Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University beginning an oral history interview with Mr. Lou Walters. Today’s date is the seventeenth of September 2004. I am in the interview room in the Special Collections building at Texas Tech University in Texas and Lou is speaking with me by telephone from Clancy, Montana. Is that right Lou?

Louis Walters: That’s correct.

LC: Okay. Lou, first good morning and thank you for agreeing to participate in the Oral History Project. Could we start off by getting some basic biographical data? Could you tell me where you were born and when?

LW: I was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1951. September, actually. So my birthday’s next week.

LC: That’s right. I think I’m going to speak to you on your birthday, isn’t that next Tuesday?

LW: Yes it is.

LC: Tell me a little bit about the rest of the kids in your family. Did you have siblings?

LW: I had two sisters and a brother.

LC: Older or younger?

LW: They were all older.

LC: Okay.

LW: My brother was the oldest and two sisters in the middle.
LC: Are they all still around?
LC: Okay. Let me ask a little bit about your parents. Tell me about your mom. What was her maiden name, and do you know anything about how she met your dad?
LW: Her maiden name was Finch. She met my dad in high school in Grand Rapids, Michigan.
LC: Were they both from Grand Rapids originally?
LW: They were both born there, yes.
LC: What about your grandparents on both sides? Do you know where they were from?
LW: On my mother’s side, Finch was English. On my dad’s side my grandpa was born in Michigan. So that’s about all I know. He had quite a few brothers and sisters.
LC: Any sense of the business that your grandfather was in?
LW: My grandfather had a dairy farm outside of Grand Rapids on Kalamazoo Avenue. Then he had a sporting goods store that he and my dad operated for a while.
LC: In town?
LW: In town. It was Walter’s Sporting Goods Store on Division Avenue.
LC: Okay and was that what your father was doing when you were born?
LW: Yes. When I was born he was working for the sporting goods store and then got hired by Bill Lear of which—it was Lear, and then it became Lear Siegler.
LC: Let me ask you a little bit about your dad. What was his name?
LW: His name was Raymond Walters.
LC: How did he come to know Bill Lear, do you know?
LW: I don’t know if he had met him through the sporting goods store, but he got to know him when he went to work for Lear and they were a defense contractor. They made instruments for companies like Boeing and McDonnell Douglas. They did a lot of the instrumentation for the Mercury and Gemini and Apollo programs.
LC: Now when your father would first have met Lear, was it primarily an aviation instrumentation company?
LW: Yes

LC: Was it based in Grand Rapids?

LW: Yes it was

LC: About how big was the company when your dad went there to work? Do you have any idea?

LW: I don’t know. I know when he was transferred to Washington I think it was when Lear Siegler had bought it. It was one or two billion dollars a year, which was large back then in the ‘60s.

LC: Yeah, absolutely

LW: I’m sure when Lear had it, it was in the hundreds of millions.

LC: Do you know anything about Bill Lear himself? Did you meet him at any point?

LW: No, of course my dad did. I don’t remember meeting Bill Lear. He was an inventor and an entrepreneur. He sold Lear and then started up Lear Jets.

LC: So he sold Lear first and then the Lear Jet company is his next adventure?

LW: Right

LC: Let me ask you a little bit more about your dad first of all. Had he seen any service in World War II for example?

LW: Yes. He was in I believe it was the Army Air Corps at that time. He was trained as a pilot and as a bombardier. He was due to go over—well, the story is that my mother managed to hit him in the eye with a sinker when they were fishing, and gave him astigmatism. I don’t know how true that is, but he ended up training pilots in World War II.

LC: Where abouts was the training happening?

LW: I’m going to have to visit with my mom on that again. I believe they were down in Ohio and I don’t know of the other base.

LC: But he had been trained himself as a bombardier but then I guess from what you said it seems he wasn’t able to actually take a posting over seas. Is that right, because of the injury?

LW: That’s correct.

LC: Okay. Did he ever talk to you about the war?
LW: Not a lot, no. He didn’t. I did talk with my step dad about the war and his participation, but Dad didn’t talk too much about it. He had a lot of Army buddies and they were all pilots. So he would talk about some of them.

LC: Lou, when did your father die?

LW: He died in 1977. He was killed in an automobile accident.

LC: Was that out in the D.C. area?

LW: No. At that time he had come back to Michigan. He was president of the plastics division for Lear Siegler, and he had two factories, one in Mendon, Michigan, and one down in Sturgis, Michigan.

LC: Let me ask you, because I want to—I know that during his time in the Washington, D.C. area you had told me earlier that you had some interesting encounters with well-known people. I’d like to ask you about those, but first you mentioned your step dad. So your mom had remarried after your father was killed? Is that right?

LW: That’s right. She actually remarried twice again. She’s outlived both of those.

LC: Go Jenny. Well, tell me about your step dad, if you will, just as an aside, and his service in the war, what he told you about it.

LW: Her third husband was John Evleth.

LC: Spelled how, Lou?

LW: E-V-L-E-T-H. John served in World War II. He served overseas under Patton, and so he was in the tanks. He didn’t go in the first wave, he came in the second.

LC: Would this be in Normandy then?

LW: Yes.

LC: What did he tell you, if you recall, about his experiences?

LW: Well, shortly before he passed away, I’d say like a year before, we were talking. He talked about Patton and the service over there. He didn’t care for Patton too much. He didn’t think Patton was—how would I put it—didn’t have a real concern about the troops. But he talked about going into villages. They’d go in with those tanks and just take out all the high spots. They had learned that the hard way. So when they’d come in if there were towers or anything like that they just took them out. So theirs was more of a mopping up operation. I remember one night we talked a couple of hours and
later, the next day or something, I talked to my mom and she was just astounded because he had never talked to anybody about it. It was quite interesting.

LC: Lou, do you have any idea why he opened up to you?

LW: You know, I don’t. I don’t know if he sensed his time coming, or what. So I don’t know why he did. He didn’t have a son. He has two daughters. It could have just been that. I don’t know if he had talked to my stepsisters’ husbands or not.

LC: I know because earlier you had told me that you have spoken to a number of different veterans. At this point in your life you’ve spoken to veterans of different conflicts. I was just wondering if this is something that you’re finding is happening to you more and more, that you’re just having opportunities or opportunities are just presenting themselves to speak with different veterans about their experiences.

LW: You know I don’t know what’s caused that. I think when I moved to Montana—I really never knew veterans until I moved out here because we’re geographically a large state but population-wise, we’re quite small. Particularly during the Vietnam War, a lot of the vets came from rural areas to the inner city areas. I think that’s why I met more out here. I don’t think vets that have seen combat like to talk about it. I think as they get older they finally start talking about it, but I think initially, like after the Vietnam War, you didn’t hear too many talking about what went on over there.

LC: I think that’s probably right. We’re certainly finding that here, that more and more veterans of that conflict are willing to speak about it sometimes with difficulty of course. Lou, let me ask you if you remember much about growing up in Michigan. You didn’t live there all that long, is that right?

LW: Well, I lived there until I was about eight. We did an awful lot of things outdoors. We did a lot of camping and fishing and because of all the lakes, waterskiing and swimming. We lived on a lake for a couple of years out in Rockford, Michigan. I think that really made me appreciate the outdoors. My dad was just an avid outdoorsman.

LC: Was he?

LW: Yes.
LC: Would you do these things as a family, or did your dad take each of the kids?

How did it work?

LW: Generally it was family activities, although at different times, I’d go fishing with him early in my life, and then later. That also worked well in his job. He was contracts manager for Lear Siegler when he was in D.C. So I did a lot of outdoors things with him there, too, and got to meet a lot of folks. A lot of the people of his generation were outdoors people.

LC: That’s something that throughout his life he enjoyed?

LW: Oh, yes. Yeah. He really did.

LC: The move to the D.C. area was I’m gathering from what you said driven by Bill Lear’s sale of the company, is that fair?

LW: It could have still been Lear at that time. Bill could have still been in control of that company. I don’t remember when he started up Lear Jets. But it was— I’m trying to think if it was Lear or Lear Siegler when we were down there. I know it wasn’t long after that it was Lear Siegler.

LC: How did you adjust to the move as an eight-year-old? Was it a big adventure or were you a little bit sad, or do you remember?

LW: Oh, it was kind of an adventure. I remember this clearly, when we were first talking that we were going to move to Washington. I was thinking Washington state. Then of course it wasn’t, and there is so much history down there. At that time there was a lot more open space than there is now. I was back there this year and it’s just amazing how much that area has grown.

LC: How built up it is?

LW: Oh, yeah. It’s just incredible.

LC: Meaning in northeastern Virginia, that whole area?

LW: Yeah, I was raised in McLean, Virginia. It’s inside the beltway and it was just a really nice area to live. Our house at that time, I think Dad bought it for $38,000 and when we sold it he sold it for $42,000 and thought he had cut a fat hog. Now they’re $600,000 houses in that neighborhood. They’re half tearing those down and building up these big mansions.

LC: People are paying 600K just for the lot?
LW: Yeah, it’s pretty amazing.
LC: Yeah, absolutely.
LW: But most of the kids that I grew up with down there were all, their fathers—
of course Langley was real close by CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). A lot of them
worked for the government and that’s what the kids were taught back then, who’s your
dad work for? Oh, he works for the government. But a lot of military kids, CIA kids,
politicians, things like that.
LC: What school did you go to?
LW: I went to Franklin Elementary and then I went to Cooper Intermediate and
Langley High School.
LC: Did you graduate from Langley High School?
LW: Yes. Langley opened up in ’65 and that’s actually the summer of ’64. So
my class was the first one to go through all four years of Langley High School.
LC: What year did you graduate, Lou?
LC: Okay. I want to ask you a little bit about growing up in McLean. You’ve
already talked about the other kids in the neighborhood. Tell me a little bit about the
school that you went to. What was the composition of the school?
LW: When I went there, integration had just begun. So it was predominantly an
affluent white area. But my freshman year, integration started and we had just a few
black students. One in particular who was a good friend was Alfie Taylor. I remember
talking to him one time. We were—I said, “Alfie, why weren’t you over at Cooper with
us?” He said, “Well, we didn’t have integration til this year.” He said, “They used to bus
me out to Vienna.”
LC: Vienna, Virginia?
LW: Yeah. So that’s where he spent his early years. He went all through high
school with us, and I think to University of Richmond. He’s passed away since. He was
one of the first kids in my class to pass away.
LC: One of the youngest, you mean? At the youngest age?
LW: Yes
LC: Do you know what happened?
LW: Yes I do. Mary Lou Shortell keeps track of all this stuff after all these years. Alfie died of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). I don’t know how he contracted it, but I know it was a loss because he ran for office one time. I think it was his junior year or senior year, and his slogan was, You can’t judge a book by it’s color.

LC: No kidding.

LW: Yup. He was a musician. He was in school plays, pretty amazing.

LC: What year would he have died? Do you remember?

LW: No, I’d have to look that up. I can find that out.

LC: Was it in the ‘80s?

LW: Early ‘80s, if it was ‘80s.

LC: Okay. So when—maybe in that first group of men who were dying of AIDS in the United States?

LW: Yeah, that’d be my guess.

LC: Okay.

LW: Another interesting thing about Alfie. He lived with his mother. His mother was single, and he had a younger brother. They were in what used to be a large estate or plantation type setting, but the house here they’re surrounded by all this affluence, and yet their house didn’t have indoor plumbing.

LC: No kidding.

LW: Yeah. It was just amazing, but she was a nice, nice lady.

LC: What did she do? Do you have any idea?

LW: Nope, I don’t remember. I don’t remember.

LC: Lou, how did you spell his first name?

LW: Well, it was Alfred. We called him Alfie.

LC: I just wanted to get that correctly.

LW: I believe he was in the Navy band. I think he did go into the Navy and was in the Navy band.

LC: Oh, wow.

LW: I’d have to talk to Mary Lou on that.

LC: Yeah, it’s a little bit harrowing when you start losing high school classmates.

That’s a little worrying.
LW: Yeah, and I’m fifty-three this year so—
LC: I know, you’re a young man.
LW: Well, my dad died when he was 55, and so did my brother. So it kind of brings things home a little more.
LC: Did your dad—your dad died in an accident.
LW: Right, they think he had a heart attack.
LC: While he was driving?
LW: Yes.
LC: What about your brother?
LW: He died from a heart attack.
LC: Oh really? So you’re busy seeing your cardiologist, I’m sure.
LW: I’ve had two stints.
LC: Okay, wow. Lou, let’s go back to McLean for a little bit. When I spoke to you earlier, you mentioned that your dad’s work brought some interesting people to the house. Can you tell us a little bit about that?
LW: Dad entertained quite a bit. So we were constantly involved with folks of different nationalities for one and also individuals. I remember playing golf with an admiral or two. Congressman Gerald Ford. He was our congressman from Grand Rapids. Of course Dad was in contact with him down in Washington. Von Braun, we had talked about von Braun before. My dad had worked with him during the Mercury and Gemini programs. Dad had hunted with him; von Braun had been over to the house. So I met von Braun.
LC: If you can think back on that, Lou, what was your impression of him? Did you know who he was?
LW: Not totally. A good friend of my dad’s, his name was—this fellow passed away too—Eric Bergaust wrote a book on von Braun, I think it’s called *Reaching for the Stars*. In that book they talk about a little hunting trip they had up into West Virginia and I can tell you the story if you want to hear it.
LC: Yes, please.
LW: Well, they go up to this house. They had this little hunting club, Dad and his cronies. I think Eric is the one that had the house.
LC: Now it’s Eric—?
LW: Bergaufst.
LC: Spelled how? Any idea?
LW: No. But I can find that out for you. You can Google that, find Eric’s book.
LC: Yup, I will. Okay. So your Dad had a hunting club, he and his buddies?
LW: Right. So they’re up at this hunting club, von Braun is due to fly in for the
weekend. Von Braun was a pilot and flew his own airplane. So Dad stayed at the house
and Eric went out to the airport to pick up von Braun. Von Braun gets out of the airplane
and tells Eric that he’s got a problem with his rifle. Eric says, “Well, what do you mean
you got a problem?” He says, “Well, I got a shell jammed in here.” Eric says, “Well, I
don’t know what the FAA says about flying with loaded weapons, but the West Virginia
highway patrol takes a real dim view of it.” So they load them up and Eric brings them
back to the house. My dad’s waiting up for them. Eric goes over to my dad and says,
“Well, Wernher has a problem.” My dad says, “What is it?” He says, “He’s got a shell
jammed in his gun.” My dad says, “How the hell does he expect to get someone on the
moon if he can’t even put the right shell in a rifle?” Eric’s going, “Quiet, he’s going to
hear you.” So Dad takes the gun out and he gets the shell out. I think von Braun had
stuck a seven mm shell in a .30-06.
LC: That is a little worrying.
LW: Yeah. But they go out hunting the next day, and they get nothing. They
don’t know if they’re looking at a doe or a buck because it’s in the trees, and this and
that. They end up coming back and Wernher is packing up to go away. He gives that
shell to my dad. He says, “Ray, don’t worry. I’m not going to get anything stuck in the
throats of the Saturn 5.” So my mom still has that shell somewhere.
LC: Does she really?
LW: Yeah. He did hear my dad’s comment.
LC: But apparently it didn’t sour things too much.
LW: No, not at all. Von Braun went to the house one time. I just remember
hearing the laughter and stuff because—it’s probably no different than today, but you
know, sometimes people like to unwind, have a few drinks, and that they did.
LC: Sure. When did you actually get a sense of who Wernher von Braun was? I mean, he was just somebody who was a friend of your dad’s, I guess at one point, but I guess at some stage you figured out—

LW: Well, my dad would bring home photographs of all the astronauts. I do not know where those are, but I had a lot of autographed photos that NASA would release and then Dad got signatures on these. So I think during that time of Mercury I began to know who von Braun was. I didn’t really learn about his real history probably until the last ten years. I mean I always knew he was this rocket expert and put a man on the moon and everything, but because of shows like the biography channel you actually really get to see who that individual is.

LC: Does it make you think differently about your own childhood memories or family stories about this guy, now that you know he was associated with the Nazi programs? He was the designer of the Nazi programs, I should say.

LW: Right, and that he was close to Hitler and worked with Hitler closely. He could have been responsible for a lot of deaths, too, because they had many Jews were interned and basically used as slave labor on some of that.

LC: On the V2 and V1 projects?

LW: Right. So after seeing that, yeah. But when I grew up, because of my dad’s job, you never heard any racial or ethnic slurs in my house because Dad would work with Germans or people from Japan, Italy. So he didn’t want to say Wop or Nigger or Spic or anything like that. So we never had that in my household. So I was fortunate enough to be raised kind of neutral that way, you know, people were people.

LC: In your own thinking, how do you evaluate somebody like von Braun? Was he just a technician, an engineer, or—

LW: Won Braun? Oh, I think he was absolutely brilliant. I think he had a vision. It was a great vision. How many people really get to see that vision come to fruition? Not many. So my hat’s off to him for that, and then nobody’s perfect, that’s for certain, so—

LC: So you don’t see him as, for example, a war criminal that the United States should not have treated the way they did?
LW: You know, I don’t know. I guess history will have to judge that because I had just seen him from different eyes.

LC: Yes, exactly.

LW: I think he was an inspiration for a lot of people today.

LC: That’s why your perspective’s so interesting, because you had this completely different connection to him than people who only see a documentary on him.

LW: Right. If they hadn’t seen the man or what he had done, and—the space program was pretty—I really followed it when I was a kid because my dad would go down to the launches and we’d watch it on TV.

LC: Did you ever get to go down to see a launch anywhere?

LW: No, I haven’t.

LC: Okay. You mentioned earlier Gerry Ford and that he was the congressman from Grand Rapids for many years. Your dad had some connection to him. Did you meet him?

LW: I have. I suspect it was in his office. I’m trying to think. I know I’ve had contact with him, but just as a kid.

LC: Tell me also, a little bit, Lou, about Robert Kennedy living in McLean? Where was your house in relationship to the one that the Kennedy’s maintained there?

LW: Bobby’s house, I went by it every day on the way to school. It was walking distance from my place. Our house was back in the Salona Village area. Our property line backed up—it adjoined the Dolly Madison estate. So, if you’re going towards D.C., you’ll go by the Dolly Madison estate, which will be on the right hand side. Not far down on the left is the Kennedy’s estate, Bobby Kennedy’s. Then further down was Ted Kennedy’s.

LC: What’s the name of Robert Kennedy’s estate?

LW: I knew you were going to ask me that.

LC: Yeah, I can’t remember—

LW: I want to say like Hollyroad or something.

LC: It starts with an H, I think you’re right, but I can’t call it to memory just now.

Did Ted Kennedy have a property there at the same time that we’re talking about, when you were in school?
LW: Yeah, he built—I remember at the time they had said it was something like
$700,000, which was an astronomical amount of money back then, but his sat—it was
just before the bridge and sat up on the Potomac River. I’d never seen his house because
it sits off the road, but I’d been to Bobby Kennedy’s house a few times.

LC: Now under what circumstances did you go over there?

LW: I was in the Boy Scouts and our troop would go over and patrol grounds
when he would have different events. We did that a couple times that I remember.

LC: So like providing security?

LW: Yeah, Boy Scouts providing security, yeah.

LC: I’m trying to get a visual.

LW: Oh, you know, picking up trash and just being a presence I think more than
anything else, that type of patrolling.

LC: What about Kennedy’s children? What school were they going to?

LW: You know, I’m not certain. They went to a private school. They didn’t
really associate in our group, although David had gotten into a fight with one of the kids
in my scout troop on one of our outings. I think that probably was the last one we
patrolled there.

LC: Any idea what happened?

LW: David got a bloody nose, I remember that. I don’t remember the kid that
bloodied it.

LC: What was behind it?

LW: Oh, just kids. David was a difficult child.

LC: Why do you say that?

LW: Well, one time he was caught throwing rocks at cars from the back of his
property down Dolly Madison Boulevard. He was pitching rocks out. Then he later got
into other problems, but I think that was somewhat because, probably a lot because of his
dad’s death.

LC: Do you remember that time?

LW: I saw it on TV. I guess David did too, at the same time. I don’t know why I
was up at that time, but I remember they were broadcasting it from Los Angeles when he
got shot.
LC: You were actually watching the speech he was making and so forth?

LW: I don’t know if I was—well, of course we only had a couple of channels back then, whatever coverage was on, I remember seeing it.

LC: Did you know something about David Kennedy’s reaction?

LW: I know it devastated him. I mean, to just be sitting there and watch your father get killed.

LC: How did you find out, Lou, that he was watching the TV at the same time?

LW: I heard that years later when they had talked about the problems that he had had.

LC: Okay. Did you come across any of the other kids at any time?

LW: Not that I remember. I’m sure I bumped into them on the property, but David’s the only one I remember.

LC: Lou, did you take this all kind of in stride?

LW: Oh, it’s just normal, growing up back there.

LC: Just how it was?

LW: Yeah.

LC: How often would you go into Washington?

LW: Quite often. Then days off from school, I would ride down into D.C. with my father. I’d just run loose through the city. All through the capitol building, I’ve been on the dome of the capitol and—

LC: You’ve been on the dome?

LW: I’ve been on the dome, yes.

LC: So, on its exterior surface?

LW: Yeah. There’s a little staircase in one of the rotundas, could be the main one or just off that, there’s this little stone staircase that goes up. There’s a library, at least at that time up there. Then there’s a door that goes out to the dome. They would open that door for the ventilation, because it’s pretty stuffy up there. So, I’d go up there, and go out the door. At that time you could wander all through there and you could take the subway that all the congressmen and senators took. The building was totally open.

You could sit in on a session. So I did that for years on my days off.

LC: You could pretty much, as you’re suggesting, get around unmonitored.
LW: Oh, yeah. One of the things my dad required since I would go to his office and stuff, I would generally—I always had a tie on if I went down there with him, but here’s a little thirteen, fourteen-year-old kid in a suit and tie and off I’d go.

LC: So probably you weren’t being bothered for being some kind of vagrant because you had the tie on and you were looking probably pretty spruced.

LW: Oh, in my sharkskin suit, I bet.

LC: There you go. Let me ask a little bit about your attending the open sessions, I would guess of the House or Senate. Did you go to committee hearings as well sometimes?

LW: Yes, I went down to House and Un-American Activities hearings when Rubin and—my mind’s failing me now in my old age.

LC: Yeah, fifty-three.

LW: Let’s see.

LC: The anti-war people? Jerry Rubin?

LW: Yeah, I have a picture of Jerry Rubin and then—oh, help me out here Laura.

LC: I’ll try.

LW: Who’s the other one or the even more radical than Rubin?

LC: The famous guy from New York? I don’t know, Tom Hayden maybe?

LW: Tom Hayden was there. Jerry Rubin was there, and there was—well, they were all there. I remember, and I could probably figure the date out of that hearing. It’s a quite famous hearing. They stood up when they were sworn in. Here, I’m like fourteen years old, something like that, when they raised their hands, they raised their middle finger as they were sworn in. I mean, back then, that was a little shocking, especially as a kid. We just sat there and couldn’t believe it. Those folks were just hustled out of there. It was an interesting thing to experience. I have—Jerry Rubin was dressed in a Revolutionary War costume, like an ammo belt across his chest and things like that. War paint on. I’ll try to find that photograph and send it down to you.

LC: Yes, please, that would be fabulous. Lou, how did you come to be attending a HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) hearing on this day? I mean, did you watch The Washington Post or something? You knew this was going to happen? I mean, how did you end up there?
LW: I wonder if it wasn’t my junior year. I had a really good history teacher one time. His name was Mr. Lutz. I think he’s a principal in the D.C. area now. He kept—we had to do a regular current events thing. So we knew what was going on. He made sure we knew what was going on.

LC: That’s incredible. That’s just incredible. Any other things about that hearing come to mind? Were you—how did you feel, watching this? I mean, did you feel like it was this big important thing that was happening?

LW: Well, it seemed like it. I was a little shocked by the—when they hustled these folks out and down the staircase and outside, and they were gone.

LC: Now do you mean Jerry Rubin and Tom Hayden and the others? They hustled them out of there?

LW: Yep.

LC: Okay, uh-huh.

LW: To see—there were swarms of police. To see all that go on and go on that quickly, you know, boom boom boom, so the—yeah. Definitely. It left an impression in my mind.

LC: Lou, I want to ask you about the political context within which that hearing was held and also within which you, as a high school student in the D.C. area were operating, in ’67, ’68, ’69. I wonder how much you knew about the war in Vietnam, separating that from the protests in Washington, which I want to talk to you about. But how much did you pay attention to Asia, to the Vietnam conflict, what was happening over there? Were you watching TV, for example?

LW: Yes. In Washington you watch the local news and it’s everybody else’s national news, basically.

LC: Yeah, that’s right.

LW: There was a lot of coverage on Vietnam. The protests, when those started up, you not only saw them on TV, but if you were in D.C., you also saw it in person. They started doing the body counts and when you get—like when I got into my senior year, you register for the draft. They had the lottery going. My next door neighbor pulled my lottery number out of that. They had a little, looked like playing keno or bingo or something, and they pulled the lottery numbers out?
LC: Right
LW: Our next door neighbor was the White House correspondent for NBC (National Broadcasting Company). I get home from school and they ask me how I was doing. He was in my front yard talking to my dad. I said I was doing pretty good until you pulled my number out. I was just being smart more than anything else. It devastated him. He sat out there and apologized. He just said, “Lou, I’m so sorry.” He says, “I wish I hadn’t gotten involved in that.”

LC: Do you remember who it was?
LW: I do not, nope, I don’t.
LC: But he was an NBC reporter?
LW: As I recall, that’s the memory I have of it. But I thought he was the NBC White House correspondent, but I don’t know.

LC: Well, that must have been a little difficult, I’m sure.
LW: Well, it was interesting. So when you’re in those times and you can go to college, or not, or be drafted, I think there’s just a real sense back then that you could be one of the ones going over there, getting killed and is the war correct? So that started to shake my attitude during late high school years.

LC: So you knew that you would be subject to the draft.
LW: Yes.
LC: What about your older brother? Was he too old for service?
LW: No, he served in the Navy. He did not go overseas at all that I know of.
LC: Okay.
LW: But he trained at Great Lakes and then went to New Orleans or in that area down there. I don’t know if it’s Pensacola or where he was stationed for a while, but he was in for a couple of years during that era.
LC: Did he talk to you about his experience or about the war at all? Or did you not have that much contact with him about it?
LW: Ray is nine years older than I am, so he—
LC: How many years? I’m sorry.
LW: Nine
LC: Okay, I see. Uh-huh.
LW: So we didn’t have a lot of discussion. He wasn’t around the home when I was going through high school.

LC: Okay.

LW: I think of the four kids, I was the only one really impacted as far as a real strong opinion on the war and what was going on and the whole politics going on.

LC: Did your parents let on at all about any worry or anxiety they might have had about you being drafted?

LW: Here’s the crux my dad was in, is, he was a defense contractor. I remember we had a rather heated discussion one time. I had actually signed up for the Air Force after high school because I didn’t know what I wanted to do after high school. We were having this argument, and I said, “Well, how are you going to feel, Dad, if I end up over there in Vietnam and one of the bombs that you guys have guidance systems on blows my butt up?” It hurt him. It really hurt him. He came back later. I ended up not going into the Air Force and I went down right after high school. I started in September down at Emerson Institute in Washington, D.C., which is a prep school down there, to basically get a better grounding in my skills, because I wasn’t the best student in the world. I liked to play around a little too much, I guess.

LC: Right. But it bothered him?

LW: After that, after that discussion, I think that really hit home to him, yeah.

He never—I don’t remember really discussing it afterwards. But I think a lot of people his age at that time, they had gone off and fought a war. So we didn’t have to do that. The kids wouldn’t have to go through with that. Here, back at it again. They had World War II, Korea, then Vietnam. I think a lot of them, I think a lot of the adults questioned why we were there.

LC: Did you ever hear your dad say anything about Vietnam that made you think, outside of his discussion with you about your situation, anything that made you think he was questioning whether it was a good idea for the United States to be there?

LW: No, I don’t really recall.

LC: What about your mom? What was her take on all this?

LW: Oh, I think she just thought we were all a bunch of screwed up hippie kids.

LC: You and all your friends?
LW: Yeah, and everybody she saw on TV protesting and things like that.

LC: Okay, uh-huh. Did you see protestors in Washington?

LW: I saw lots of protestors in Washington. I went to a number of demonstrations there. I went to the first Earth Day.

LC: That would be in, what, April or something of 1970? Is that right?

LW: Yep.

LC: What do you remember about that day?

LW: Well, I was going—I went down to Old Dominion University. We came up for that demonstration. That’s something I think a lot of people in the country don’t realize about Washington D.C. There are so many universities close around there. Inside you got Catholic University and GW (George Washington University) and Georgetown and then Richmond’s close by and there’s Old Dominion and there’s just—Maryland. There’s schools all over the place. So to bring in a half million kids is nothing.

LC: Right, okay, uh-huh.

LW: That was a big demonstration, that first Earth Day. It was pretty much an anti-Nixon demonstration and troops all over the place. That was a whole period of unrest.

LC: So although it was Earth Day and the environmental agenda was the reason for the march, there were anti-Nixon and, would you say, anti-Vietnam War elements of that?

LW: Right. There were some veterans in there, too, or at least in uniform as a veteran. I guess that kind of translates into a whole different area and it’s because things went on to those vets that I had no idea until I moved out here in Montana.

LC: Like what?

LW: The hostile treatment they got. They weren’t even well received by some of the World War II veterans. They weren’t accepted as real veterans. I had one friend up here that he came back, and he had feces thrown at him. That was just—I can’t imagine that. I didn’t know that that was going on at that time. I didn’t learn that til later.

LC: Much later, it sounds like.

LW: Yeah. Well, probably not til ’84, ’85. I started hearing what happened to some of those veterans when they got back, I couldn’t believe it. Because I don’t—the
anti-war movement, least from my perspective, wasn’t against the veterans. It was
against the administration for getting us into that mess. But I guess the veterans got a real
backlash from it in a lot of different directions. I didn’t know that they were treated so
poorly by some of the World War II vets. They weren’t really accepted into the VFW
(Veterans of Foreign Wars) halls and things like that.

LC: That’s right. What was your view of Nixon? You were graduating from
high school the spring that he took office. What did you think of him at that time? Did
your opinion change as the years went by?

LW: Yeah. I think initially, I had a favorable opinion of Nixon.

LC: Uh-huh. Why was that? Do you know? Do you remember?

LW: No, probably just more youth and still being influenced by family. A lot of
things hadn’t gone on yet. As you become more aware in some of the things he started—
that he was doing, and then like Agnew was a crook. I believe he was governor of
Maryland and he was in scandals over there. It was no secret in that area that Agnew
wasn’t the most sterling character.

LC: Right, right. That eventually, of course, led to his resignation, some of
those, some of those scandals. But you said you indicated that your opinion of Nixon sort
of changed as time went on. Were you thinking—were you evaluating him primarily on
the basis of the war and the prosecution of the war?

LW: I think so. Primarily it would have been the war that would have changed
that, but there was something else, and I don’t know how to put it into words about
Nixon. He wasn’t a very likeable fellow. I think he didn’t come across as some kind
person, especially when—my most impressionable years were Kennedy. Here is this
charismatic president and that whole wonderful experience. We get Johnson and Nixon,
it just kind of went downhill. I mean, when you compare Nixon to Kennedy, there’s just
no comparison.

LC: In terms of their character?

LW: Not necessarily the character, because I suspect—well, we know Kennedy
wasn’t the best in certain areas either. I think it’s just that really was a Camelot period of
history when Kennedy was in the office.

LC: Do you really feel that way? You really still think of it that way?
LW: Oh, yeah. Some of my best memories are from that whole time period, although I remember really clearly the Cuban Missile Crisis. That was absolutely terrifying. I’m trying to think what grade I was in, it was probably like fifth or sixth grade. Boy, we were—some people were getting ready to leave town because D.C. was a big target.

LC: I can well believe it. Yes, absolutely. Did you—

LW: We were watching that closely.

LC: Did you know if your parents had any plans?

LW: I don’t—my dad never discussed it. I remember one neighbor talking that they were going to go take off to wherever they were from, Nebraska or north and to the west. But I don’t remember my dad expressing a lot of alarm over it. I mean he was obviously paying close attention. We were watching it on the news, but those were tense times. It may be that’s what gave us the confidence of Kennedy, is we got through that. Then we had a nice period of time where Nixon, it didn’t get better. It just seemed to get worse.

LC: I see. Lou, I haven’t asked you this, and I don’t know whether you would feel like talking about it, but if you have any memories or impressions of the time when John Kennedy was killed, it would be useful to include them in the record here. I don’t know if you feel like you would like to talk about that.

LW: Well, I remember where I was, where I think most people do. I was at Flint Hill Prep School, out by Vienna, Virginia. I went there my sixth and seventh grade year. I remember being called out. We all came out to the football field and they announced that the President had been killed. Even at that age, there was just this profound sadness over the, you know, over the whole campus. We went home. Dad took me down along with my sisters and my mother and we watched the funeral of Kennedy. I have some photographs of that in the office.

LC: Do you really?

LW: Mm-hmm.

LC: Did your dad take the pictures?

LW: Yes.

LC: Okay. Do you know roughly where you were along the route?
LW: I have to look it—I always want to say Connecticut Avenue is where his office was, but I’d have to do some head scratching on that. I know I have the pictures from either his office window or a office window that he had access to.

LC: Uh-huh. So you were up high, not on the street?

LW: Correct. Yeah, we were looking down at—the pictures I have are from up above.

LC: What kind of impression did that day leave on you?

LW: Just sadness, that something like that could happen. Even at that age, you can really feel something like that.

LC: Oh, sure, absolutely. You were a young man then. I mean, you were what, twelve, thirteen? Something like that?

LW: Yep.

LC: Well old enough to appreciate certainly the sadness and loss. How did your parents react? Do you remember at all?

LW: I don’t. I know there was sadness, but I don’t remember particular discussions or anything. Because I think you kind of go into a shock, you know. It’s like 9/11. When that happened, I went numb for a long time. It was just, you remember the event really clear. But that was a bad day.

LC: Yes. Yes, it certainly was. Lou, let me ask you a little bit more about the protests in D.C. later on. You mentioned that you saw several protests. I gather you may have participated in one or two of those, does that sound right?

LW: Participated, dodged tear gas and other stuff, yeah.

LC: Tell me about the tear gas incident. Where were you?

LW: Well, I’ll give you a better time—I graduated in 1969. Then that summer I drove out to California and came back. I ended up going to Emerson Institute the summer of ’69, that school year. So that whole school year, the protests were beginning. If you got in around GW campus was always lit up. They were constantly raising hell there. But I remember the White House having guards around it and a lot of troop presence and police presence in D.C. They would just have—we had some big protests, like Earth Day. I can’t remember the other ones. The following year I went down to Old Dominion and I know I came up for one or two protests.
LC: Did you for example, and I don’t know whether this is the case at all, but one of the really large protests in the spring of 1970 was in response to the incursion into Cambodia. Do you remember that? At all? Or the shooting?

LW: Some of those are blurred together.

LC: Uh-huh, sure. What happened the time that the tear gas got thrown? Do you remember that?

LW: It could have been that one. I know there was one in particular, and I’m trying to think—that would have been that year, because my buddy John Harvard was going to G Dub, and he had talked about the tear gas. I could probably get the exact date on that, but he could smell the tear gas on the G Dub campus.

LC: Really? Did you ever sort of find yourself face-to-face with police or military people trying to contain or control a crowd?

LW: Nope, I’m pretty much a coward.

LC: I just wondered whether if you saw any exchanges between the police and the protestors and what the tenor of those were.

LW: I saw from a distance some of that. I guess I’m more in line and maybe influenced by Martin Luther King. I just don’t understand the need for violent protest. So I would stay clear of that if I could. Sometimes you’d be in the midst of it where kids are running around and the police are running around and if you’re minding your own business, you’re not going to be bothered. But if you’re picking up stuff and throwing stuff, they’re going to go after you.

LC: Did you think of King as an inspiration? Was he personally important to you?

LW: Oh yeah, he’s one of my favorite speakers. I always admired him. My girlfriend and I at that time picked my dad up in D.C., I don’t know for what reason. I must’ve had the car or something. When the riots broke out in D.C. and we came out, we had a brick thrown at the car. They shut D.C. down and they blocked—they had tanks on the bridges and everything.

LC: Now this would have been after he was shot?

LW: Yeah. That was, you know, that song Abraham, Martin, and John? Yeah.

It’s three of my favorites, I guess.
LC: Lou, did you see U.S. military personnel on the bridges over the Potomac when—?

LW: Yes.

LC: Okay. With tanks?

LW: I saw the personnel. My dad went down. We had a neighbor that had an auto dealership down there. My dad and a bunch of the men in the neighborhood went down and pulled some of the cars out of the D.C. lot that they were on.

LC: They pulled the new cars out?

LW: Well, I think they were more—I’m not sure if they were brand-new cars or more like Jaguars and things like that.

LC: Oh, so—

LW: Classic, even at that time.

LC: So these were the valuable ones?

LW: Yeah.

LC: What were they thinking in doing this?

LW: Oh, the city was on fire. I mean, it was days that you couldn’t get into D.C. and there was a lot of rioting, and looting and property being destroyed.

LC: Did you go up there at all? Not necessarily into the city, but you know, Alexandria or around there?

LW: I had been—yeah, McLean isn’t far from there either. I had been down to the bridge area, but I was driving out of DC when it was erupting. My dad was driving the car and I was passenger and my girlfriend was in the backseat.

LC: What was going through—I mean, I know it’s hard at this distance, probably, to remember, but can you imagine what was going through your mind when the capitol city was basically a no-go area?

LW: Yeah, get me the hell out of here. It was just, like, boy, we better get out of here and not totally understanding why, but not understanding all the anger, I guess. Totally, I mean. Because that’s not what Martin Luther King would have wanted to happen.

LC: Right. Did you have any African-American friends at this point? You’d mentioned before, Alfie—
LW: Alfie? I would say Alfie was in high school, really the only African-American that I was friends with.

LC: Do you remember if he had any reaction to the death of Dr. King?

LW: You know I don’t remember talking to Alfie about it.

LC: Well, let me ask you a little bit about your time at Old Dominion. If I’m correct, you entered in the fall of 1971? Is that about right?

LW: That would—let’s see, I graduated in ’69, so ’70. So fall of ’70.

LC: Oh, fall of ’70, okay. Did you pick ODU (Old Dominion University) for any particular reasons?

LW: Well, yes I did.

LC: Okay, do you want to just leave that one alone, Lou? I don’t know if you want to go into it at all. It’s fine if you don’t.

LW: Well, I’ll go into a little bit.

LC: Okay, sure, whatever you want.

LW: I went through—just before my freshman year, I met a girl named Shauna and we, you know. We went together all through high school and the year after. She went to Old Dominion, so I was going to go down there. Then we broke up before I went there, and it was just—I went to Old Dominion for one year and then moved back to Michigan. That’s a long story short, how’s that?

LC: I gotcha. Okay, that’s fine. During the time that you spent that year at Emerson and then at ODU, were you still thinking it would be possible that you would be called on for military service?

LW: Absolutely. I had—let’s see. At Emerson I didn’t have a student deferment, I don’t believe. I did get one went I went to Old Dominion. But then I left Old Dominion and so then I was vulnerable again and I took some classes up in Michigan.

LC: Whereabouts?

LW: Grand Rapids, Michigan, at Calvin College for a semester there.

LC: Okay, mm-hmm. Did you go specifically—I mean—

LW: Well, some of it was for that reason, and quite frankly, I was going to go to Canada if I had been drafted. I wasn’t going to go into the draft.
LC: Had you already given thought to that, Lou?

LW: My sister, Jenny, was living in Canada. She said come on up here. So, that’s probably what I would have done. I wouldn’t have gone in. In retrospect, I would do things differently. Hindsight’s 20/20. I think the conscientious objectors did it correctly. There’s nothing wrong with serving in another capacity. Now, looking back, I would have gone the CO (commanding officer) route, but at the time I was just going to leave. But I believe Laird was Secretary of Defense at that time. He had a press conference, and he said that if we dropped our student deferments and didn’t get drafted the rest of the year, that our lottery numbers—and mine was sixty-nine—it would roll over, so there’d be 365 in front of us. So you virtually would not get drafted then. So I dropped my student deferment.

LC: But in a way having in your back pocket the possibility that—

LW: Oh, I would—yeah, I could have gone to Canada.

LC: You were going to get out of the country?

LW: Yeah.

LC: Do you remember speaking to your sister about this? Did the offer come from her first? Or did you ask her, look, here’s the situation, can I come—?

LW: The offer came from her, but I think it was more in different conversations and what was going on and everything. Well, you can come up here.

LC: How did she happen to be living in Canada, and where was she?

LW: Well, she was in Toronto. She was married to a doctor up there.

LC: Okay. Did you talk to her about the war much?

LW: I’m sure we discussed it. She was against the war.

LC: Was she?

LW: Yeah. She didn’t protest that I know of.

LC: But she had—she shared your view in general?

LW: Yes, mm-hmm.

LC: Lou, would you say that you were thinking about the war sort of ’70, ’71, ’72 as only getting, you know, more—you were getting more and more convinced of basically the wrongness of American policies? Or were you questioning things at that time still?
LW: I would say towards the end of high school and after high school, it just seemed like the wrong place to be, like, we didn’t belong there. There was no reason for what we were doing. There were this big fear that that whole area was going to become communist and one thing, you know, but it seems to me, since its ended, it stayed pretty calm in Vietnam.

LC: Do you remember the end of the war? For example, the—

LW: Yes, I do.

LC: Let’s talk first about the return of the POWs (prisoner of war) in about 1973, do you remember that?

LW: I remember the POWs being released and the evacuations, right up to the last day at the embassy, getting people off the rooftops there.

LC: How did you feel about those things? Were they sort of footnotes to you, or was this more important than that as something you had grown up with and were watching now come to a close?

LW: I would say something that was coming to a close. But it was still—it was shocking, it was a violent end. The whole war was violent, but it was a very violent end.

LC: Lou, let me ask you a little bit about your retrospective feelings on the conflict. You sort of suggested that as time has gone by, you’ve given the whole conflict and your relationship to it some thought and that you would do things a little bit differently now. What would you do differently? You talked about the conscientious objector route?

LW: Well, I probably would have registered that way. Some of the war protests, the large gatherings and stuff, were almost party-like, in some respects. I don’t—I think some people were doing it, not necessarily because of their beliefs but because just because they could. They could be bad for a day, or something like that.

LC: So it wasn’t really out of principle so much as—?

LW: Right, yeah. That probably hits it better. I’m trying to think—it’s hard to see—I just have such a different view of the vets today. They were treated so poorly. That’s something I wasn’t aware of at that time. I’m sure I don’t ever recall doing anything that would have made them feel that way, but they were treated badly, I found out later. That’s, I think a rotten thing, because those kids were just trying to do what
they thought was right. It’s no different than today, with these kids going off, and they’re
not being treated that way.

LC: Yeah, how does that make you feel, about the two different conflicts that
you’re comparing, the one in Vietnam and the one now in Iraq?

LW: In some ways, they’re no different to me.

LC: Why is that?

LW: I don’t think we should be in Iraq. I wish we hadn’t gone in. I wasn’t in
favor of going in, but it didn’t seem justified. Yet, Afghanistan, I had absolutely no
heartburn at all over what we did there.

LC: What in your mind was a distinction between the Afghanistan operation and
the one in Iraq?

LW: I think Afghanistan was directly linked to 9/11. 9/11 changed my life. So
they’re tied both real close together. Afghanistan had a chance to change their ways, they
just refused to do it. They were harboring Bin Laden. So I don’t have any problem
with—I think that was justified. Iraq, when Bush got elected, I looked at my wife and I
told her, we’re going to war with Iraq, and this was before 9/11.

LC: No kidding.

LW: She says, “Why do you say that?” I said, “He wants to finish his dad’s
business.” I just felt that, before the election, when he was running, if he gets elected and
sure enough we did. I think he wanted to go into Iraq.

LC: Before the 9/11 attacks?

LW: Oh, yeah. I think he wanted an excuse to go in there. It’s just an awful
mess right now. It’s killing the economy here. So in a lot of ways I think it’s very
similar to Vietnam. It seems to be getting more so that way the way it’s getting bogged
down.

LC: And that there doesn’t appear to be plan for stabilizing the country and
going out?

LW: Right.

LC: Lou, you said that 9/11 changed your life. Can I just ask a little about that?
Why do you say that?

LW: I had retired from the state, and—
LC: As a state employee?
LW: Yeah.
LC: In Montana.
LW: Right. I took a job with a consulting firm. It’s good money. Then I was outside of Chicago when 9/11 happened. We were there for a week, the airlines opened up on Friday. We were on the first flight out, and then I was on something like thirty flights for the next month.
LC: No kidding.
LW: Oh, it was—and it was eerie. You’d be going through LAX or through O’Hare, or Salt Lake, and there’s like, no people. We were on some flights when there’s just a few people on the plane. We had work scheduled, so it’s out to California and up to Seattle and back to here. Then I flew down to Salt Lake. Jimmy Carter was on our flight from Salt Lake. We were heading over to Baltimore, we went to the plane at Baltimore, and Jimmy Carter went through the plane, shook everybody’s hand.
LC: Did he now?
LW: Mmm-hmm, shook everybody’s hand, thanked them for being on the plane. We were conducting this class, and there’s about fifty or sixty kids—kids? Adults in this class, at this company. Then 9/11 comes on and it’s—of course, my birthday was coming up, and I thought, this is not worth it. I was going to move to Nashville, Tennessee. I just said no, I’m not going to do it. So I walked away from all of it.
LC: So you had been planning to move and—
LW: Relocate with this new job.
LC: Right, and have essentially another career?
LW: Yeah.
LC: You just decided, no? Not doing it?
LW: Yeah. It’s insane. I like Montana. This is my home. I can’t even put into words what I felt when those planes hit those towers. It was almost like you could feel the deaths. I mean, it was almost like—I don’t know, I can’t explain it.
LC: Yeah, yeah. It was very difficult. Very difficult day. Did you mention, I’m sorry, that you were in Chicago when it happened?

LW: South of it.

LC: Were you working that day?

LW: Yes, yeah.

LC: What happened? Somebody said, look, you gotta come and see on CNN?

LW: Well, one gal came in a little bit late. “Excuse me,” she says. “Do you know what—it was just on the news, a plane has hit one of the towers.” So, the initial report was, some plane had gotten off course or something and had hit it. Then, one of the people in the back, a little bit later, twenty minutes or whatever says, “I need to interrupt.” He said—he had one of these instant messengers on his phone. He said, “A second plane has hit the towers. We appear to be under attack.” So we went into one of the other conference rooms. This is a large company and there was a big training center and everything, and watched that unfold. Then we had to continue the classes for that week.

LC: Yeah, it’s a little hard to work that day.

LW: It was, yeah. But the fellow I was working for, he gave one of the most stirring, I guess, talks before he began class, but he talked about—you still there?

LC: Yes, I am.

LW: Thought I lost you. He had gone out and walked around to think about things. The birds were still flying, saw this and saw that. He said, “Life goes on.” That is true. Life goes on. Boy, it really impacted me. Like I said, I was all over the country, and in Baltimore and back and D.C. I think it’s when I was in D.C. that it just didn’t make sense to me, to travel like that.

LC: Yeah, to be on the planes and—

LW: I wasn’t afraid to be on the planes, but life is too short to spend seventy hours a week flying and working, and only coming home a day or two, or something, if that, a week.

LC: So it sort of reordered your priorities?

LW: Yeah, yeah. It sure did.

LC: Lou, is there anything else that you’d like to add, to this interview that perhaps I haven’t asked you about?
LW: I can’t think of anything right now. I know we talked about a few other things when we visited that one day on that long flight—

LC: Which we made very short by talking the entire way.

LW: Yes, we did. I’ll probably visit with you again, and I’ll try to—this has brought back a lot of it. A lot of times, I don’t think about this on a regular basis, but it was such a unique way to grow up in that area, and to go to school with kids whose dads were congressmen or secretary of interior, this and that, and just grow up and think it’s perfectly normal. It’s a beautiful city, even today, but it’s so full of history. The area around it is full of history. That period of time, to go through the death of Kennedy and King and Bobby and the war, it’s a different world today. We’ve gone through things like Enron. Now we’re over there in Iraq, and I don’t understand why we’re there. We were told one reason and that obviously wasn’t the reason.

LC: Well, I want to thank you for your time today, and for sharing your thoughts.

LW: Well, thank you, Laura. I hope some of it makes sense.

LC: It does make sense. Thank you very much.