LEXINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS, INC.

Interview
Arthur Johnson
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Interview conducted by Norma McGavern-Norland
Videotape length 83 minutes

INT: Tell us first your name and a little bit about your background.

AJ: My name is Arthur Johnson. I live in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. I'm a lawyer. I've lived in Jamaica Plain for twenty five years, ever since I've finished law school, in effect.

INT: Where are you from originally?

AJ: I'm from the Midwest, Toledo, Ohio. Grew up in an Irish Catholic neighborhood. My father is a World War II vet.

INT: What brought you to the East Coast?

AJ: I went to my father's college, Holy Cross College in Worcester. I was there on a Navy ROTC scholarship. I graduated in 1968 and was commissioned into the United States Navy.

INT: You said your Dad was a veteran of World War II.

AJ: He was.

INT: What sort of view did he have about World War II, Vietnam later on, and how did that shape your views?

AJ: He was very pro-involvement in Vietnam, and in fact I recently had a conversation with my mother—I have five younger brothers; I was the only one in my family to serve in the military during Vietnam, and my service resulted in substantial family disputes over participation in the American military system—and twenty five years later I learned from my mother that she finally acknowledges that the children in our family were right about Vietnam, as opposed to my father, who was very pro-involvement.

INT: What was the feeling of your other siblings about that war?

AJ: They tried to avoid it, you know, effectively as they could. I mean, nobody wanted to get sucked into this particular conflict, and the fact that I was years ahead of my brothers—and I served less than two years when I was discharged as a conscientious objector from the Navy as an officer. Nobody really wanted to follow in my footsteps.

INT: What did your father and mother do? What were their jobs?

AJ: My father is a businessperson; my mother is a housewife. We're an upper middle class family.

INT: Did this cause much dissension, the difference in views at the time?

AJ: It caused substantial dissension. They didn't understand how we could be opposing the government, number one. Number two, after I was discharged as a CO [Conscientious Objector], my mother thought of course that my life was over—that I would never be able to do anything substantial in our society, and thought that I had made a major mistake by resigning my commission in protest of the war.

INT: Were you drafted, or did you volunteer?

AJ: I graduated high school in 1964, the oldest of six children. I took the ROTC exam and was awarded a scholarship, so I essentially joined, I guess you could say.

INT: Was your family shocked when they found you had joined?

AJ: No. It was actually considered to be a good career path. I'd be an officer, and I could serve for whatever period of time and then get on with the rest of my life. Everybody thought I was going to be a lawyer, so nobody believed that I would end up being a career military person, and it was a convenient way for me to go to school—helped my middle class family support its children through college.

INT: Where did you have your Basic Training?

AJ: Well, there wasn't really any Basic Training in ROTC. You went to ROTC classes in college, and then you went summers for training. So I

spent a summer in Newport on a ship, and a summer in Corpus Christi, Texas, and Quantico, Virginia, doing various things.

INT: How did you feel about being shipped to Vietnam?

AJ: By the time I graduated college in 1968 I was substantially alienated from the military establishment—even before I went in. I ended up being the editor of the student newspaper in my college, and we wrote anti-war editorials. And they punished me by putting me on the first boat they could find to Vietnam. That's what happened to me. I graduated college in May, and by September I was on my way to Vietnam. I was the first one in my class to go.

INT: Did you have friends at the time to whom the same thing happened?

AJ: I'm not sure what you mean by "the same thing happened?"

INT: Did they also go to Vietnam?

AJ: Yes, other people went to Vietnam at the same time, right.

INT: With you? Was anyone with you that you knew?

AJ: No, no.

INT: What happened when you got there?

AJ: I was on a ship in the war zone. We were there about a year.

INT: Where was the war zone at that time, where in Vietnam? Do you remember?

AJ: For the Navy the war zone was essentially the Gulf of Tonkin. In order to qualify for various military decorations—you know, medals—you had to be within the war zone, and there were certain medals that were available to people. The basic medal was the "I Was Alive Medal." They gave it to everybody who was in the military at the time. Then there was the "I-Was-There-Medal," there in Vietnam. And then there was the "I-Was-There-For-Six-Months Medal." It all had to do with whether or not you were in the war zone. The war zone was, sort of an area—I'm not sure

of the direction—west of the Philippines heading towards the Gulf of Tonkin.

INT: What was your role?

AJ: I was an officer on a ship. I had the deck division. That was the division in those days in the Navy before there was better racial equality that did all of the maintenance around the ship. So it had what I would classify as anybody who was not smart enough to get into a better job. It had all the troublemakers, and it had all of the minorities, primarily blacks, at the time.

INT: Was it a carrier?

AJ: No, it was a destroyer.

INT: Were there tensions among the people who were responsible for it—various kinds, either racial, or social, or about the war?

AJ: There were tensions. Yes, there were tensions between the lifer military types who wanted to advance in the military and who wanted to engage in combat. And then there was everybody else who didn't really want to be too involved if they could avoid it. Everybody thought that the Navy was a safe place to be. At least you weren't on the ground getting shot at.

INT: And was it a safe place to be?

AJ: It was physically safe. Intellectually, emotionally, it wasn't all that safe. There were substantial divisions within my generation about participation in this particular conflict.

INT: How did that manifest itself? Were there arguments, discussions?

AJ: There were disagreements over policy. The Navy was sort of a safety valve for a lot of people. It was a way to serve without really being all that involved because the Navy wasn't… I mean it was off the coast and not in the country—not entirely true, some people were in the country. But there were tensions between the people in the Navy who wanted to acquire a military record that involved serious combat service versus everybody else

who didn't want to get anywhere near combat if they could avoid it. It's essentially the conflict between the lifers and the militarists, and the non-lifers and the non-militarists.

INT: How did people cope with their stress? Were they concerned? In other words, besides there being obvious tensions, you say arguments, discussions, policy disagreements, did people drink? Did they use drugs? Was there anything like that that you recall?

AJ: There was drinking, drugs. That was common for our generation in those days. The non-military types tended to be a lot looser than the military types. So when you hit ports where you had liberty available everybody sort of flowed off and tried to find their own way to deal with the particular conflict.

INT: Did you see combat?

AJ: Well, it depends on what you define as combat. We spent a month, one month, shelling the coast of Vietnam. Now the guns on my ship had a two-mile length on them. What that meant was that we were parked a mile off the coast, and that meant we could lob shells for a mile into the country. The VC [Viet Cong] were smart, they didn't go anywhere near the coast. The rest of the time we spent chasing aircraft carriers up and down the Gulf of Tonkin. It wasn't heavy combat duty.

INT: Was there a feeling that this was futile, like something was being accomplished? That it was meaningful or meaningless? How would you describe it?

AJ: I thought it was pretty meaningless. Most of the people that I was hanging around with thought it was pretty meaningless. There were some military lifer types that wanted it to be more meaningful and were complaining that we weren't involved more than we were.

INT: Did anything come of that?

AJ: Not really.

INT: What was it like when you were on shore? Did you have a sense of what was going on onshore? What was going on in the country for the time you were there?

AJ: I had no sense when I was there of what was going on in Vietnam. We never went on shore. We floated in and out of Subic Bay, our Navy base in the Philippines where you did R&R and repair for your ships. We went to Hong Kong and Singapore, and all of those various ports over there, but we never were in-country.

INT: Did you have a sense of the news, what was happening there, what was happening politically either at home or in Vietnam? Or did you feel distanced from that?

AJ: You received news depending on what newspapers you subscribed to. You could get sort of up-to-date information. It wasn't the greatest milieu to have access to information. There were clearly two camps. There was the camp in favor of the war and wanted to fight it to the hilt. And then there was the camp that thought it was completely stupid, and we were over there and we're trying to avoid ending up getting killed for whatever reason. That wasn't a big deal in the Navy because you didn't really have all that many options or opportunities to risk your life.

INT: When you came back here, you connected with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. What brought you to that point? Your experience in Vietnam sounds as if it was somewhat distant from what was actually going on there.

AJ: What happened to me was that I was sent immediately to Vietnam as part of my service. I had a four-year military obligation. I went over there and pretty quickly got into serious disagreements with the military types over whether or not we should be there. Came back after the first year or so, was on a ship that was the oldest destroyer on the East Coast, and it got decommissioned out of Norfolk. The Navy then transferred me immediately to the West Coast to another ship that was on its way back to

Vietnam. I had pretty much decided I wasn't going back. By the time I got out to San Diego where I was then stationed I had resigned my commission, filed for Conscientious Objector status, and was released before the end of my second year in the military. I was helped in this process by a group on the West Coast that was doing anti-military organizing. I got out in April of 1970, got into my car and drove cross-country, stopped and saw my parents in Toledo, Ohio, drove back to Boston where I had a brother who was at Harvard—I was going to stay with him—and showed up in Cambridge on May 4th, the day after Kent State[1] occurred. At that point Cambridge was in complete anarchy by most people's standards. Students were running freely through the streets of Harvard Square, the police were out in force patrolling the streets, students were throwing bricks at police officers. It was a very heavy time. I was here about a week, and I hooked up with people on the East Coast who were doing anti-military counseling and very quickly got sucked into a project that was being run out of the Mass PAX office, now CPPAX, called the Legal In-service Project.

INT: Was that then called Citizens for Participation in Politics, or was that…?

AJ: No, it was then called Mass PAX. It became Citizens For Participation in Politics. It's now CPPAX.[2] We had an office on Winthrop Street in Cambridge, and they ran this anti-military counseling service out of it which was the Legal In-service Project. I showed up in May of 1970, and immediately, essentially, started working full time helping other military personnel get out of the military for whatever reason. In December of 1970 the VVAW had its Winter Soldier investigation in

[1] At Kent State University on May 4, 1970, a contingent of National Guard troops opened fire during an anti-war demonstration, killing four students and wounding nine others.

[2] CCPAX is the result of a merger between CPP, Citizens for Participation Politics, which supported anti-Vietnam War efforts, and Mass PAX, a statewide organization that worked for peace, nuclear disarmament, and the end of the war in Vietnam. The Lexington branch of CPP was asked to assist the VVAW with logistics during their march and expected bivouac in Lexington in 1971.

Detroit where there was tales of atrocities put out about American participation of atrocities in Vietnam.

INT: Who called it Winter Soldier? How did that get named that? Do you recall?

AJ: It's a literary reference.[3] Rusty [Rusty Sachs, another VVAW member] will tell you what that is. Rusty was a Winter Soldier. There was actually sort of a hearing in Detroit. After that, VVAW decided that they were going to do a major demonstration in Washington, and I was working in Cambridge at the Legal In-service Project with my friend Bestor Cram, and a couple of other people—Eddie Rottman was there, and Chris Gregory. At the time Mass PAX was running the Moratorium, and there was a lot of liberal money available through Mass PAX. VVAW was looking for a way to tap into the Northeast liberal money. And as I recall the scenario, John Kerry, who was then sort of working with VVAW national people, came up and talked to Jerry Grossman, and Marty Peretz at the time wanted to…

INT: And Jerry Grossman and Marty Peretz were?

AJ: Jerry Grossman was the brains behind Mass PAX at the time I guess—the theoretical or the spiritual head. Marty Peretz was a professor at Harvard who was then somewhat politically on the left. He sort of slipped in his later years. They were looking for support from the Northeast liberals and Jerry, who knew Bestor and me because we were running this little project out of the Mass PAX office, agreed to help John Kerry. But they would only do it as long as Bestor and I had control over the fundraising out of the Northeast because Jerry trusted Bestor and me because we worked with them. Everybody thought at that point that

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[3] The term was inspired by the words of Thomas Paine, i.e., "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 retreated across the Delaware.) In this context "winter soldier" means a soldier who will *not* shrink from his duty.

VVAW was a little too radical. So we then got pulled in by January of 1971. Bestor and I had sort of floated over from the Legal In-service project, which was an anti-military counseling group, over to VVAW. Both of us were Vietnam veterans, and we sort of took over management of the VVAW presence in New England.

INT: You say at the time VVAW was seen as more radical. More radical than whom? Who else was out there?

AJ: Than the rest of the peace movement, which was pretty staid at that point.

INT: But still, Vietnam Veterans must have had a kind of power in being actual veterans. How did people you knew, or who had not been to Vietnam, feel about that?

AJ: Actually I thought that the process of involving the veterans in the peace movement was actually what turned the peace movement around. By the end of 1970-1971, the peace movement was pretty defunct. It had sort of spent its political capital and, at least in my view, was not going very far. The vets were able to revive the sense that the world was wrong. If there were people who had participated in the war who came back and said, "We don't want to do this anymore, it's a bad thing to do," I thought that had significant political impact on the way our society began to view the war and the opposition to the war.

INT: You said a while ago that your father had been in World War II. When he heard, or when your family heard, that you joined VVAW, how did they feel about that?

AJ: They were not happy. My father is very patriotic, had a lot of pride in his military service, [and] was an officer in the Army in World War II—several purple hearts. [He] felt that his generation had gone a long way to preserving so-called freedom in the world, and didn't believe that the United States Government could actually be engaged in a conflict that

was not morally or politically legitimate. It caused great tension in my family, actually.

INT: Did you talk about your experience in Vietnam when you were there?

AJ: With my father, did I? There wasn't a lot of exchange of ideas on a rational basis that went on in those days between the children and the parents.

INT: Was that very common?

AJ: I thought it was pretty common. I mean, there was a serious generational conflict between the World War II generation and the boomers.

INT: Was this a feeling that you think your fellow VVAW members shared?

AJ: Oh sure. Everybody knew that we were on the cutting edge of our generation's political conflict with the previous generation over war policies.

INT: Did you feel like a revolutionary? Was it depressing? Was it exciting?

AJ: Looking back, it would be an overstatement to say we felt like revolutionaries. We were at that point I would say mostly counter-cultural revolutionaries. Drugs were just coming into use by our generation. Most vets had experienced heavy drug use in Vietnam [sigh]. I just didn't see us as revolutionaries particularly, but we were kind of political in a way that was different from the way our parents viewed politics, and the difference was that we didn't trust the government, whereas our parents trusted the government. They thought that the government didn't do anything that was wrong. Whereas based on our experience, we felt that the government had certainly mistreated us in relationship to this particular conflict, and was not legitimately focused on this particular conflict.

INT: Were you treated differently by other veterans of Vietnam who felt differently than you did?

AJ: It wasn't like we were out there associating with other veterans particularly. We were a pretty small sub-group.

INT: How big a group was VVAW then?

AJ: I'm always amused to think that we were able to shut down the Federal Government in April of 1971 in Washington by camping on the Washington Common with less than a thousand veterans. Most veterans had not reached the same conclusion as us. There is still serious denial in a lot of sectors over what was going on there.

INT: How did you…or did you hear about the Dewey Canyon Operation in Washington, D.C., and what happened there?

AJ: The way we got into this was VVAW wanted to do Dewey Canyon III and they needed money to do it.

INT: What was Dewey Canyon? What did that mean?

AJ: Dewey Canyon III was a play on previous war activities that had gone on in the—I don't remember the history; somebody else might be able to tell you that. But there was a plan to go to Washington and camp on the.... That's when John Kerry and a couple of the other folks showed up looking for money, and they showed up at Mass PAX. Mass PAX had access to money because they were running the Moratoriums, and they had access into all of the liberal money.

INT: What happened in Washington? What happened that you were involved in?

AJ: What happened before we went to Washington was that we were able to raise a lot of money primarily out of the suburban towns around Boston to support Dewey Canyon activities. We ended up, I would say,

raising most of the money for Dewey Canyon III[4]. Dewey Canyon III—it was a "Yippie" [thing]. I don't know if you people remember what "Yippies" were—"Youth International Party," Jerry Ruben, Abby Hoffman. It was just theater, is what it was. We had less than a thousand vets on the Mall in Washington, D.C. and we closed the government down for a week. It was the first time that veterans had expressed opposition to the government's policies in Vietnam. It had, I think, a very dramatic effect on the country as a whole. We sent people over to the Supreme Court building, and people got arrested. They were dragging veterans off of the Supreme Court for protesting the war in Vietnam. It was a very heavy time I thought.

INT: How long did you camp there?

AJ: We were there for a week. Then we came back to Boston, and we decided that we were going to do another event, another "Yippie" event, and that turned out to be Operation POW, which—I can't remember how we came up with it, although some friends of mine suggested to me that it had to [have] come out of my mind. [It] was a three-day march backwards on the Freedom Trail. It was a sort of funny concept that we would march backwards on the Freedom Trail.

INT: By "backwards," you mean Paul Revere's Ride in reverse, right?

AJ: That's right. Over Memorial Day Weekend, 1971, when everybody was celebrating the holiday and Memorial Day is the big military day to remember the people in the military who had served in and perhaps lost their lives. We thought it was going to be a funny little event. We would spend three days, raise the issues locally which had been raised nationally a couple of months before. The vets were pretty full of themselves. We were pretty full of ourselves. We thought we had turned the anti-war

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

movement around, and we wanted to continue the media circus that had gone on.

INT: So what did you think was going to happen?

AJ: What did I think was going to happen where?

INT: In Concord and Lexington and then into Boston. What was Bestor doing?

AJ: Bestor and I were the planners of this. One of the funny things about the way this VVAW broke down was that the leaders were the ex-officers, and people did a lot of the work with the ex-enlisted men. It really broke down on those lines in a way that I always thought was a little bit weird, but hey, that's the way it seemed to happen. We just wanted to run a little event that perhaps caught some local media attention. We would start out in Concord, move through Lexington. We had permission to camp on Bunker Hill for one night. We got permission from the National Park Service to camp in the Minuteman Park in Concord. We didn't really want any trouble. We just wanted to run this little event—it was supposed to be three days. We decided we'd get some good media attention because everybody was interested. We didn't anticipate that we would provoke a major confrontation with the Lexington Selectmen. Actually, they sort of played into our hands.

INT: You said you got permission from Concord, you said you got permission from Bunker Hill. What about permission in Lexington? What did you do to arrange that?

AJ: I was in charge of planning, and we were looking to move from Concord on a Friday night to Boston Common on a Monday afternoon where we were going to have a big rally where E.G. [Eugene] McCarthy was going to speak, and we were going to have a big rally. My notion was that we move as far as we can the first day through Lexington, then we move the second day to Bunker Hill, and then the third day we'd end up in

the [Boston] Common. We asked permission of the Selectmen to camp in the town of Lexington.

INT: When did you ask them? How long before?

AJ: I don't know dates. It was probably a month before. Is this the letter?

INT: This [letter] was written in 1971 requesting permission. Do you remember that letter?

AJ: [Dated] May 20th, oh yes. We didn't really give them a lot of time, did we?

INT: Maybe you could read the letter, or at least part of it.

AJ: Let me just summarize it. It's a request to camp in the Town of Lexington over the weekend of Memorial Day. Our strategy was that we would ask for the Town [Battle] Green even though we weren't really particularly interested in the Town Green. We were more interested in being in Tower Park, which is on the Arlington border primarily because we wanted to be further along in our route. If we started out in Concord and we ended up in Lexington the second day, we hadn't really gone too far. We had to get from Lexington into Bunker Hill the next day. I was actually more interested in being in Tower Park, and our strategy was to request the Green, thinking, well, they may not give it to us, but they would certainly give us Tower Park because—who cared? It turned out that they denied us both locations, and we just said, "Well, hey, screw you, we'll go where we want." We ended up camping out on the Green that night.

INT: One of the things mentioned in the letter requesting permission, I believe, is guerilla theater. What was that all about?

AJ: We liked guerilla theater. That was sort of a Yippie affectation that the vets had. We used to do it at various places around Boston. Guerilla theater was where we would stage what was equivalent to American military incursions in Vietnam except they were in the U.S., so that we would, for example, show up at the Government Center T Station

and pull some so-called "innocent people"—they were our people, of course—out of a crowd and pretend like we were shooting them like you would do in Vietnam. It was theater, is what it was.

INT: How did people react to it when they saw it?

AJ: People were freaked out. It's not the type of thing that most Americans are used to—seeing their fellow citizens "abused" by whomever.

INT: Scary.

AJ: It was scary.

INT: Deliberately.

AJ: Deliberately.

INT: How did it play out in Concord and Lexington? What happened?

AJ: We were really concerned because there are a lot of issues that affect vets that are tough for a lot of reasons. Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome is a major problem in the veteran's community. We have a lot of guys who were participating with us in various activities who probably classically would be considered unstable. We were concerned that things not get out of hand too much—we wanted to have sort of a controlled theater without unintended side effects, so we would do some things as we marched along, but we were really trying to keep a lid on people acting out.

INT: Did you do guerilla theater in Concord?

AJ: Sure. We did it all along the way. That was just part of what our routine was.

INT: What was it like that night in Concord, the night before you came to Lexington?

AJ: My memory is it was pretty peaceful; we just sort of were hanging around. It was like a little party—everybody was happy to be together again. We had been down to Washington—or a lot of us had been to Washington—but there was also a new influx because of the publicity out of Washington. Other vets had shown up; my memory was we had maybe three, four hundred vets.

INT: In Concord that night?

AJ: Yes, that first night. We anticipated that we would pick up a few more as we went along. We were getting good media coverage, the media was there, and it was like a party is what it was. It was sort of our anti-war vets getting together and then being outrageous.

INT: Were people in town welcoming, friendly, in Concord?

AJ: My memory is that they were. We had permission to be in Concord. We had arranged for food to be provided to the people who were camping by local citizens. There was a good crowd of local residents there. We had no problems in Concord. The next day we headed out towards Lexington, and we didn't really know what we were going to do. We thought we would end up on the Green and see what happened. We didn't really have any plans about it, although we knew that the Selectmen were not real happy, and we had heard that they had gone to court to try to prevent us from doing what we wanted to do, but, you know, nobody really cared.

INT: Where did you hear that from? Where was your source of news?

AJ: We had pretty good contacts in the Lexington community. One of the primary staff people at MASSPAX was a woman named Jean Rubenstein who was a long-time Lexington resident. She had a bunch of her friends who were helping us out, and we pretty quickly figured out the political scene in Lexington. It was not going to be all that advantageous to us. Now on the other hand, since they weren't going to let us stay in Tower Park or the Lexington Green, we said, “Well, hey, you know, let's just see what happens.” A lot of that was they played right into our opportunistic hands. They took a hard line about us being on the Common [the Green]. We were just there because it seemed to be an interesting place to be for an evening, and we were getting good support from the local community, and then the Selectmen called in the cops to arrest everybody. We got national

publicity out of it. It was really pretty amusing that they had done what they had done.

INT: To go back a little bit, what was the day like when you walked from Concord to Lexington? What do you remember?

AJ: It was a warm sunny day; we were just walking along, talking to the crowd. People were friendly; there were people all over the place. Everybody, I thought, was supporting what we were doing. We did little guerilla theaters as we went along. We had lunch—I can't remember where we had lunch—but we just sort of moved along. I thought we were getting good support from the local citizenry.

INT: How many of you came to Lexington? Did everyone come who was in Concord? Did it grow?

AJ: It grew. Friday night in Concord we made the local news, so Saturday people started floating in because they had seen the TV reports. We probably doubled in size from Friday night to Saturday morning. And by the time we hit the Lexington Common [the Green] my memory was that there were at least a thousand people on the Common.

INT: When you came there were a thousand people?

AJ: Well, including the vets. There were maybe a thousand people, maybe more. I don't have a clear memory of how many folks were there, but there were a lot of people.

INT: When did you first get a sense that things were not going to go the way people thought they were going to go?

AJ: I don't know if we ever had a thought about how things were going to go. We were just being flexible about what possibly could happen. We had arranged for dinner, so we knew we were going to get fed. We had some suspicion that the Selectmen were going to do something stupid. We thought, hey, if they do something stupid, we'll take advantage of it. It turned out they did do something stupid, they called in the cops and they

started arresting everybody, sort of elevenish at night.[5] People were lining up—it was easily a very orderly arrest. There was none of this dragging from one part of the Green to the buses or anything. People just got in line to get on the buses. My memory was that there were a lot of people [who] actually didn't get arrested and were pissed because the police stopped arresting people after awhile because they had no place to put us. They put us in the public service garage, the public works garage in Lexington, and everybody was just being mellow. It wasn't confrontational. It was just, hey, you want to arrest us? Be our guest.

INT: Do you remember if there were veterans who were not arrested? People who were supporters on the Green who were not arrested—some the police did not bother to arrest?

AJ: Right.

INT: What about the veterans? Who was arrested?

AJ: I was arrested. I'm sure there were some vets that were not arrested. It was really just a numbers game at that point. I think they got up to six or seven hundred in the public works garage, and they just shut it off.

INT: There were some veterans who were in wheelchairs, and some veterans who were disabled.

AJ: Right.

INT: I think in the letter it mentioned veterans were going to be coming. It said that there might be fifty. Were there that many, and do you remember what happened to them?

AJ: I don't even remember how many disabled vets we had. I know we had a number. Yes, I think all of those guys wanted to get arrested, too. My memory is that the cops didn't want to arrest those guys, but it's twenty

[5] In fact, the arrests did not begin until well after midnight, in the early hours of Sunday morning.

five years ago—I can't really remember who got arrested and who didn't get arrested.

INT: Do you remember anything about the interactions of the police who were arresting and the vets?

AJ: My memory was that the police were somewhat apologetic about it. They didn't really want to be in this position where they were out there arresting people who had served in the military. A lot of those guys had served in the military, and I got the sense that they weren't all that happy with the way the war was going either, but their job was to be police in the town, and they got orders to arrest all of these guys who… You know, they knew us. They knew who we were, what we stood for, and they didn't particularly want to do what they were ordered to do.

INT: Would you describe it as a certain degree of respect on all sides? Or would that be going too far?

AJ: I don't know that respect is the right term. There was certainly no abuse on the part of the police like there was in Cambridge around a lot of anti-war stuff. And the vets were not in a confrontational mode, so it wasn't like we were yelling slurs at the police or anything like that. Everybody just said, well, if you're going to arrest us, arrest us. We'll get on to what we're going to do because we knew that the court system wasn't going to do anything to us.

INT: Did you yourself talk with any of the Selectmen? Were you involved in any of the negotiations?

AJ: I was, but I don't remember any of the details, frankly. I remember that we were sitting around at the Lexington Green. It must have been after dark, and all of a sudden the cops came up and they showed us this order from the Superior Court that was an order to certain named defendants—I think my name was first on the list—and other unnamed veterans to cease and desist from camping on the Lexington Green. They had gotten a preliminary injunction out of the Superior Court. We sat

around and talked among ourselves about what we were going to do, and everybody decided that we weren't going to leave. At that point the police had executed their orders to arrest.

INT: Had you had a meeting among yourselves on the Green to discuss alternatives? How did it come about that you were going to stay there?

AJ: Without romanticizing this too much, there was a pretty democratic decision-making process within our group. We sort of put the issues out there as to what they were, and tried to structure the discussion so that people could have a chance to express opinions. The issue was do we stay, or do we comply with the court order. The unanimous opinion was, we're going to stay.

INT: Did you know what the Selectmen's grounds were for denying the use of the Green?

AJ: I can infer what they were. We suspected that they thought that this was a sacred parcel of land in the town of Lexington that was being despoiled by anti-war protestors who claimed to be veterans.

INT: Were you quoted a particular law or by-law of the town?

AJ: I'm sure we were, but I don't remember it.

INT: Who among you were most heavily involved in the negotiations and organizing? I guess you were. Bestor Cram, John Kerry—were they all there at that time?

AJ: John wasn't involved. John was floating around on the national scene. I think John showed up for the weekend and I think John probably was arrested for the only time in his life at that event. Vets generally considered John to be an opportunist, but we were willing to use him because he was such a pretty boy that people would give money because John would speak at functions—that kind of thing.

INT: So he came for a while and then he left?

AJ: No, he was there. I remember he was there pretty much for the entire weekend. I remember seeing him in the public works barn after we

all got arrested. It was a core of people who had been working out of the Mass PAX office for essentially the previous six months. It was myself, Bestor Cram and Chris Gregory, and Lenny Rottman, and Rusty Sachs, and a whole bunch of other folks.[6] Dennis O'Brien.

INT: That was the core.

AJ: Right.

INT: What happened after the arrest? You were in the barn for the rest of the night?

AJ: In the morning they took us all over to Concord District Court, which is the district court that has jurisdiction over Lexington. They processed us pretty quickly over there. We all got out cases continued on a Friday. We had to pay like five bucks fine, or ten bucks fine, I don't know.[7] And then we just regrouped and moved on to Bunker Hill which was our next stop. We just marched down Mass. Ave. is what happened.

INT: What time was that? Was it Sunday midmorning? Were you behind schedule?

AJ: Yes, we were. The arrests sort of put us behind schedule. That was the problem that I had as a planner. I wanted to be further along in the route anyway. I didn't particularly want to be on the Green. I wanted to be more on the Arlington side of Lexington because it would just give us an easier time in terms of our ability to get there to Bunker Hill.

INT: And you walked all the way.

AJ: We walked all the way.

INT: What was it like when you got there? You must have been tired.

AJ: People were high on the event, and I remember people being tired. People were up all night in the barn, and you went to court in the morning,

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[6] Of the people he mentions, Chris Gregory, Bestor Cram, and Jerry Grossman were interviewed by LOHP.

[7] The fine assessed by Judge Forte was $5.00.

and then you floated out to regroup, and then you moved onto Bunker Hill. It was a very exciting time.

INT: Was there a big crowd at Bunker Hill?

AJ: There was a big crowd at Bunker Hill.

INT: Why was that, you think?

AJ: Because by that point we had hit the local news on Friday night. We had hit the national news on Saturday where we all got arrested in Lexington. By that point there were a lot of people coming out of the woodwork to support us. There was a big crowd at Bunker Hill, there was an enormous crowd on Boston Common the day after that for the final rally.

INT: So you spent a night at Bunker Hill.

AJ: Right.

INT: And then this was all capped by a rally on Boston Common the next day.

AJ: Right, that's right.

INT: What do you think all of these events for this weekend had accomplished for the VVAW?

AJ: It raised the war issue one more time in the public domain, and my view was that the vets legitimized the peace movement at that point, and sort of put it back on track which resulted within the next two years [in] the complete reduction of the American Forces in Vietnam, and the withdrawal from Vietnam, which occurred in 1973, I think.

INT: What do you think was the effect that this had in Lexington?

AJ: I don't live in Lexington. I don't have a view of what effect it had. I have some notion that politically it created quite a stir, that there was a split between the old conservative crowd in Lexington and the more liberal crowd. They couldn't believe that their Selectmen had actually arrested former servicemen who were protesting the war in Vietnam. But I was actually sort of amused by the whole thing. I couldn't believe that, number

one, the Selectmen had been so stupid to play in our hands by arresting everybody, giving us national exposure. It was just beyond my comprehension that they could have done that. The easiest thing for them to do would have been to say, "Let them be—who cares?" But there's always been a lot of politically stupid decisions made over issues like this, and this was just another one.

INT: In the years and the time that followed until the war was over, did you ever find yourself again in a situation like the one that happened here in Lexington?

AJ: After this I went to law school. Most of the people that were involved in VVAW at that point got on with the rest of their lives and went onto other activities. VVAW [during] the years after that were actually taken over by a left [wing] group that none of us could relate to because it was just too politically extreme. There really hasn't been a general protest movement like the anti-war movement in the last twenty-five years. Politics have gotten very tame.

INT: What kind of law do you do now?

AJ: I have a community practice. I do people's problems. I've done a lot of litigation in my life, but I also do real estate, wills, trusts, estates. They're just general problems that people have.

INT: Did the activities you were involved in shape the career that you chose, or the type of law you wanted to do?

AJ: It probably put me in a frame of mind where I couldn't have moved into that corporate law sector too easily. I wasn't really interested in pushing the legal issues of the corporate or economic lead in our society. I was more interested in trying to help regular people deal with their legal problems. I ended up living in the City of Boston, and in a neighborhood that my family has been in for five generations. [I'm] more comfortable with dealing with people's problems than I am dealing with the problems that some corporation might have.

INT: How do these times seems to you now that you look back from this distance of twenty five years? Is there anything that you wish you had done differently, or that you would have liked to have seen happen differently?

AJ: Somehow in the early eighties we got sidetracked in our society in a mean spirited way that I think is regrettable. The election of Ronald Reagan, the rise of the Republican right… I can see us doing something stupid again like Vietnam, frankly. And on a lot of levels I don't think we learned our lesson.

INT: What do you think the lesson is that we should have learned? It's not an easy question, but if you had to say it briefly, what do you think the lesson might be?

AJ: One lesson—and I'm sure there's a lot of lessons that are out there—but one lesson is that the United States has no business trying to impose its political will on people in other parts of the world. The reality of Vietnam was that we would have to have killed every Vietnamese person who existed within the geographical confines of Vietnam in order to be able to be sure that we had stomped out the so-called Communist threat. It wasn't a realistic objective for our government, but I feel like we could do it again because we didn't learn our lesson. The younger generation that I see who's now a lot younger than me doesn't understand the political struggles that we went through. They still think that the government can still do this, that, and the other thing, wherever they want. Now, it's true that our society has sort of picked on substantially weaker opponents over the last twenty years—Grenada, Panama, Iraq. The list is endless. But we could make a decision to intervene in another national liberation struggle that we had no business dealing with. So in that sense I don't think the lessons were well learned.

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

AJ: I'll tell you that in a complete irony in my own life, I end up now working in 1995 on economic development projects in Vietnam.

INT: Could you tell us briefly about that?

AJ: An old friend of mine from the VVAW days who is fluent in Vietnamese and myself are doing some business development projects involving various things that are going on in Vietnam right now. Vietnam is coming out of a stage where they were not particularly looking outward in terms of their economic development, but they've made a major commitment to improve their society.

INT: Are you going to be going there again?

AJ: I've been there. They have no apparent resentment towards Americans, which is amazing to me, because if I was them, I'd be pissed. It's a very interesting place. The north took over the south in 1975. Since that time the population has doubled from thirty six million to seventy two million, which means that at this point in time half the population doesn't remember the American conflict. They don't refer to it as the Vietnam War, by the way. It's the American Conflict. A lot of it is analogous to what happened after World War II in the U.S. when the American veterans came back and started families, and wanted to improve their life in their society—that's happening in Vietnam now. The war veterans in Vietnam came back and started having children. They want their lives and their children's lives to be better, and they're working very hard at it. It's a very dynamic place right now, and it could have been a lot different. It could have happened twenty years ago if the U.S. policies—or forty years ago actually—if U.S. policies were a little bit more clear thinking.

INT: It sounds very sad.

AJ: It is sad in a lot of ways. The Vietnamese lost a lot more than we did in that conflict. For example, the dispute over the MIA's [Missing In Action]—there are less than a thousand American MIA's that are not

accounted for. There are over three hundred thousand Vietnamese who are unaccounted for.

INT2: I'd like to hear more about what happened in your family, your siblings and your parents when you were evolving your thoughts and feelings. You've already answered this question in a way saying that they weren't thoughtful discussions. It was more rancorous when you got back, but as you were on that ship off of the coast of Vietnam, did you write them letters that expressed your realities?

AJ: I wrote them letters expressing my reality. They were not willing to accept the reality. There's a faith in government in my parent's generation, the World War II generation, that is not present in the boomer generation, and I attribute that to the Vietnam War, actually. To be treated by the government the way they treated us in this particular conflict has had substantial political impact in my generation adverse to the notion that a citizen should be supportive of one's own government. What my generation learned was that the government can be completely arbitrary about how it treats its citizens, and that continues into the present day politically.

INT2: You made a short reference to the motivation of the members of the VVAW coming from anger the way they had been treated by our government. Can you fill that out with anecdotal or more particularized detail?

AJ: A lot of people very quickly figured out that they were on their way to be potentially cannon fodder in a conflict that was not winnable, and the resulting conclusion that people [came to] was that the government was willing to sacrifice them for political ideas that made no sense to them.

INT2: This may sound really sort of obvious or trivial or stupid, but what's the background that allowed that to happen in a democratic society? What was going on that we could come to this?

AJ: I think it was the last gasp of the World War II generation trying to control political events worldwide. It was old men sending young men off

to war because they felt like they had to have a macho presence in the world, and were not sensitive to the realities of the political situation in Vietnam and other parts of the world. It's John Wayne at the end of his life. The U.S. has to be in control, and we don't care how many people die as a result of that.

INT: Were you exposed to footage, newsreel footage and so on while you were on the ship? Did you see those same pictures that were enraging us here at home?

AJ: No, there wasn't TV on the ships. There weren't TV's in the foxholes either. You got your news filtered in from the military press. You didn't really hear a whole lot about it, and what you got was not all that favorable to the anti-war movement. But those of us who were in the military at the time—we never saw footage of this, of what was really going on. You saw it before you went in and you saw it when you got out, but while you were there it was very closely monitored.

INT: So did you find yourself angry about the way people in Vietnam were being treated not having seen these pictures that we were seeing?

AJ: I found myself angry at the way the military types were making…about their attitudes towards the war. It wasn't like there was a rational basis for this that made any sense. For most, in my experience, of the military types were only interested in career advancement, and career advancement meant combat participation. So the lifers were there. They wanted to have something in their service record that said that they had killed somebody in conflict, and they didn't care about the conflict, the underlying reasons for the conflict. It was only, hey, if I'm going to be in the military, and I want to be a general or a sergeant or something like that, I've got to have on my resume that I was in combat. No concern about the underlying political implications about what they were doing, or whether or not what we were doing made any sense on any rational basis. My turn away from this really had to do with my experience in the officer class.

The attitudes of the military officers really were not at all concerned about politics, or the underlying morality of what they were doing. They were only concerned about their career advancement, and career advancement meant having a record that showed that they were in combat and had, in their view, participated in killing people.

INT2: I'd like to know more about the story about when your ship was decommissioned and you filed for CO status. I somehow remember Bestor Cram saying at some point that he did that. It was unheard of, and the military was pretty confused, and frustrated and so forth. A more detailed description of what happened with you would be interesting.

AJ: As it turned out I was not exactly their model officer type. I had come out of a background where my way of providing leadership was to get people to cooperate with each other, and work towards a common goal. I had control, for example, on the ship that I was on, of what was generally considered the dumbest group, with a few crazy folks thrown in. I never had any problem with them. They always did what I wanted them to do. They never got in trouble, but every… The military rates you every six months—it's what is called a fitness report—and you can have from "excellent" to "adverse." My fitness reports were always on the "adverse" side of the ledger, and they would say things like, "He's too friendly with the enlisted men." It was just a bizarre situation as far as I could tell. So when I decided that I wasn't going to participate anymore in the war machine, on a lot of levels I think the military was glad. I decided not to participate anymore because I fought for CO in February of 1971. I was discharged by April. They got me out of there real quick, no problem.

INT: I have a question. It goes back to the fractiousness within your family related to the generation situation and political differences. Since that time, has there been some kind of reconciling and coming closer together among your family members, particularly the generations? And if there has, how did this go? How did this happen?

AJ: I think generally families reconcile over a period of time assuming you can keep it together to get to the point where you can actually reconcile. I don't think my father thinks about it in any sort of realistic way. Family dynamics are strange anyway. I don't think that there's been a reconciliation of views. I think there's been a burying of political differences, and a sort of reluctance to bring up old political disputes over issues, so that things moderate over time because the people don't want to bring up old bad garbage.

INT: Do you have children or nephews? Who is it do you talk to, that younger generation, about these issues?

AJ: I have a fifteen-year-old daughter and a bunch of nephews and nieces. They don't have a clue about the politics of the sixties and seventies, and I don't think they're going to get a clue, frankly. Times are just different now.

INT: Are they curious? Do they ask you?

AJ: They don't even know what Vietnam is. They don't understand war, my generation. I'm at the cusp of the baby boomer generation. I was born in 1946. I'm a month younger than Bill Clinton. My generation was defined by Vietnam. We spent ten years dealing with the political implications of Vietnam. All of us came to politics in those days, and had to fight through issues about how our government treated us. One of my brothers who is four years younger than me, who turns out to be a junior capitalist in his old age, voted for Bill Clinton although he's a raging Republican because he couldn't stand the attacks by George Bush on Clinton's failure to serve in the military. He said, "Lookit, there are thirteen million of us in our generation, only three million served. The other ten million actively tried to avoid it, and nobody thinks it was wrong to try to avoid. Everybody agrees that it was the proper thing to do because nobody has the opinion that it was worthwhile giving up your life to fight in Vietnam."

INT: I wondered if you wanted to describe some of your colleagues. You've referred to Rusty Sachs, and Bestor Cram, and Chris Gregory. Tell us more about those people and your relationship with them.

AJ: Bestor and I were sort of the—it's hard to say that we were the leaders because it was pretty decentralized—but we were like the core of decision-makers around strategy and things like that. And then there were people in the outer circles. Rusty was in college at the time, so he didn't have a lot of time to spend on this. Bestor and I were working full time on this, and that's really the reason why we had the major responsibility for how these projects developed and whatever. Lenny, Chris, and Dennis, and the other folks that were floating around, they sort of fit in and tried to help us work through what needed to be done. Everybody just took on responsibility. It was pretty decentralized and we had decision-making that was essentially collective in nature. I'm still friends with all of them. We see each other on a somewhat irregular basis, but every time we see each other we have great camaraderie for old times. They were very heavy political times in those days. We caught a lot of flack for what we were doing. We got a lot of satisfaction, and other people thought that we were doing great things, too, but generally it was out of step to be a veteran opposed to the war in those days. On the other hand, we were also all living very comfortably in Cambridge, Somerville, Boston, in a way that we could fit in politically without being too isolated. It's not like we were in my hometown Toledo, Ohio, where I would have been completely ostracized from what was going on.

INT2: Why are you so convinced that John Kerry was an opportunist?

AJ: Do you know John?

INT2: No, I don't really know him, but I've met him a couple of times. We were arrested with him.

AJ: You know, John's a good guy, I'm happy he's our Senator. He's done a lot of good things in his life, I think.

INT2: We hear it a lot from other people that that's what they think of him, and I've never been able to really figure it out exactly what it was.

AJ: I think it's at least two things from my experience. You know how he's called "Live Shot" in the local press for his capacity to get in front of the news cameras? He was like that in the old days, too, and he's a very articulate guy. He speaks very well, and he has the ability—at least in some circles—to encourage people to do things like give money to various events, and that's what we used him for because he was very useful for that. There was a general feeling that he was using the vets to advance his political career, and that was sort of confirmed for most people when the year after VVAW he ran for Brad Morris' seat in the Fifth [Congressional] District at age what, 24?—with no experience. It wasn't like John was willing to start at the bottom of the political ladder. But hey, I think he's a good Senator. I'm happy that he's our Senator, versus Mitt Romney, for example.

INT2: Except that he didn't really stand up in Grenada. That's one of the things that I hold against him. I wrote him a letter. It took a while to get any kind of an explanation, but he finally sent me back something—the government explanation, and it was obviously a false explanation.

AJ: He's a political creature, and he's starting to sort of fit into the Washington political scene. It means that he has to conform on a lot of levels. I'm not heavy with Bill Clinton. I think he's an opportunist, too, without politics, but those people seem to be the people that have to advance politically in our society. It's not a great reflection on the way we choose our leaders, frankly, but it is the way we do it.

END OF INTERVIEW