

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Bruce Willett  
Signal Corps, 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division, WWII  
1996

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**Willett, Bruce E.**, (1925- ). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 95 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 95 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

### **Abstract**

The Chippewa Falls, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service as a radio operator with the Signal Corps and the relationship of his military experience to his post-war involvement with the peace movement. A high school student when the war began, Willett talks about the changes in gym class to prepare students for military service, the attitude that all students would serve, and the reaction when one of his classmates was killed in action. Willett's father was a Methodist minister and he describes the effects of his upbringing on his attitude toward war and military service. After attempting to enlist in both the Navy and the Coast Guard, Willett joined the National Youth Corps (NYC) and comments on the role of this group, his reasons for leaving it, and being drafted into service. He mentions duty shoveling coal at Fort Snelling (Minnesota), basic training at Camp Crowder (Missouri), and Signal Corps training in Missouri. While in Missouri Willett saw segregation for the first time, he recounts seeing Black soldiers drilling and riding on segregated busses. He mentions learning Morse Code, assignment to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Armored Division, daily briefing on the progress of the war, and the feelings at camp to VE-Day. After VE-Day Willett was assigned to JASCO (Joint Assault Signal Company) unit, he talks about training for landing operations, visiting his brother who was working on developing the nuclear bomb, and his feelings about using the nuclear bomb. He talks about military life with the JASCO unit including drinking, gambling, marching in parades, and going on scavenger hunts with other service personnel. After discharge Willett became involved in the peace movement. He touches upon protesting mandatory ROTC training at the University of Wisconsin, joining the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), marching with Father Groppi in protest of discrimination, and his relief work in the South. He discusses his anti-Vietnam War work such as counseling young men on ways to avoid Vietnam, number of veterans in anti-war groups, and the reactions of people to the participation of a veteran in an anti-war organization.

### **Biographical Sketch**

Willett (1925- ) served stateside during World War II as a member of the Signal Corps and JASCO. After the war he became active in the peace movement, and was involved in anti-Vietnam War efforts in the Wausau, Wisconsin area.

Interviewed by Mark D. Van Ells, 1996

Transcribed by WDVA staff, n.d.

Transcription edited by Jackie Mulhurn and Abigail Miller, 2003.

## Interview Transcript

[Interview begins with incomplete sentence]  
--the sheets you gave me yesterday. Yeah.

Mark: Okay, I think we're on. Today's date is April 9, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. Bruce Willett, presently of Chippewa Falls.

Willett: No, Eau Claire.

Mark: Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Up north. A veteran of the U.S. Navy—Army, I'm sorry—during World War II. Good morning. Thanks for coming in.

Willett: You're welcome.

Mark: I absolutely appreciate it. I suppose we should start at the top, as they say. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Willett: Well, I was born in Rice Lake, Wisconsin, which is further north.

Mark: That's Barron County.

Willett: Right.

Mark: I know that one for some reason. [Willett laughs]

Willett: [Laughs] And then I moved, my folks moved around a bit because my dad was a preacher, and—so we lived in various parts of western Wisconsin, from Mineral Point to Superior. And prior to my induction in the service I was in school 'cause I was, oh, when Pearl Harbor happened and even the invasion of Germany into Czechoslovakia I was still in high school.

Mark: Yeah. And so, as a 16-year-old kid—

Willett: That's about it.

Mark: --are you paying attention to what's going on in Europe.

Willett: Nope.

Mark: Are you thinking that perhaps this might involve you some day? Or just—

Willett: No, no. I think you're kind of oblivious to that. You get involved in trying to figure out who you are as an individual and what you're going to do with your life. And then I think high school kids generally are, or were at that time more so than now, less aware of what's going on in the world. But I do recall very vividly when they dropped the bomb, when they bombed Pearl Harbor, and listening to FDR calling it, not "disastrous," what was it? He had a certain term.

Mark: Day of Infamy?

Willett: Day of Infamy, yeah. And heard that over and over again. Was walking along Superior Street in Chippewa Falls. I was living in Chippewa Falls at the time, in high school there, and pursuing, trying to figure where I was going to go to college more than where I was going in the military.

Mark: And so as we got into the war then, did things change for you? I mean as you're going from high school did it become more and more of a reality that—

Willett: Oh, yeah. One of the things that happened, well, among other things, I had three brothers who were in service, so there were four of us out of the same family that were in service. They were all in before me because I was the youngest in the family, and my father had been a chaplain in the First World War so he was, and he tried to get into the Second World War but they wouldn't, he passed all the physicals and so forth but he was over 55 so I thought it was, you know, a responsibility that I would follow along in the steps of my three brothers so I tried to enlist in, well, the first one, I tried the Navy and the Coast Guard and the—

Mark: Air Force?

Willett: No, no, I never tried the Air Force. I'm scared of heights so I thought that was enough [laughs]. But as a senior in high school one of the things that they proposed to entice the young men at that age is that if they would sign up in the service, they'd give their diploma no matter what time of the year they were in the senior year. Probably the first difficult time I had was one of my classmates was killed in Sicily before I graduated from high school—he was one that was eager to get in service—and there was a certain pressure to go in the service. We used to run three miles a day as part of the gym exercise, preparing us for the service. That was the coach's decision and so every day we'd run through Ervine Park and so we got in physical shape, and we'd run until we couldn't run anymore, and we could see who could outlast the other members of the class. So there was that kind of pressure on you and the kind of conditioning of your mind to say this is the thing you ought to do.

Mark: So there seemed to be very little doubt that everyone was going to end up in the military unless they were—

Willett: Yeah.

Mark: Now, I grew up in the post-Vietnam Era.

Willett: Oh, sure.

Mark: And, of course, there was a lot of resistance to going to war in Vietnam.

Willett: There wasn't that during World War II. I mean, you were expected to go.

Mark: And so why was that? That's what, I mean, as a young man, I mean, what kept you from doing that, what prevented you from doing that?

Willett: Prevented me from—

Mark: From saying, well, gee, I really don't think I want to go in the Army. I mean, everyone seemed to go. People would lie to get into the service as opposed to—

Willett: Oh, sure.

Mark: I mean, so I'm interested in—

Willett: There wasn't, one thing, there was a considered legitimacy about the war and everything you heard on the media. Of course there wasn't television then, but was geared toward saying how vicious and, well, dehumanizing the whole Nazi regime was as well as Mussolini's fascist government, and so forth, so that we were seen as the good guys for one thing. There wasn't that controversy in the States that you had during the Vietnam War. I did happen to know some people who were conscientious objectors, and my oldest brother was.

Mark: Well, see, like you mentioned your father was a minister and I was going to ask what denomination and how that may have played a role in how you viewed your military service.

Willett: Well, I viewed, it affected me more after the war than before the war but I think among, he was a Methodist, and statistics bear out that there were more Methodist conscientious objectors than most denominations. But not percentage-wise because the Methodist church per se isn't what I'd consider a "peace" church. You know, it wasn't like the Quakers or the Brethren or the Mennonites but a wide number of Methodist who were conscientious

objectors. As I say, my oldest brother was. I had five brothers and four, well, eventually four of us were in service. One was a CO, the other was physically disabled. So, that's just, so you were expected at that point to go in. And I think you're brainwashed, if I can use that term in a, not a negative sense, but you're conditioned, I guess would be a better word, to go and get into service.

Mark: Yeah.

Willett: So you're expected to do it but on the other hand I wasn't physically in the best shape. And I say that only because I couldn't see very good. I had one eye that wouldn't pass any examine of any service. When I eventually became inducted, I was in limited service but that did prevent me from getting in any service of my choice.

Mark: I see.

Willett: I didn't want to be in the Army for some reason. I wanted to be either the Sea Bees for some other group but anyhow, so, yeah, I think that's part of it. And my father, of course, was very anxious that we do our part so it was kind of expected.

Mark: Yeah.

Willett: By all of society versus the, there was no national effort or no effort in the community to be against the war. I mean, if you're against the war, you're against motherhood and apple pie.

Mark: I was going to ask about the role of fascism and perhaps the role of your religious background in some opposition to fascism. Hitler's, the nature of Hitler's regime, how much did that have to do with the enthusiasm for military service? I mean, did you hope to make it anti-fascist or was it just an expected thing that you were going to go into the military?

Willett: Well, I was raised up in the traditional, I guess it would be a Christian social gospel-type of thing so that what, and I know that's been very criticized especially in the last 25-30 years, that the social gospel is not real Christianity but that's kind of humanitarianism. But I was raised in that tradition. I happen to believe in that tradition, that human life is important. And I was aware that, from what I read in the papers, that I was, what Hitler was doing and fascism generally had little respect for human life, so I found that in contradiction to my basic belief though my basic belief was not too well established except I had the feeling that I ought to be kindly toward people and, then, should involve myself in the betterment of society rather than destruction. And everything fascism stood for was kind of the mob rule. I

mean as I saw it, the mob going along with what was expected and I always felt that everything should be on the individual choice. Even at that stage.

Mark: Well, there was also persecution of churches in Nazi Germany.

Willett: Yeah, yeah, I know. And we heard some of that but we heard the same thing of Russia until, especially when Russia invaded Finland, you know, that Russia was the bad guy at that point. Then I saw this reversal which made me wonder a little bit, that all of a sudden, when I finally did get in the service we had film after film about our great ally Russia instead of the Big Bear who invaded Little Finland. So that kind of made me question but it was too late, I was in service by that time, to really think about so I didn't give it a lot of profound thought I'm sure.

Mark: So as you mentioned, you tried to get in the Navy and the Coast Guard. Was it your eyesight that kept you out of those?

Willett: Yes.

Mark: So eventually you got the greeting from Uncle Sam.

Willett: That's correct. But I went to college first.

Mark: Oh, you did?

Willett: Yeah.

Mark: Okay, let's walk me through graduation.

Willett: Well, let me go back a little bit. I graduated from high school. Then I thought I should be involved in the war effort some time, having tried these various branches of services, so I took a training course to be a machine tool operator and get involved with either J.I. Case or some other company that was in the war effort, so I joined what was called the NYC, National Youth Corps, or something like that. And they gave you training in how to operate a shaver and the lathes and so forth, so that you could contribute to the war. Then, by the end of that summer, I thought, well, this isn't leading me to anyplace so I just thought I'd go to college and just kind of wait my time. Maybe they wouldn't take me and if they wouldn't, well, then I'll, I didn't know where I was going then. So I went up to Hamline University in St. Paul. From there I was drafted.

Mark: So you were drafted how long after you actually enrolled? Did you get to finish a semester at least?

- Willett: I finished one semester. That was all. I remember when I was drafted I went to Fort Snelling to have my physical and I and one other person from the campus at that time went together this fellow's name was Howie Schultz. He was the specimen of health. He was the hero of the basketball team and later played professional baseball and was quite an athlete. We went together. Then after we got through our physicals we got on the trolleys they used to operate at that time in St. Paul, from Fort Snelling, and he got rejected and I got accepted and I never—
- Mark: On what basis was that?
- Willett: On the basis was he was too tall. They would only, at that time they would only accept, they wouldn't accept anybody over 6'6". Howie was 6'7". 'Cause they didn't have the equipment, apparently, and they thought he'd be more vulnerable in the foxhole or whatnot [laughs]. I was, is this what the Army's about? They take, I was 130 pounds soaking wet, you know, and there was Howie. So it kind of made me wonder. Well, justice doesn't always rule [laughs]. At least in my estimation.
- Mark: Um, now, I went to basic training about 35, 40 years after you did. I remember some things very distinctly. Why don't you just walk me through your entry into the military. I mean, you're at Fort Snelling now. Just sort of walk me through getting into the military, getting the uniform, getting the haircut, and going through training, and what sort of training you were doing.
- Willett: Oh, well, basic training—well, you're a few weeks at Fort Snelling 'cause that was an induction center basically.
- Mark: What did you do there?
- Willett: Oh, I, one thing I remember most is shoveling coal into the little heaters in the barracks. Each barracks was a long wooden building and they had a little coal-fired stove at each end and somebody had to stay up at night and shovel the coal.
- Mark: Is this winter or spring or something like that?
- Willett: Yeah, it was in early spring, late winter. So it was one of my jobs to stay up at night and go from barracks to barracks shoveling coal. Until you got your orders as to where you're going. In the interim you're tested for certain branches as to what you'll be in. Because of my limitation they decided, they had a classification called "limited service." I don't know whether they had that during the Vietnam War or no. But anyhow, so they put me in that category and then they sent me to the Signal Corps at Neosho, Missouri at Camp Crowder, for my basic training which is six weeks long. It was pretty



basic stuff, you know. You learned how to crawl under live ammunition, crawl along the ground. Then you learned how to climb telephone poles because that was part of the Signal Corps and with my avoidance of heights I didn't do too good at that. They finally said, well, I guess you can operate a radio. And so they put me into the basic training course of learning the Morris code and doing that sort of thing.

Mark: With the expectation of what? I mean were you going to be prevented from going overseas because of your limited service?

Willett: No, not at all.

Mark: And so you were being trained to be, perhaps, behind the lines a little bit, operating radios and that sort of thing?

Willett: Yeah, basically giving information as to where the enemy was. So you were not very far behind the lines, just in back of the avant-garde, or the first wave. That was a pretty clear understanding of that's where you were. So you had portable generators and that sort of thing that you operated. But you did have to learn the code. And then after you get to a certain speed in Morris code, then you had to go into what they called "advanced reception." At that point then I left Camp Crowder and was shipped to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for high-speed operation.

Mark: Let's pause here for a second.

Willett: Sure.

Mark: One of the things that I remember about basic training was that you got people from all parts of the country. You got different cultural regions and that sort of thing. In my era it was different racial backgrounds, too, which wasn't the case in your era.

Willett: Not at all.

Mark: I'm sure it was still a good mix of people from all across the country. I'm interested in how people from these different backgrounds all got along, in your basic training.

Willett: Well, the troops were segregated. Of course, I wasn't aware of it at Fort Snelling but at Camp Crowder 'cause everything was segregated. They had colored rest rooms in town, a little town in Neosho, but more explicitly on the grounds. They had, "colored" is the term they used then, colored recreation halls, colored theaters, of course colored barracks. Everything was completely separated. One of the fun things, I thought it was kind of fun, was to watch

the colored troops, as they were referred, drill because they were much snappier than we were. So we used to go down and listen to them and listen to their cadences and that sort of thing. But there was no intermingling at all, which was a bit of a puzzle to me especially in terms of my propensity to think that all people were equal and I—

Mark: At the time was this puzzling to you?

Willett: No, no, it was puzzling to me at the time. In fact, I recall one weekend, I went to Oklahoma City on a three-day pass and was going someplace on the bus, and I went to the back of the bus where there were some empty seats, and sat down. The bus driver proceeded to stop the bus, walked back to me, and said, “Soldier, if you’re going to ride this bus, you can’t sit back here.” I said, “Why not? There’s an empty seat.” He said, and I wasn’t argumentative about it, but he says, “You either get off or get up front and stand.” So I was a little, of course, then that started a lot of things going in my mind.

Mark: Like what?

Willett: Well, the whole thing of, well, I guess the first thing is why should I be deprived of a seat, but then it got a little more deeper than that to say why are the Blacks confined to the back of the bus? It was long before Rosa Parks ever thought of sitting on a seat but I was still irritated by the whole thing, and by making an illustration to me by pulling the bus over and by him walking down the—I can still see him walking down the aisle to straighten me out. And I was, you know, young enough and rebellious enough as the youngest of a preacher’s kids family. I always contend in a preacher’s family you’re either a rebel or a conformist and all my brothers were pretty much conformists and I chose the latter role ‘cause I didn’t want to be like my brothers.

Mark: Now, was this the first time you had been to the South and seen this sort of thing first hand?

Willett: Yup, yeah.

Mark: I mean, you obviously knew it existed but this was your first exposure to it.

Willett: No never seen it. If you were raised in northern Wisconsin, you never saw a Black for the most part, except I remember one time we had a quartet of Black singers who came to our church in Chippewa Falls and my dad introduced them as “our brown brothers.” That was a new term to me. It never caught on but Black caught on. I think Brown would have been more appropriate when I think of it retrospectively. But otherwise, no, we’d never seen a Black. So you get into that and in communities of the South, well, even that little town of Neosho, there was a definite dividing line and, you know, I went to church

in Neosho and it was all Whites and it was things I was used to. But anyhow that little experience did irritate me a great deal and made me start wondering about a lot of other things. But back to the basic training, anyhow, I was just trying to think. There was nothing impressionable that I recall except you'd go through the—well, one time I remember crawling under live ammunition or they'd have tanks rolling over you and you have to jump into a little hole, and all those things that were preparing you for combat, and I can see these, they used the bullets, those tracers. I remember that.

Mark: Tracers?

Willett: And all of a sudden I felt a liquid going down my leg and I thought, oh, my golly, I've been hit. What it was, 'cause we were out in the field for at least two weeks, I had a bottle of ink. The top came off and it was, it had run down my leg. It was warm because it had been next to my leg. So I thought I was mortally wounded [laughs]. It was merely the top of the bottle of ink—that was before the days of ballpoint pens—'cause I used to write quite a bit [laughs].

Mark: Quite a relief, I'm sure.

Willett: When I saw that blue spot on my fatigues, I thought, well, that's what—[fades into laughter].

Mark: Um, so you went to South Carolina. More radio training.

Willett: Yes, they'd put you in a high-speed course out there where you could--the accomplishment at basic radio training was 10 words a minute but when you got in the high-speed you went 25. Then you'd have to shift to a typewriter, which I didn't know how to operate. Everything was in coded messages of course so they'd train you by giving you Morse code letters that you only use your index finger, then you'd use four fingers, until you got to use all five. To this day I don't know how to type numbers because we didn't have any numbers so all you'd learn was the alphabet, no punctuation and that kind of thing. But anyhow, so then it would take, it took quite a long time to get your speed up. They'd expect you at least in 10 weeks, going from 10 to 25 words a minute, the idea being that the faster you could communicate a message the least likely it could be intercepted by the enemy. But when we were there, and as we were getting near the end of our training, well, we were assigned to the Second Armored Division, to be a part of Blood and Guts' outfit in Europe, and we started packing all our equipment. Well, another funny experience there, as we were packing equipment you had to be sure that it was waterproofed and all those necessary things. One day we were having a demonstration of our ability to go through mined waters, in a little pond. They had a lot of water in South Carolina but the pond where we did our

maneuvers, you get into these little boats with all your equipment and go across this pond, and then there were explosives that were preset so that you see the water popping up. But among other things in my unit, we had what people didn't recognize, we had pigeons, you know. 'Cause I thought that was only in World War I but we had them—I didn't have anything to do with the pigeons per se but there was another branch of our outfit that did. So we had boxes of pigeons on these little boats. Anyhow, one of the boats that had not only radio equipment but the pigeons, got off course and an explosive tipped the boat over. And here was the inspecting general on the shore—the water wasn't so big enough that you could holler across—and the inspecting general, the chief commanding officer of the camp rather, was standing next to this inspecting general, and he shouted out as loud as he could shout—well, here was these guys floundering around in the water, and their equipment, and their packs on their back—and the commanding officer shouted out, [loudly] “Save those pigeons!” That was the most important thing to him. It sort of made me wonder. I mean, here was these guys. I was a little concerned about them. I was not in that particular boat. But, anyhow, that seemed to be a priority in the commanding officers—It was funny but at the same time it made me wonder what's important, you know, the pigeons or the people? I probably wasn't profoundly struck by it but it did raise a question in my mind at that point. But anyhow back to, we were getting ready to go to Europe. I always used to tell my kids when I got to be an adult that when they heard that I was coming, Hitler gave up. But that was, never had that verified. But anyhow, we did—[faded to laughter]

Mark: I'm sure it's in the archives somewhere.

Willett: I'm sure. We did have all our equipment ready to go and we were a few days away from shipment when the war ended. Even though it looked like it was winding down, you know, you could see as you watched. And we would be—

Mark: Yeah, 'cause, see I was going to ask, you must have been observing the war.

Willett: Yeah. They gave us routine, meaning almost every day, they'd give you a rundown of what was happening in Europe particularly. Like when the Battle of the Bulge occurred, we'd hear about those things. And any of the battles, which a lot of those places were foreign to us but they'd have maps and you'd gather in the assembly hall and they'd give you daily, routine on what was occurring in Europe. So you sort of knew what you were getting into in terms of what was happening and how there was, you know, the ebb and flow of the troops and we could see, even as we were packing up, that things were, the possibility of the war ending was there. It wasn't too disappointing to me that I didn't go because we heard all kinds of tales of the pearl handled pistols that Blood and Guts Patton wore. And, you know, as any group of people the rumors get wild and fast. But we were basically to be used as replacement

troops in the Second Armored Division, only in the Signal Corps area of it. So then the war ended.

Mark: I'm interested in—well, the war ended twice actually. There was VE Day—

Willett: Well, this was VE Day.

Mark: So let's talk about VE Day. Did you recall the reaction? I mean—

Willett: Yeah, there was a lot of sense of relief.

Mark: --celebration, jubilation?

Willett: Oh, sure. It was relief as much as anything 'cause we were within 10 days I think it was of shipment. And so I kind of escaped that by the, actually two of my brothers were over there already. And the other brother was in the Coast Guard and he was basically in Florida 'cause they were expecting some submarines and so forth along the coast of Florida so he just patrolled that. Of course my other two brothers were in Europe and were in the lines. So it was of particular interest to me, the daily briefing that we would get from our officers. So it was, I did keep track for personal reasons, what was going on. But it was a relief because it was, I knew they were out of harm's way and that I wouldn't have to get involved with that. Of course, at the same time you think, well, what's next because obviously by that time Japan was being seen as much more powerful than we ever imagined. In fact, I remember when that thing happened, and I'm going backwards a bit, but when they first talked about Pearl Harbor, that we'd mop them up. And one of the senators, and I forget the exact name, but said publicly, well, we'll have them wiped out in a matter of a week or two. And that was kind of the impression I think a lot of people had at that time. That it wasn't much of a military power, but, of course, by the time things got in full swing and you went through the islands of the Pacific. And by this time, by the time VE Day came, you knew it was a real problem. Of course, then wondering, I was at that point, wondering what the Big Bear Russia would do because they were a neighbor in their eastern coast anyhow, to Japan. So there was a lot of speculation at that point, would Russia get involved as they were our allies in the Western Front, would they be our allies in the Eastern Front. There was quite a bit of that speculation. But you had no idea what you're going to do so you kind of were in limbo for a few days.

Mark: Yeah. And so by the time the Japanese surrender came, were you still in South Carolina? Or had you been transferred?

Willett: Oh, no, no, right away. They transferred us within a week or two.

Mark: With the expectation of going to the Pacific? Or it was unclear at this point?

Willett: Oh, no, it was very clear. They shipped us by troop train, where you had three-bunk high trains, and I imagine you've had some description of those troop trains. They shipped us to California, immediately, assigned us to a new outfit called JASCO [Joint Assault Signal Company], which was called the Joint Assault Signal Company. That particular unit had a very clearly defined role.

Mark: Which was what?

Willett: Which was basically that you set up, well, in the first place JASCO company was unique in that we had Naval officers in our company. We were being shipped to, well, I was shipped to Oceanside Naval Base which is in the middle of Camp Pendleton, which was the first time I ever sensed I was in the minority because I was in the Army, in the Naval base, in the middle of a Marine camp and I felt, well, it was an interesting experience that way. To be a minority. But I didn't think as much of minorities as I did after the war. But anyhow, the assignment was that you would set up your communications between the ships and the first wave of troops so we'd be kind of in the middle and say, well, the troops are at this stage and if you're going to aim your artillery, be sure you get beyond the troops. Because I'm sure you've heard of incidents where the—

Mark: So called "friendly fire."

Willett: Yeah, yeah. So it was to avoid friendly fire. So we would be, and they were very clear about this, you'd be the second wave of personnel to land on the beaches. The first wave being the initial infantry. So—what we did then, when we got to this Naval base in California, we did a lot of training on island maneuvers. And we'd, either on the beaches of California or some nearby islands we'd go out into transport ships and shinny down the ladder which is not a great joy for me but these rope ladders to shinny down into little landing boats. And then you'd jump on shore, and you'd set up your operation, and get your little generators going, and all of that stuff. So it was definitely in preparation of landing operations. They used to tell us, but then again it's the rumor factory is always great guns, that we were being trained specifically for landing on the Japanese island proper, not just on the Iwo Jima or some other Pacific island. You knew you were in for the long haul. So it was a pretty intensive training. I think the most intensive I had was when we got out to California. I have to backtrack a little bit 'cause there's a related incident as I get to VJ Day. When I was in South Carolina, the one brother who was physically disabled, and the reason he was physically disabled was he had TB and had been in a sanatorium. He was also a chemist. He got a job in Tennessee. That much I knew. So when I had a three-day pass I decided I'd

go and see him and he told me how to get there. It was Oakridge, Tennessee. That's where Oakridge is I think. Anyhow, I went there. And he was living in a little temporary shelter, and I know I had to pass all kinds of inspections to get to see him and transfer from buses, and have another inspection. And I had no idea what was going on. But when I got back to camp, I had a friend by the name of Jack Weinstein who, he and I had shared our experiences from, all through these various training programs. I think he's now a judge in New York, in fact. But anyhow, I got back and I told him I had, where I went on my pass, and I said, "Some kind of an operation my brother's working on. I don't know what it is but I certainly had to go through a lot of rigidity and finally getting to his house." So anyhow, that was just one of my weekend passes. Well, so then we were, as I say I'm at Oceanside, California, where I thought I had the best food that I ever had in the service, at the Naval base. I don't know what your experience in food was, not that that was high priority to me. But anyhow, I was standing in chow line one day and Jack came over, this friend Jack Weinstein came running up to me, and he said, [excited] "Look here, Bruce." and he showed me this newspaper that said Oakridge, Tennessee, that's where the A-bomb was developed. So that was, of course, near the end of the Japanese intrusion. So he says, "This is where you were?" and I said, "I guess I was." And, of course, it was verified later on that that's—so it was kind of exciting to me at that time to think, and we had no idea of the devastation except that it was a tremendous bomb. Of course, I had remembered the fear that the British had when these unmanned bombs they called them, came over from Germany. It was kind of a forerunner of not atomic explosions, but certainly the missile.

Mark: Missiles, yeah.

Willett: And that was a fearsome thing in itself. It was terrifying to me, even that. But anyhow, that was kind of a personal experience.

Mark: Yeah, I was going to ask you about your personal relationship with the bomb, I guess you could say, and your training to storm the Japanese beaches.

Willett: That's what we were told, yeah.

Mark: Yeah, and they dropped the atomic bombs on Japan. Many veterans think that those bombs actually saved their lives. There's one sort of famous essay by an English professor, Thank God for the Atom Bomb. I'm interested in your reaction to it at the time, the reaction of those around you at the time, and how your view of the bomb may or may not have changed over time.

Willett: Oh, yeah, I'm very free to give that opinion. One thing again, I was on the edge. It was six days that we were to be shipped so all our equipment was ready. I seem to have escaped shipment overseas by the hair of my head, I

always did. But, yeah, we were, we had the date very firmly set as to when we were leaving. And, of course, so our first reaction was, boy, what are we getting into 'cause we didn't know on that initial knowledge of a new weapon that this was going to be the weapon that stopped the war. So we knew the war was going to be more severe and it wasn't, you didn't have that sense of relief that we had with VE Day. Well, it wasn't VE Day. It was VJ Day when they dropped the bomb. So I guess my reaction at that point, and most of the people I was with including the Naval personnel, was that we were really in for some tough sliding although we will not be the first ones there because we still had to traverse the ocean so to speak. But we had, you know, we had our orders and everything was more definitive. Well, I don't know if "more." It was certainly definitive as to what we were going to do. In relation to the bomb, of course none of us had an idea of the devastation at that early stage. You want my reaction to since?

Mark: Oh, I'm very curious.

Willett: I have a hard time accepting that. That it was dropped on—and I don't know what went into it, but that it was dropped on civilian personnel. I don't see why—and I have a hard time even though in some ways I thought Truman did a fairly decent job—I have a hard time not accepting that he couldn't have chosen an alternative to show the power of the atom bomb rather than drop it in the middle of a very densely populated area. And then that reverts back to my kind of understanding that human life was sacred, which didn't cross my mind too much when I was rat-tat-tatting at silhouettes of people. but since then it's given me pause to wonder why couldn't they have dropped it on some atoll. So I have not completely reconciled myself to the dropping of the bomb because I've seen the devastation it's done. Of course, it's easy to be a Monday morning quarterback, but I've never read any place—and this is maybe my fault—of where there were serious negotiations with the Japanese and to say, look, we've got this weapon, we'll show you how it works. I mean, we'll show you what devastation it can bring. And maybe there was. You might know, Mark, better than I. Or that there was an effort to communicate to the Japanese. Or the other thing was, and I remember my brother explaining this after the war, that they had a real fear when they were developing this that this reaction might get out of control and affect all life. As he explained it in scientific terms that I didn't fully understand except that a chain reaction could develop once the atom was broken. So anyhow, I had since then real doubts about—Oh, I know what I was going to say is maybe we, as a country, didn't know how devastating it could be. On the other hand, I'm not sure, we knew it would be devastating but, you know, I reacted very, and I'm thinking of contemporary times, when the Smithsonian Institute was barred from having what I considered was an actual account of the Enola Gay and it's part in the war, that what irritated me about it wasn't just the bomb but the fact that that's how fascism starts, by having to curtail freedom of speech



and the public's fear. And I think Smithsonian is a basically public facility and I've been a member of Smithsonian so I felt real strongly. But I think when they're over-censoring like that it's like saying, you know, that Blacks are inferior mentally, or homosexuals are not acceptable in our society and should be done away with—as Hitler did. And, of course, Jews are nothing but parasites. So when you start censoring, that's just the first step to the big lie technique that Hitler used and so forth so I, I guess I'm kind of wandering a little bit, but just to say that the whole bomb thing has made me very skeptical about how much we valued human life at that point. And it seemed to be a little contradiction of what we later learned of as the Holocaust and all of that.

Mark: That's not wandering at all. It's very interesting. So the Smithsonian exhibit, as a World War II veteran, you personally didn't find it offensive to you?

Willett: No, I think the more truth is exposed the better off it was, and I think they were honest. I've seen enough Smithsonian Institute displays that I know that they're not going to pervert. But, and I guess, I've never belonged to a veterans' outfit, and part of it is because I don't want to be told how to think. And I've always considered myself a bit of an individual. Not that I have anything against veterans' groups. I've given talks to veterans' groups, not in this area, but I mean, as a veteran, so I have nothing against them, but I felt that there were certain powers. And it wasn't just the veterans' group. It's people like Jesse Helms and so forth who make me have serious doubts about the democratic process at times, even though I know it's the best process in the world. But I think you get some kooks in there that just shouldn't be there and I don't know how to avoid them as long as you have basic democracy. And I say that from the point, I happen to be an official of, in Eau Claire, as a supervisor in Eau Claire County, and what amazed me, and I'm really wandering at this point, is how easy it is to get elected, and how much power you've got once you get there. And you can abuse it so easy. I was aware of that in [unintelligible] relationship. I was never involved politically except during the Vietnam War as far as presidential politics are concerned. And again I was surprised how a few people can affect the whole process of choosing a president.

Mark: Yeah. No, it's not wandering at all. I want to come back to this. Actually I want to come back to some of these topics.

Willett: Okay.

Mark: I think at this point it might be helpful to close out World War II.

Willett: Okay, all right, good idea.

- Mark: We talked about the bomb and how the war ended. How long was it until you actually got out of the service after that?
- Willett: Oh, five, six months, yeah, 'cause I didn't have a high priority because I didn't have any overseas experience, and I went in when I was 18.
- Mark: So you had low points.
- Willett: I had low points, yeah. And they, one of the things that I—a little diversion—when you're 18, you're much more willing to take the chance of, if you get into combat—and I'm kind of digressing a bit—but when I think of my own attitude, I would have been much, I would have been a little reckless I think had I gotten into combat service. Because you sort of feel when you're 18 you're invincible, you know. Life and death isn't the real thing. But anyhow, after the war, yeah I knew I didn't have the points so it was almost play time from then on.
- Mark: What was it like in the service? As you know, the war is over and things are winding down, and they're sort of dismantling things. I mean, from your perspective as a young enlisted man, what's going on and what's going through your mind at the time?
- Willett: Well, I think you try to evaluate where you were. I don't mean physically but where you were mentally during that process. When it's all over you're kind of in a vacuum, as far as your own directed thinking because a lot of it, and naturally expected, was determined by the goal of the nation. And then all of a sudden you have no purpose, really. There's no purpose. Except one of the things I did a lot of was because of this outfit I was in, this JASCO [Joint Assault Signal Company]. We were a pretty snappy looking outfit because we had the front two rows were Naval officers and Army officers, and then the peons came along. But we were in much demand to march.

[End of Tape 1, Side A.]

I remember marching on St. Patrick's Day, marching on Valentine's Day. Everybody was celebrating and they would, who ever made the contacts for units to march, they'd pick on the kind of snappy looking outfits. That was kind of a novel group so we did a lot of marching. And then we were involved in, oh, I got shipped to Camp McClellan and they were closing down Camp McClellan where my father had been in World War I, but there was nothing to do. One of the silly things we used to do—to show how idle time goes—this friend Jack and two other guys, we would go and we'd type out lists of things and we'd put at the top of it "Scavenger Hunt Team #1", then you'd list all kinds of odd things. And then what we'd do, we'd go into town, which was La Jolla, we'd go into town and we'd rap on doors and say we're

on this scavenger hunt 'cause there were no USOs, no rec halls. And the only reason we'd do this is because on these, eventually you'd get invited into a home. So it was your entrée into society.

Mark: Did they offer you dinner or something?

Willett: Oh, they'd offer you drinks and dinner and an evening of fun sometimes. You'd hope that it was the only purpose, and you'd go out two-by-two. We knew some ways to handle it so you'd go two-by-two [laughs]. So that was just a way of getting into the community and finding something to do. One day, literally, I picked up cigarette butts for eight hours. I mean that was cleaning up the yards of Camp McClellan. So there was a lot of that and a lot of drilling. I know they had me drilling troops at one point. I got so sick of it I had them do an about-face five times in a row and that was the end of my being asked to drill the troops [laughs]. I found ways to rebel, I guess is what I'm saying, but it was so meaningless at that point. There was no, you know, when you're trained to dig a foxhole you thought well this is, might come in handy some day, whatever you did. But after the war it was kind of a meaningless existence and you know you're just biding time. So basically then you just spend a lot of time in the pubs because of the lack of social activities. You do whatever you could. Did a lot of swimming in the ocean. It was a nice place to be that way. Did a lot of reading. In fact, I worked, when I was still in service, I worked the night shift in Cannery Row where John Steinbeck made that popular, and I worked cleaning sardines. It was an experience. You'd get acquainted with the women on the line, cleaning the guts out of sardines. It was kind of a fun experience.

Mark: Very romantic, I'm sure.

Willett: Yeah, it was. I mean romantic in the sense that here was this, I can still today, to this day, smell that gut and salt water, and all the other things, with nostalgia. It was maybe repulsive at the time but it was good.

Mark: And you were still in the Army while you're doing this?

Willett: Sure, sure, 'cause you have all you can do and then you'd sleep a lot during the day. I mean there wasn't a lot to do so whenever you could you'd take a nap. Yeah.

Mark: Now, there were some other aspects of military life when you're trying to bide your time. You perhaps weren't involved in these sorts of things, but I'll pitch them to you anyway. That's a lot of drinking sometimes goes on, gambling, you'd be sort of M\*A\*S\*H for example, there's always a card game going on. Did you see much of that stuff? Did you participate in that sort of thing?

- Willett: Question number 1, did I see a lot of it? Yeah, I did. A lot of it. Well, even prior to the end of the war there was a lot of gambling. I can still remember all the dice going up against the footlockers. As soon as payday occurred there was a lot of gambling in the barracks, but more so after the war. And drinking, there was a lot of it. Now, I was raised in a home that, and there was no drinking or gambling. Not even card playing.
- Mark: Well, see, that's why I was going to ask you that specifically 'cause your upbringing was different than most.
- Willett: Yeah, yeah, that was taboo in my home. I never did get into gambling. I'm still very opposed to the lottery and a lot of other things because I've dealt with addictive people in my professional life and I just see it as an additional addiction. However, I did imbibe in the local pubs quite a bit and that was something that I know was against my upbringing but, and I remember one time I met my brother—this was after the war—who was still in service, and we met in San Bernardino I think, or someplace, and I had a couple beers and he was still being honest with his tradition, I guess, and was appalled that I even took a drink. Or the first time I was home, I remember I poured my milk by tipping my glass and spilled it while in the habit of not getting any foam. I don't think my parents counted on that as a cue. I don't drink much now but I did at that point, yeah.
- Mark: Well, see, I was going to say, after the war did that particular habit stay with you for awhile?
- Willett: No.
- Mark: I suppose you could look at it in morale terms and say that military life was a sort of corrupting influence in that sense. And did that sort of thing go on in the course of your life?
- Willett: No it didn't but I didn't consider it corrupting. I made the choice and it was an escape. I mean it was an escape from doldrums and I don't blame the military for it. It was just that that's where, you know, but I remember one of the things that—I'm diverting to the minority troops—I was in a pub out in Salinas, California with some friends of mine. I had this one friend who was, by the name of Bill Small, who always stared at people with his mouth open, for some reason. It was a peculiar habit Bill had. Anyhow, there were some fellas down the bar who were obviously veterans of overseas and they were in a Hawaiian troop, and somebody said, "Look at those pineapples." And, anyhow, it ended up that my buddy, Bill, got his jaw broken and I was offering them a bottle of Muscatel and, but soon the military police came on the scene. But I guess I'm saying that even after the war, when here were some proven heroes of combat and so forth, we were still looking askance at each other.

There wasn't the intermingling. There was segregation of that type. No, I don't, it was just my choice to escape and my friends were there. Early in the war I found that I associated much more with people who had the same upbringing. And I was involved quite a bit with some Mormons who, they were friends of mine but I remember I went to church one time and the church refused to give me communion when I thought it was important, because I wasn't a Mormon.

Mark: Yeah.

Willett: But, so, again those type of things kind of formulate where you're going to go, either in terms of religious belief or your basic values.

Mark: I was just about to ask you about religious life in the military. Something that you perhaps were a more acute observer of others. Why don't you just basically describe your experience religiously in the military. A lot of Catholics and Jews, not to mention there were Protestant groups coming together.

Willett: Well, yeah, I got exposed. Well, I mentioned Jack Weinstein who was obviously Jewish. And I'd never met a Mormon in my life. The Methodists that I got acquainted with in service, or at least the communities, were Southern Methodists. I don't know if you're aware that at that time there were three branches of the Methodists church which happened because of the slavery in the 1800s, so that they were more fundamentalist than I understood. I found value-wise I was closer to either somewhat Orthodox Jews or Mormons because they kind of led the type of life, and the protected life, that I had. I never forget a later experience where I was with a Jewish friend. This is way divert but I felt the same about Jack, I think he was one of the dearest friends I had in the service. But this other Jewish friend and I were in Mexico and were buying some things and, coming from northern Wisconsin you used a lot of phraseology that wasn't appropriate. But anyhow we were dickering about how many pesos to pay for this particular item. I said to Jack after we had gone from 500 down to 250 pesos, I said to Jack, "Well, I'll be able to Jew him down a little more." And he turned to me and he said, "Bruce, next time we're going to Christian him down." Never used the term since but it did open my eyes to other religions and made me start wondering about my own, where I was going, and what values I had in mine. I think, even though I, at first, went to church very regularly and was involved in the Army base chapel, choirs and that sort of thing, I gradually pulled away from it because it wasn't very meaningful to me 'cause I was kind of facing some moral decisions that I had a lot of questions about but couldn't make any decisions about. It seemed like I was in kind of a state of mind where I didn't care to make decisions because I was involved in this thing that I was the right thing to do but didn't know why. Well, I knew somewhat, why because of what was happening in

Europe and Japan. But it didn't have too much religious zeal to it. In other words, I couldn't relate the two so I just chose to cut out the one. It didn't affect me after the war, however. I had some other thoughts but I'll get into that.

Mark: I was just going to say, we're kind of skipping ahead here but why don't you just describe to me how your military experience during World War II affected the rest of your religious life.

Willett: Well, I lost enough friends from my high school class and it started making me wonder what this was all about, and what violence itself was all about. I recognized within myself, as I retrospectively looked at it, that were I to be in a place where I could use violence I could be very dangerous. So I drifted, not drifted, I guess I conscientiously moved toward the idea that violence may not be the way to handle things 'cause I know I couldn't handle my violence. In that recognition, and I kind of sought out where can I express myself in a more positive way, 'cause I'd spent two years in what I thought was the thing to do but began to question the whole matter of how violence is a cure to anything, especially in personal life. And I still know to this day, were I to be placed in a place where I would become violent, I'm scared of myself at that point. So I spent a year in a mental hospital as an attendant trying, 'cause I thought there was something in my mind that needed straightening out, and I think I was a bit screwed up to be frank about it. I mean screwed up in the sense of what I was raised in had become, parts of it were very meaningful but I didn't understand how that related with the war, and I didn't understand how that related with violence, and I didn't understand how it would give any direction to me at the time. So, yeah, I spent a year with the Quakers in a New York hospital where we had 8500 patients and where the treating of mental illness was, consisted primarily of restraining, you know, of wrapping kids, for an example. Our cold treatment method was to dip sheets into ice-cold water and then wrap the kid like a mummy and then wrap him in wool clothing and just leave him there until he came out as a limp noodle. Straight jackets were, I was bit numerous times by people, trying to get them into straight jackets. I was involved with electric shock three times a week where we'd give people electric shocks and I had to cart them out. Well—

Mark: This is in the '50s some time?

Willett: No, this was the last '40s.

Mark: Late '40s.

Willett: Yeah, about '46, '47. It was right when I got out, more or less 'cause I was, as I say, looking for where I belonged. And we'd do things like, well, anyway you could restrain, you know. The first thing I learned, and again it started

making me wonder about how we treat humans, the first thing I learned when I went there was how to subdue a patient without leaving any marks on their body. How you can make them become unconscious and that sort of thing, of how you treat fellow humans. At the same time I remember we got stuck in a real snow storm where the whole, well, there were 80 some buildings on that campus, just outside New York City, and the coal trains couldn't get in. Everything was heated by coal. I had to take, I think it was, 12 patients who were on the homicide ward—I worked mostly the suicide ward and part-time homicide—and shovel coal. And we had a great time. I, you know, I would see these were the guys that we keep penned up all the time and it started to make me wonder about, and I really thoroughly enjoyed that and we had, for several days we had to shovel coal and I had a good experience. So that made me wonder about the whole mental operation and how we treat people who are mentally ill. Well, then I went on another Quaker thing to Mexico and that's where I did some goofy things, but it was supposed to be, basically, humanitarian and that we were building a road to get to a source of water. Actually, what it was, and I think the Quakers knew this for awhile, it was good for the people who took part more than the community in which we dealt, as a lot of programs are. So anyhow, I got back on campus here—instead of going back to Hamline I came here 'cause my parents were living here for one thing. I had the GI Bill. I have to backtrack a little bit with the GI Bill. I decided that a person ought to be able to, or should have a trade, physical trade, so I could put myself through college, which eventually I went through numerous, more years than I should have, college. So I took the GI Bill and I went, I had the idea that I should learn to tune pianos, of all things, and I could put myself through college once I had that trade. I could augment the GI Bill or whatever. So I went to Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and learned how to tune pianos and tuned for the Baldwin Piano Company for awhile. Then I came back to the university campus and started my degree.

Mark: And what did you get it in?

Willett: I got it in social work, oddly enough. And then once I got out of, peculiar twist of my life, once I got out of, through that, I went to seminary for three years--the military. And one of the, my dad and I had a heated argument, which we seldom had, over the presidential campaign in which Adlai Stevenson was running against Dwight Eisenhower, and I said, "If Eisenhower's elected, I'm going to leave the country." I mean, I felt very strong, it had nothing to do with the personality of Dwight Eisenhower, but it had to do with the fact that he was a general, so my emotional reaction was that way, and we went round-and-round. My dad wasn't no died in the wool Republican by no means 'cause he preached the social gospel as much as I knew of the social gospel. Anyhow, he died rather suddenly and I, my mother was in, you know, a state of being a widow all of a sudden, so I said, and he was still a preacher, I said, "Well, if they want, I'll fill the pulpit for a few

Sundays.” Well, I stayed there for seven years. In the interim I went through seven or eight in Dubuque, then went for another seven years in another parish and decided that I’m tired of talking and maybe there’s something more effective I can do in my life where I’d have first-hand experience with people in terms of counseling because a lot of people had come to me for counseling and I didn’t know diddley, I thought. I’m not sure I know diddley now. So I went back and got a masters degree in psychiatric social work here at the university. So I spent a lot of time in college which I enjoyed. One of the, getting back to the military a little bit, one of the first things that happened to me on campus was they had compulsory ROTC here.

Mark: After the war, you mean?

Willett: After the war, yeah. And I had another Jewish friend whose name was also Jack, who I met in Mexico, the one I referred to before, and he was required to take ROTC and he refused. But we picketed and were arrested at the stadium for picketing against compulsory ROTC. We both joined what was then know, is still known as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which is a basically ecumenical peace group which has been in existence for years and years and years. And we got involved in the campus FOR, it was called. On that basis both of us became involved in the anti-ROTC thing. They refused to allow him to graduate because he refused to take ROTC. I didn’t have to make that choice because I was a veteran. So they kicked him off campus. Kind of a poetic justice, I think anyhow. They went to Michigan and got his masters degree in social work, oddly enough, and was invited back to be a professor, or assistant professor, on the Madison campus years later, but it was the same year in which Nixon’s Attorney General was sentenced to prison, and I thought that was kind of poetic justice [laughing], in my own weird way. Anyhow, Jack was a big influence and one of the guys, I never said I loved guys very much, but he was one I really felt the world of. Taught me a lot of things that I, what it means to be a human being. Anyhow, again, you can see I was sort of rebelling sort of at the whole military experience. Then I came under the influence of the Quaker faith because I was tired of talking. They worship in silence. I mean, what they call “unprogrammed” is what they refer, the Quakers, versus Nixon who was a program Quaker, not much of a Quaker anyhow. And I associated a lot with groups that were peacemakers, and I marched with Father Groppi in Milwaukee against, you know, the racial discrimination. Did all those type of things. Then during the Vietnam War I was very active in a group up in Wausau where I was living, as a psychiatric social worker, and we formed a Wausau-area draft counseling service and counseled people on how to avoid going to Vietnam, basically. The choices they had. We just gave them what the choices are. We didn’t say they were not to go to Vietnam. And we avoided that very rigidly in saying here’s the choices, you make the choice.



Mark: Did you get a lot of business?

Willett: We did. Sure!

Mark: I mean did you get a lot of young people coming to you?

Willett: Oh, sure, we had quite a few coming, yeah.

Mark: On what basis? I mean, how much of it had to do with moral objections to the war? How much of it had to do with people just not wanting to get shot at? I mean, for what reasons did they come to you?

Willett: Yeah. I think, and maybe it's my wishful thinking, it was mostly moral grounds, that they didn't feel that we were participating in something that we should. And, you know, there was enough information out in the public at that point that it could raise at least a question.

Mark: Now, this is what? The Vietnam War extended over a long period of time. About what period of time was this?

Willett: Well, let's see. I moved to Wausau in '68, so it was '69, '70.

Mark: So the later part of the war?

Willett: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Mark: How did the—I'd like to go back even to the activities on campus. As someone involved in peace movement after World War II, you must have been quite a minority on campus.

Willett: Yeah.

Mark: I'm interested in that movement. How much of, how many people involved were veterans such as yourself? What sort of activities did you do? And how were you received? I mean, it wasn't exactly what you would call the most progressive of times. I'm interested in people's reactions to your organization and its activities.

Willett: Well, I have to go back a little bit to say that when, within about a year after I was out of service, I went to the draft board and told them I wanted to register as a conscientious objector. Probably about a year or two later. Of course, they said I was a little crazy but then I said, well, it's maybe what the Army did for me. I'm not sure. But I wasn't bitter about it. It's just, I think I had matured in my thinking. At least it's the way I viewed it. And, but going to

the campus, there was nothing organized like the Veterans Against the War. There was no veterans' group per se—

Mark: After World War II?

Willett: Yeah—that I knew of, so you did it kind of as an individual. And you did it in connection with groups like the FOR. But one of the things I found at that point was almost fearful to me. It was fearful. Is that you really had to be careful of infiltration of the SDS, Students for Democratic Action, and those groups that were basically Communist, if you want to use that term in an unpure sense, of infiltrating your organization and, so that the peace movement itself wasn't disrupted. I remember meeting with the chancellor and a bunch of, oh, probably a couple of hundred students, and we were going to boycott with our bodies the interviewing of Dow Chemical.

Mark: We're talking about the 1960s.

Willett: Yeah, we're getting into the '60s then, yeah. So, see, there was a bit of a span at that point. I was back in graduate school by that time and had, I think, my moral convictions a little bit more in order. I'd been preaching long enough to know that I laid a lot of eggs and said a lot of things that were dumb and, hopefully, I had matured a little bit. But I certainly was stronger in my convictions. Whatever that stint in my life was it certainly helped formulate my convictions. I am kind of jumping ahead. But anyhow, we're going to have a lay down our bodies and make the students who want to be interviewed by boycott, step on us. That was kind of the concept. Well, and we talked with the chancellor, I can't think of his name, a sociologist. But anyhow, we decided because of the violent groups that were on campus, and there certainly were, that it would be self-defeating because they would disrupt the whole thing and you'd be caught in the middle of the whole thing and there might be a better way than just putting your body on the line that way, so we kind of abandoned that. But there were, you know, we did have our rallies and that sort of thing, but with always a consciousness that the fascists, if you want to use that term loosely, element on campus, which is very alive and well at that point, would not infiltrate whatever those of us who believed in the non-violent approach to things would conjure up. So it kind of, in a lot of ways it didn't freeze you but it certainly limited you on what you could do. Well, let's see, where was I going with this? Oh, so after the war, I was going back to that. Yeah, there were no groups like after the Vietnam War.

Mark: But there's the Fellowship of Reconciliation.

Willett: Yeah, and that was a fairly small group though.

- Mark: Now, like on campus at the time, over half the student body were veterans. How many, was this organization disproportionately non-veteran? Were there a lot of other veterans such as yourself?
- Willett: It was pretty disproportionate with non-veterans. Yeah, it was. I would say that maybe 1/3 or 1/4 of them might have been veterans, but not proportionately. A lot of them were people who were long time out of campus, faculty, and so forth. It was not just a student group.
- Mark: Not just a student group.
- Willett: Yeah, yeah, which made a difference, too.
- Mark: Now, there were a lot of small veterans' groups on campus. One of the larger ones was the American Veterans Committee. Do you remember this group at all?
- Willett: No.
- Mark: It was sort of a New Deal, liberal sort of veterans' organization.
- Willett: No, no, I don't remember. I think I was at a stage where I didn't want to get involved with groups and anything that said "veteran" I avoided. Which was, you know, it might have been my own error but it was my own prejudice.
- Mark: It's actually very common.
- Willett: I think so [laughs]. After you've been herded for awhile you think no more lines do I want to wait and no more stereotypes of what I am do I want.
- Mark: So you got involved in the peace movement very, very early. Right after World War II. As you went into the '50s, how did the peace movement change? And did it grow? Or did it not? What were the issues involved, for example? McCarthy, for example? The atomic bomb. I mean, how did the peace movement sort of evolve? Just take me through the post World War II period to the 1960s. What was going on in the '50s?
- Willett: Well, I remember the McCarthy era of course was where there were a lot of persecution of the Communists. Of course, then he—
- Mark: Well, and persons such as yourself.
- Willett: Yeah, he pulled in all these other groups, you know. A lot of them. I remember one was the Emprith League. Well, the Emprith League was the high school youth organization in every Methodist church in the country. I

belonged to that when I was a senior in high school. Anyhow, well, he was so inclusive and so, what do you say, dangerous person in my opinion. I remember my dad was severely criticized because he mentioned something in the pulpit that was anti-McCarthy. And this was here in Madison where he had a church. Anyhow, there was both sides on that issue. As far as the peace movement itself, I think it didn't have any, that I was aware of anyhow, any real—they did a lot of things in terms of, as a kind of forerunner of the Peace Corps where it affected the lives of the individuals but there was nothing of kind of a mass movement that I saw. Or even on campus, I don't recall much happening.

Mark: For example, your going to Mexico.

Willett: Yeah. That was, you know, this friend I met was from this campus but out of 16 of us who were in this one little village, he was the only other one that was from Madison. They were from other campuses. I think it was an effort on the peace movement to educate the young and not become as politically involved. Partly because of the danger of McCarthyism and how inclusive, how he could wreck lives, as he well did. Of anybody who was very sincere, whether there be a non-violent approach or whether they be of a fascist type, and there were certainly some, you know. The span of concern for law and order and to be human was great so that when he was theoretically supposed to be attacking the fascists, of course he included everybody and his uncle.

Mark: Yeah. Now, the '50s is also when the modern civil rights movement got under way.

Willett: Yeah, yeah.

Mark: Did you have much involvement with that through your church groups?

Willett: Well—

Mark: Things like boycotting the Woolworths or Sears, or whatever it was, I forget off hand.

Willett: Boycotting what?

Mark: The Sears or the Woolworths or something like that.

Willett: Oh. No, I wasn't involved in that. I was involved with Father Groppi in Milwaukee. And I went down to Mississippi and was involved in some efforts there but not—

Mark: In 1964?

- Willett: Well, I wasn't in the Selma peace march. No, it was some kind of relief-type thing where we would haul clothing and other things down there, then meet with the people and intermingle with Black populations which, of course, was a new experience for me at that time. And I could see the deep South, you know, as it appeared at that point. It was very segregated and they thought it was pretty novel to see a white person with a funny accent.
- Mark: Now, did you—
- Willett: But it was nothing highly organized except through some of the peace churches at that point.
- Mark: Now, did Vietnam sneak up on the peace movement like it did on the general public?
- Willett: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, I don't think they saw it coming. Partly, you like to believe everything that your leaders are saying, and I think there was a lot of respect for Kennedy, for an example, because of some of the other things he did that were very positive, you know. I just don't think there was that awareness of what was going on. And there were still the residuals of, and the fears of China and all of that whole area.
- Mark: Yeah. So, as for the Vietnam War itself, we've discussed your—
- Willett: What you mean?
- Mark: We've discussed your draft counseling activities. Were there others? For example, there were some World War II veterans who formed veterans for peace organizations. There was a fairly significant Vietnam veteran population—
- Willett: Yeah, there was, yeah.
- Mark: --which came to protest the war. Did you have much involvement with these groups? Did you, perhaps, join with other World War II veterans? Or Vietnam veterans?
- Willett: No, I didn't, no.
- Mark: So your activities mostly focused on the church groups.
- Willett: No, I wouldn't say that. I know whenever there were celebrations like—I'm trying to think—like every, boy, my memory is failing me at this point, whether it was Veterans Day when we gathered in the rotunda at the Capitol

because that was even later than this. But it's like George Vahalich, I could associate with him in terms of his ideas. I wasn't close to him but I'm just saying Vahalich was fairly outspoken about, as a World War II veteran, about the Vietnam War. Whenever there were occasions when I see him and other people that I could identify with in terms of the moral equivalent of our viewpoints, I'd do it but not from the point of organization. But, for an example, I went very faithfully to the observance. I think it was Memorial Day or Veterans Day.

Mark: It's Veterans Day. It still goes on.

Willett: Yeah, okay, and I was always proud of that, just as a participant not as a speech maker because I'm not much of a speaker.

Mark: As you look at polling data from the '60s and '70s about the Vietnam War, about 1970 the only thing less popular than the Vietnam War, was the protest movement. I'm interested, as someone involved in it, if you, what your experiences were in terms of public opinion towards your activities and what you were doing, and how that perhaps or perhaps not, shaped what it was you were doing specifically.

Willett: Well, two things. One isn't with the Vietnam War but a little bit related to the, to Martin Luther King. I remember we had a march in Wausau—which I had one of my children on my shoulders and the other two by the hand—and we were very highly criticized by the people in the street for these radicals, blah, blah, blah, and no goods, and my kids heard all that, and I think it affected them in the positive way. But specifically to the Vietnam thing, they were dedicating the Central Wisconsin Airport and Mel Laird was to be the guest speaker. Of course, he's from Marshfield.

Mark: Right.

Willett: So he was to be the speaker. So we, this is a specific activity. We arranged to have a kind of a march but carrying a number of coffins from the city of Wausau to Mosinee, which is about an eight mile trek, and we carried these black coffins and, you know, we were actually seeking publicity I think. But one of the funny things, I thought it was funny. I don't know, it may be meaningful, it was I hope. We ordered 1000 blue balloons—remember the slogan then was “Peace Now” and they were blue with white “Peace Now” on them and we'd have them on strings. So we went to that rally. We had our own rally at which point a couple of priests burned their draft cards and so forth and I had to give a little speech. I remember saying such things as “Mel Laird and I have things in common, that we're both bald-headed and we're both sons of preachers” but I said “There we part.” But these priests who lived in the monastery outside of Wausau where we used to go occasionally—

Mark: Catholic priests?

Willett: Yeah, yeah. They burned their draft cards. At the same time this was going on at the airport and we had, you know, kind of a counter-rally. But anyhow, back to the balloon thing. So what we did with those balloons, we'd stand near the entrances where people came to this great observance of the dedication and we'd offer these balloons to little kids [laughter]. And of course some of the parents would get irate because they'd read what was on them. Of course then they'd take them and they would be floating in front of Mel Laird. We thought that was kind of a cute thing I guess [laugh]. Anyways, we were wanting to tell the public that, you know, some of us don't appreciate the Secretary of Defense and some of the things that he'd done. So that type of thing we did, besides kind of the ongoing advertisement for counseling and developing materials that could be helpful to people as they made their decisions. I'm bouncing around a little bit, but just to say there were that kind of activities that were going on.

Mark: Yeah.

Willett: And we had some rallies in town, I mean, where we'd bring in guest speakers and so forth.

Mark: Now, this was up in Wausau.

Willett: Yeah.

Mark: Not known, again, as a—

Willett: Hot bed of—

Mark: --hot bed of—

Willett: --liberalism. No, no, that's right [laughs]. We were aware of that but then that's—in fact, I was told by the—at that time I worked for the Department of Social Services and basically with kids who had mental problems—but I remember the mayor of Mazomanie, I mean not Mazomanie, Mosinee, came to my director and said he thinks I should be fired and blah, blah, blah. So my director sat down with me and told me what he had been told, wasn't exactly supportive of what I did but at the same time he just said, "I want you to know I've got a little pressure on me." A nice guy, was always supportive of what I was doing for the agency, and what I was doing outside, he said that's your business but just be a little careful. That was all. That type of thing I could feel in the community. We used to hand out, on a weekly basis, little

brochures about the Vietnam War that we'd roll off on the mimeograph and stand outside of churches and give it to people as they left the sanctuary.

Mark: Some fairly brave acts up in sort of an isolated area like that.

Willett: Oh, brave or foolish. It's hard to tell the difference sometimes, you know.

Mark: Do you think it had an impact at all?

Willett: Yeah, yeah, I do. And like anything you plant the seed and you don't know when it's going to bear fruit but we saw enough of fruit-bearing that I think it was worth it. It certainly started people thinking about it and that's about all you can do is say, hey, there is another side to this. We, you know, published such things as the facts of how many were killed and this sort of thing, and what the, you know, I don't know if you recall, they had weekly reports on how many were killed, on both sides, the body count. And that sort of thing we'd do just to make people more aware than the newspaper might because the newspaper wasn't exactly the *Capitol Times*, if you want to use that analogy.

Mark: Now, as a veteran, do you think perhaps you had more credibility in some quarters at least, about your anti-war activities during Vietnam?

Willett: Yeah, I think people thought well that I, well, they wouldn't question whether I had combat experience or whatnot. They just say so you're a veteran so you must have some—I think they thought I was probably more mature in my thinking than I was but then you just take it for whatever it's worth, you know. And, yeah, I do think it made a difference with some people but I didn't wave the flag and say "I'm a veteran." If they'd find out, fine. But I, 'cause I didn't want to use that. I mean, I think it's using an experience rather than saying "Here I am today." And this is how I feel and this is the basis upon which I came to it. Now, I would not be hesitant about saying that the war didn't affect me greatly, and it certainly did. I mean, my participation in it and what I was trained to do, to make me rethink my whole approach to human life and the sanctity of life. And then I was affected quite a bit by reading a lot of Albert Schweitzer, which he was kind of one of my numerous heroes. I guess I would say that one of the things that was lacking, or is, I don't know if it was or is, but which I had were a lot of heroes. I used to list them occasionally. In fact I had to give a talk one time to a university group on who your heroes were and it included Schweitzer, and my dad in fact, and my friend Jack and, you know, all these people that influence you in saying that all of us have—had heroes, or a lot of us had. I'm not sure how many heroes there are today. Partly because of the, I think the political rhetoric makes it very difficult so I consider myself fortunate to have some who were not tainted by the publicity of their personal life or by the activity of a political aspiring competitor. But



anyhow, that's, that was one of the fortunate things in my life I think. And even from the point of the experience itself with the military. I gained a lot from it because it sort of shook me a little bit. Not a little bit; it shook me a great deal, just in terms of my belief. Now if I had actually participated in the killing process, I'm not sure where I'd be. I can imagine it but still you're prepared for that so I think that one would have automatically gone through it, you know. And I was spared and I oftentimes thought, well, I had a Black friend in New York who later became an Episcopal priest, which is odd in a way because you don't think of Black people aspiring or attaining that.

[End of Tape 1, Side B.]

But anyhow, he was telling me, he was in a segregated group as we all were during the war, and his basic chore, or his units was, to clean up after battles and he described to me very vividly some of the experiences in picking up parts of bodies and so forth. Anyhow, when he came back he went to church as he was, would and we talked a lot about religion, and he said, "You know, I don't know how many people came up to me and said 'I'm so thankful that God spared you.'" And Johnny said, "It just galled me to think that a God would spare me and not somebody else." And I oftentimes thought about that myself. I don't think that I was spared particularly. I can't believe in a God, I was kind of separate the two, and more decent people than me, and more idealistic, and certainly more worthy of life than myself. So at that point you start saying, well, and it's where it affected me, I guess. There are some things I can do that, to kind of make up for those who didn't get the chance and I think that probably affected me as much as anything. To know that some of my buddies, they're high school buddies, not so much Army buddy but, you know, I know enough about what happens in buddies in the Army. But anyhow, so it affected me on the profession I chose 'cause I felt I had to work with people, and I loved it. It isn't that it was tough. And I had, object to violence as I understand it within my own limitations. And I know that I'm not the most prophetic, or the brightest, or anything else but I can say a few things, or do a few things with my life that might have some affect like people have affected me.

That's sort of how it affected me, basically, to say you're not spared but you're here and some guys aren't, and I better do something about it, and I'll have fun in doing it. And I guess I've always felt that you have to enjoy life, basically, and have the—I'm trying to think of an adjective that describes where you express happiness at the same time as seriousness. If you think yourself, you're so important then you better forget it. I can remember my dad always saying, "You know, if you think you're important, you get a pail of water and put your fist in it and then pull it out and see how much of an impression that makes." [laughter] You're not greatly significant but you can affect other people, and in a positive way. I guess as I think of, I am much involved now

with the environmental movement and, as a county supervisor, I try to express some of the concepts that I've learned I think through experiences like being in the war, participant, not in war itself but in the training process. And having lived through that era and the years that followed where there was objection to, you know, even like the Gulf War. I had a sign in my yard "Stop the War Now" and that was pulled out within a matter of a few hours by someone, I don't know. So I think there's always that unwillingness for people to think that the government can be wrong. The government is wrong sometimes. It's, I'd say most the time it's right but you just can't accept it as all knowledge and doing the right thing so I guess I'm coming back to where I started. I have some doubts about the democratic process sometimes but it's the best thing we know and I thoroughly believe in it and feel that wars have to protect that if that's what we're protecting. I think corporate power is, and this is where I, in spite of my argument with my dad, I always admire Eisenhower for saying when you get the military combined with the industrial complex, you've got a terrible situation. And I think we've moved in that direction. And he warned us very explicitly. Kind of meandering, confusion I guess, unless you wanted something else.

Mark: No, this is fascinating. Is there anything you'd like to add? It seems like a very apropos place to end.

Willett: Yeah, I think it is, yeah, yeah. Okay.

Mark: Well, thanks for coming in.

Willett: All right.

Mark: I appreciate it.

[End of interview]