's sort of not recognized. This was a group of people who really recognized that they were in some sort of moral or emotional pain and shared that recognition. I don't know what it sounds like. I don't know how to really communicate it, but it really changes everything to see how much people can suffer, how badly they can suffer, and how useless can be the cause of their suffering. This is a revelation that informs the rest of your life. It informs every aspect of your life. In past generations it would have caused somebody to become religious. It's that sort of religious experience. It didn't play itself out that way with me, but it certainly gave me a lot of direction that is comparable, in a way.

INT: Anything else you want to tell us about?

CG: After we left here [Lexington], this was a defining event for this group of people. Dewey Canyon, as I said, had I don't know how many people, a hundred twenty-five, a hundred fifty, two hundred? Not too many. Here we had thousands, not thousands, but something probably close by the time we were done. It built other protests around here. We had a couple of very good oppositions to the war—the Winter Soldier hearings, a series of hearings that went on for a couple of days in Faneuil Hall. I think it was a successful thing. We got well supported by the town. We were able to put together this clear opposition between the authority and the people. It played itself in a way that was poetic, almost. These are very fond memories in a way. It was very mixed at the time. I wish I had some answers how to define all of this, how to encapsulate all of this stuff, but I really don't. It's still constantly moving around for me, what this meant,

what it did, and what it was all about. It's probably one of the reasons I'm still in touch with many of the people who I was there with.

INT: You've certainly given us a very rich account. I have a note here that doesn't make sense to me. It says "sense of betrayal, Jonathan Shay." Does "Jonathan Shay" mean anything to you? It might have been someone else, another VVAW? I was interviewing someone and I just made a note.

INT: I think it was Chris Burns.[7] Where did you find him?

INT: I would be glad to give you all of those addresses.

CG: No, no, I just wonder what he's doing. I wouldn't know what to say to him now.

END OF INTERVIEW

[7] Chris Burns was a member of the VVAW and was interviewed by LOHP.