

Mr. Robert Bonner  
July 19, 1973

Interview \_\_\_\_, Tape 1, Track 1.

Mr. Specht: Mr. Bonner, you were born in Vancouver. What year was that?

Mr. Bonner: September the tenth, 1920.

Mr. Specht: 1920. What part of Vancouver did you grow up in?

Mr. Bonner: Mostly in Hastings East.

Mr. Specht: Hastings East?

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: Is that where you went to High School also, in that area?

Mr. Bonner: Yes, Britannia High School, Templeton Junior High School, and/ Hastings Public School.

Mr. Specht: When did your family come to Vancouver?

Mr. Bonner: Well, my father came here from New Brunswick about 1910 and my mother came here from Ireland a year or two earlier, but her family had been in British Columbia for a longer period. In fact, Port Kells, in the Fraser Valley is named after my mother's people, her family name being Kells.

Mr. Specht: What was your father's occupation?

Mr. Bonner: Father was in the automotive retail business and laterly with Dominion Bridge Company.

Mr. Specht: What type of work did he do?

Mr. Bonner: Well, he had a garage business in the automotive retail.....a garage and service station. When he worked with Dominion Bridge, he was in personel work.

Mr. Specht: Did you have brothers and sisters?

Mr. Bonner: No.

Mr. Specht: You went to Britannia High School. How would you describe your high school career? Did you enjoy it?

Mr. Bonner: Oh yes, thoroughly. Britannia in those days was quite a small school by comparison. I don't think there were more than 600 in attendance. But it had a great spirit and considerable tradition.

Mr. Specht: Who were some of your colleagues in high school? People who you have maybe later formed long term relationships with...?

Mr. Bonner: Well, it's curious about the long term relationships because our class seemed to break up and scatter considerably. My particular friends in high school were a chap by the name of Townsend and Bob Cowan. I've seen them on and off over the years but we're not terribly close.

Mr. Specht: What year did you enroll at U.B.C.?

Mr. Bonner: 1938.

Mr. Specht: 1938. The majors that you chose to concentrate in were economics and political science.

Mr. Bonner: That's right.

Mr. Specht: Why did you choose those subjects?

Mr. Bonner: I had formerly the intention of entering law. That was some years prior...about grade 7 or 8...(laughs) as a matter of fact. So I concentrated my studies along the lines that I thought would be useful as a base for a legal career.

Mr. Specht: So from a very early age, you were interested in a legal career?

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: Why do you think you were interested in a legal career?

Mr. Bonner: I'm not so sure how a boy forms an interest. My first interest, frankly, was medicine because I'd admired our family doctor considerably. But I underwent a fairly heavy operation for mastoiditis at the age of seven and I decided as a result of that that really... (laughs)... I didn't want to spend a lot of time around the hospital. So I searched around for another career. (laughs) I though<sup>t</sup>/the law would be an interesting way to live. I really don't know how I formed those opinions but that was the opinion I formed.

Mr. Specht: You were in debating organizations and societies in high school and also in university.

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: I wonder if that was also indicative of your interests as political science and economics are excellent topics of debate.

Mr. Bonner: Those interests, were of course shaped by the fact that the Depression was pretty rampant in the 1930's and I had developed an interest in political solutions to economic problems. My father was always very interested in politics. We had many discussions at home. In fact I used to go to political meetings with him and I gained some admiration for the politicians of the day and their techniques...stage presence and so on. (laughs) I always connected oratory with effectiveness in terms of presenting ideas. So it became kind of a minor hobby. In grade seven we had, in the English classes, the

requirement to make a two or three minute speech a number of times in the course of the year. This was part of the mode of instruction at Templeton Junior High School. I remember the first speech I made. It was devoted to the Zeppelin. The R-100 and the Zeppelins of the day were big things in a small boy's mind and I decided I'd do a little study into the origin of the Zeppelin and make a small speech about it. Well it turned out to be a rousing success. I got an A plus for my first effort and I kind of marvelled at the result compared to the effort I'd put in.....(laughs)....to it. I think a person tends to do a thing that he finds easy to do. So it really began with that particular effort.

Mr. Specht: Where you lived, would that be in the Vancouver East constituency?

Mr. Bonner: Yes it was.

Mr. Specht: That was always quite a strong left wing constituency in the '30's.

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: You said you went to political meetings, did you ever hear someone like Harold Winch speak?

Mr. Bonner: Not Harold Winch but Llyle Telford was very prominent in the area at that time. He became mayor of the city later. He used to be a frequent speaker and I used to attend a few of his meetings and ask awkward questions in the question period. (laughs) When I look back on it, it was kind of a strange thing, I suppose, to be doing at that age. In the depression everybody was searching for better modes of civil

organization. You know it was totally incomprehensible that a vast number of people should be without work when they were willing to work and for people to be without income when the country was obviously rich. I think a lot of people of my generation were really not too content with the way things had been and were seeking to make them better. Some people took a left wing approach to it and others took a more reformist approach. I suppose I was among the reformers.

Mr. Specht: Were you concerned that democracy was threatened because of a lot of the tensions that were created by the Depression, mass unemployment, demonstrations, ....? Possibly authorities might feel a need to control demonstrations or speeches.

Mr. Bonner: No, I don't think there was any particular concern along those lines. As a matter of fact, looking back on the period, it was remarkably stable notwithstanding that there was widespread unemployment. The people who demonstrated were actually very few in number either by absolute or relative terms. I think the most remarkable aspect of the entire period was the absence of uprising. People were fundamentally very orderly in their outlook and very much of an independent frame of mind despite the fact that very many families had little or no income. I knew people who would refuse to accept any public assistance. It was a matter of self respect and pride that you would not accept assistance. I'm not certain that that's the opinion today.

Mr. Specht: How would you describe your interest in debating?

Why do you think you became such an active debater? You mentioned the incident in Grade 7 but any other reasons?

Mr. Bonner: Well, it was an interesting contest. It involved logic, cut and thrust and so on. Debating/<sup>was</sup> more widespread then than now as an exercise and a thing that people did.

When I debated in High School I think it was the first occasion in which Britannia had won the Inter-High School Debating Cup that winter. There was an inter-high school debating league and I think it was the first time we won the cup. As a matter of fact, when I debated for the university of British Columbia, it was the first time U.B.C. had won the cup....the McGowan Cup Debate.

Mr. Specht: Do you remember that particular debate?

Mr. Bonner: The topic?

Mr. Specht: The occasion.

Mr. Bonner: I remember the occasion. I can't for the moment think of the topic.

Mr. Specht: One of the topics that you debated with Art Foulkes about United States.....whether or not democracy had declined in the United States since the First World War. Arthur Foulkes took the stand that it had declined. He pointed to Hughie Long and other activities. Do you remember your side in that debate?

Mr. Bonner: We usually debated together. We formed a team. In fact we were a team throughout. It really didn't matter to us what the proposition was. It wasn't a matter of conviction

we could argue either side. In fact in preparing the debates, we would analyse the other side to devise the arguments which would over-weigh. So it was an intellectual exercise rather than a matter of conviction. We could have argued either side with equal effect. We prepared both sides.

Mr. Specht: What do you think were the main concerns of students just before the war?

Mr. Bonner: I think the main concern was getting an education which really had some promise of job opportunities. People equated a degree with a bit of an edge on becoming established.

Mr. Specht: I suppose that attitude is much more prevalent then than today.

Mr. Bonner: Yes I think it was.

Mr. Specht: In 1940, it seems that the most controversial issue on the campus was conscription in Canada. There was a big blow-up about this...

Mr. Bonner: There was indeed.

Mr. Specht: Were you vice-president of the U.B.C. Canadian Students Assembly?

Mr. Bonner: Yes I was.

Mr. Specht: You were vice-president?

Mr. Bonner: As a matter of fact, Charlie Nash and I, he's an engineer with Hydro, found ourselves in the middle of this organization and it was as hellbent on blocking conscription and opposing the war effort and everything else. We suddenly woke up to the notion that thing was being externally directed.

So we proceeded to turn the thing inside out ourselves.

Mr. Specht: How did you think it was externally directed?

Mr. Bonner: Well, there was a Communist Cell in charge of it. It was a very simple proposition. We used to find ourselves in meetings in which a gal, who was later prominent in the Communist Party, would say, "Our objective is so-and-so. This is the way we have our motions organized. You, so-and-so will propose so-and-so and you will second so-and-so." As a matter of fact, I learned a great deal about meeting control... (laughs) from this exercise. It was externally directed in the sense that it wasn't really a bona fide student proposition.

Mr. Specht: The issue came to a head when the Canadian Students Assembly had a meeting at Christmas of 1940. At this meeting the committee of the Assembly moved that they send a resolution to Ottawa saying, "We do not recommend conscription. We do not recommend that Canada send a large force overseas because this will lead to conscription." This passed and seems to have triggered the controversy.

Mr. Bonner: Yes that's right.

Mr. Specht: I was wondering first of all, how were these people selected, say from U.B.C., who went back East for the meeting?

Mr. Bonner: I don't recall specifically who went or how they were selected but fundamentally the people who went back were sympathetic to the cause, so to speak. It was at that point that Nash and I started to turn the thing inside out.

Mr. Specht: Council suspended the local Assembly when they returned. Do you remember, did you support this suspension? You were vice-president still at the time.



Mr. Bonner: Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, some of my friends on council and I were collaborating on the result.

Mr. Specht: Later the Canadian Students Assembly local was reinstated only under the jurisdiction of the Literary Science Executive. I don't know if you remember the specific move but, would you describe that as a demotion of the C.S.A.?

Mr. Bonner: Well, I'm not saying whether demotion is the word but it was effective at the time....in containing the C.S.A.

Mr. Specht: Before it was somewhat more autonomous.

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: The Literary Science Executive controlled all the clubs and organizations on campus....for funds and legitimizing them.

Mr. Bonner: Yes, legitimizing rather than funds. There was a certain superintendence of activity. But it wasn't a detailed control exercise. I later became president of the L.S.E. so I knew something about that.

Mr. Specht: Yes...and when you were president what was the relationship in '40, '41.

Mr. Bonner: '40. '41.

Mr. Specht: What was the relationship between the L.S.E. and the C.S.A.? Was there any more trouble?

Mr. Bonner: No, the whole thing was contained by their first manoeuver. The C.S.A. thing, while it was interesting and educational really doesn't loom very large in my recollection of events. Past that so called 'blow-up' period to which you refer, the organization was effectively emasculated, contained,

put down, whatever word you want. It wasn't thereafter a factor.

Mr. Specht: Do you think that this was in part because the war was becoming much more serious? Students really didn't want a body to represent the students in a way which seemed detrimental to the war effort.

Mr. Bonner: That was precisely the point.

Mr. Specht: The Literary Science Executive has jurisdiction over clubs on campus. Due to the pressure of wartime, were any campus activities curtailed? Or say/<sup>as</sup> president of L.S.E., which you were, did you have any policy on this?

Mr. Bonner: There was a certain curtailment but, this arose simply from the pressure of time on the people participating. It wasn't a conscious ~~students~~ council policy particularly. People had less time for thing/<sup>s</sup> which they might otherwise have done because they were involved in O.T.C. or Naval Cadets or something of that sort. It wasn't a conscious policy to restrict things. It was just that the war began to take up more and more time.....things languished accordingly. Just a cause and effect affair.

Mr. Specht: How did you view international affairs in the years approaching the war? Did you definitely see a dangerous situation arising?

Mr. Bonner: No, I don't think so. In fact, there was a curious attitude on the campus even when the war began, I don't think people acknowledged that it was. I know in my own case the bombing of London, you'd read about but I really had no appreciation of what that implied.

Mr. Specht: Going back a little earlier, Chamberlain's

Appeasement Policy, did you have a reaction to that? A strong reaction?

Mr. Bonner: No, not a strong reaction. I don't think students were really focussed on the issue in terms that finally emerged.... at least this student wasn't..(chuckles). There had been in the 1930's a considerable anti-war sentiment which arose from the aftermath of the First War. There were, for example in the Hurst Papers in the United States, extensive publications of grizzly wartime pictures of the first war. It was almost as though a program was consciously in effect of showing people the horrors and the futility of war which I suppose is the basic truth of the matter in any event. But the net result was....I remember reading Churchill in the English papers at the time, and thinking of him....what a strange point of view he was expressing because he was sounding alarms and inveighing against the Nazi regime at/<sup>a</sup> time when the conventional wisdom was pretty much sort of...tread softly and maybe it'll go away. The Chamberlain event was probably applauded at the time.

Mr. Specht: Did your father serve in the First World War?

Mr. Bonner: Yes he did.

Mr. Specht: What did he tell you?

Mr. Bonner: Well, I think he saw the thing clearly. Neither he nor my mother were very anxious for me to get involved. He brought no pressure on me whatever. I remember asking him on one occasion when things were looking pretty black about London, I asked him, "Are we going to win the war?" He said, "Of course." He was very calm about it. I determined finally to enlist and

I think he was pleased about it...but he never urged me to do it.

Mr. Specht: Do you think you would have enlisted if there hadn't been a war?

Mr. Bonner: No, I don't think so.

Mr. Specht: How did you view the C.O.T.C. before the war, before it became a much more important institution on campus?

Mr. Bonner: Well, I don't think I thought too much about it really. I had some friends who were in the O.T.C. and I had some friends who were in the reserve Army. I didn't have an attitude against it. I think I was fundamentally sympathetic to the whole thing. There was no pressure at home. Any pressure that there was was my mother's abhorrence of the whole thing. I don't think I would have, in the absence of war, thought of associating with it.

Mr. Specht: Did you live at home while you were going to university?

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: You would have taken a bus out to campus or..

Mr. Bonner: Well, I took the streetcar the first year and then I got an automobile for \$27.10. It had been siezed for crossing the border illegally and the Mounted Police were auctioning it. I put in a bid and I got it! (laughing) So I fixed that up one summer and three years later, I drove the car to university. I used to take some of my friends with me and charge them 10¢ a ride. It kept me in gas....(laughing) The car was quite good as a matter of fact.

Mr. Specht: You enrolled in C.O.T.C. in 1940. Can you outline some of the training that you took?

Mr. Bonner: Well, it was very fundamental training. The drill was of course, a bit unfamiliar. A friend of mine was quite active and prominent so he took me out a couple of noon hours and taught me the commands and the turns and so on. A short while later I wound up as a lance corporal! (laughing)

Mr. Specht: Why do you think you ended up a lance corporal so quickly?

Mr. Bonner: Well, anyone who was anxious to turn to could get a promotion. That was about the size of it. So I thought that since I was going to be involved, I might as well learn all I could about it. This particular boy, Dick Wilson was a fraternity brother of mine and he had had prior experience with the Seaforths. His father had been a colonel there. So I suppose it was just a matter of doing the job once the job was there to be done.

Mr. Specht: Of course in 1940 there was a vast influx of students into the C.O.T.C. and probably a <sup>tremendous</sup> horrendous need for N.C.O.s and people to give drill.

Mr. Bonner: Oh yes. There was a tremendous need all around. That's correct. The other thing about it was that I always felt that if you were in an organization it was better to run it than to be part of it. (laughing) I was determined to qualify.

Mr. Specht: What other training did you have? You said you did drill.

Mr. Bonner: Well yes, that was the drill and we had lectures as well in the various military manuals, small arms, theories of formations and so on. It was quite good instruction. Officers from the First War were available and people who had been active in the Depression between the wars were available. They were people of high calibre....good instructors. We were trained exposed to the theories of military operation and what was involved.....preparatory to writing final examinations.

Mr. Specht: Was Staff Sergeant Smith one of your instructors? He might have left just as you came into the corps.

Mr. Bonner: I'm not to sure. I'd have to look up in the old books I've got. I've got an awful head for names at times.

Mr. Specht: Well, what officers did you have contact with? Which were you most impressed with?

Mr. Bonner: Well, there was Major McLeod who had been a high school teacher at King Edward. He went on to the staff as one of our major instructors. There was a chap by the name of Smith who was subsequently in B. C. House, London after the war. He was one of our officers and very good at it too. There were one or two lawyers from town who had been qualified who took on duties as instructors, a chap by the name of Hutchin. He was responsible for artillery and I think for turning me off artillery.

Mr. Specht: I want to ask you some more about drill. Before the Armoury was built, I believe it was completed in 1941, a lot of the drill had to take place outside and often in the evening so it wouldn't clash with classes. When did you have drill? Did you have drill in the evenings? Saturday afternoons?

Mr. Bonner: Saturday afternoons or Saturday mornings.

Mr. Specht: Students were required also to take three weeks in summer camps. Which summer camp did you attend?

Mr. Bonner: I was at Vernon and at Naniamo.

Mr. Specht: Vernon and Naniamo. How did summer camp differ from training on campus?

Mr. Bonner: Well, of course it was a complete military situation. When you were in camp you were under instruction and under discipline as to hours and attendance 24 hours a day. That's the chief difference.

Mr. Specht: Was it a rude awakening in any way?

Mr. Bonner: Not especially. As a matter of fact it was very interesting. The Army system, drill and the rest, is merely a process of conditioning. You could see how the conditioning was having effect.

Mr. Specht: To what end do you think the conditioning was intended?

Mr. Bonner: Well the conditioning is intended to give you a series of automatic responses in wholly irrational situations. If you found yourself in an active military situation without drill, you'd have to sit down and figure out the first principles. Drill is intended and the chain of command and the exercises, the various skills are intended to give you an automatic response when your mind really tells you to get up and get the hell out of there! (laughs)

Mr. Specht: What aspect of training did you specialize in? There were several options open, I understand. Engineering,

artillery, small arms.

Mr. Bonner: Yes, I was taking special instruction in artillery but the fundamental field so to speak was so far as parade square was concerned was just normal infantry and drill. It really, that part of the thing is of no great consequence really. The drill which is finally useful is battle drill which we didn't get until we got overseas.

Mr. Specht: So you wouldn't really have been competent at the time to say take a Platoon of men infantry men...to man a gun...before you went overseas?

Mr. Bonner: No, not as a result of reserve training.

Mr. Specht: What experience did you receive in command of men with C.O.T.C.?

Mr. Bonner: Well you have to appreciate that reserve training in a matter of a couple of weeks doesn't really give you too much. You become familiar with handling people in formation. You become familiar with the interplay of personality which is involved between someone in command and someone receiving command. You get your head on straight<sup>t</sup> more or less as to how to deal with people in a group. It's an interesting psychological problem really. It really comes down to one question. In the end you don't succeed by the pips on your shoulder, you succeed by demeanour, example, personality and unless you acquire these qualities in an effective way it really doesn't matter what your rank is. You're going to get it.

Mr. Specht: As an officer cadet, a student on campus and one of several thousand student cadets in training, did you have an impression of the Commanding Officer, Gordon Shrum?



Mr. Bonner: Oh yes....(laughs)....very pronounced.

Mr. Specht: Could you elaborate?

Mr. Bonner: Well, it's difficult to be precise.

End of Track I

Mr. Robert Bonner  
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Interview \_\_\_\_, Tape 1, Track 2.

Mr. Specht: What impression did you have of Col. Shrum?

Mr. Bonner: Fundamentally he was a man of great force and sweltering vitality. He had a deep booming voice and a very precise notion of what he required. His personality really dominated the batallion which was quite an achievement, I thought. A very rough cast of character in the sense that it really brooked no interference. (laughing)

Mr. Specht: His presence was always<sup>s</sup>felt in the contingent?

Mr. Bonner: Yes. Well, he was fortunate in the sense that he had had considerable experience during the First War. He knew what the problems that we were facing would be. I think his approach was sound and certainly well intended and on the whole quite effective although I think that the O.T.C. accounted for very large enlistment in the Navy and the Air Force. (laughing)

Mr. Specht: That's true. The majority were in the Navy and the Air Force. The majority of students who left the C.O.T.C., about 60% were in the Air Force and Navy.

Mr. Bonner: Is that so. I don't know what percentage would be counted.

Mr. Specht: There was a quote in the Ubyyssey. Mr. Shrum was talking about this ...no in the Commanding Officer's Report.. saying that one of the reasons for this was that the Air Force specially offered a much more....chances for learning and advancement because of the technology involved. This attracted the students.

Mr. Bonner: I think it would be a very attractive thing to

young people. I very nearly wound up in the Air Force myself but I was really more comfortable in the Army setting. I'd related to Army perhaps because of my father. Apart from that I had an opportunity to be considered for a commission with the Seaforth Highlanders....as much as anything because of a fraternity affiliation. With that prospect in mind I really set my mind to Army

Mr. Specht: Just before we get into your actual career in the Army, I'm going to ask you a few questions. What was your... Did you think there was good esprit in the contingent? The morale of the men, did they have any....

Mr. Bonner: Oh yes, for the most part. There were a few characters who were professionally out of the whole thing. (laughing) They really wanted no part of it and it was quite evident in their conduct. Even those two or three fellows eventually served and served well. But they just weren't very keen about the O.T.C.

Mr. Specht: Do you recall many problems regarding discipline?

Mr. Bonner: Well there were really no problems. You know you get a bunch of young fellow and there's a certain amount of fooling around at times. I don't really regard that as a problem. It was an occurrence more than a problem.

Mr. Specht: How do you think the students at large felt about the war and about being inducted into the services? How do you think they viewed it? As an obligation or did they understand the situation and realize that they had to serve....What was your interpretation anyway?

Mr. Bonner: Well there was an increasingly noticeable enlistment rate out of the under-graduate year. I guess it was 1940, the Alpha Delta Fraternity virtually disappeared through enlistment. In our fraternity a number of fellows signed up early. As a matter of fact they were among the early casualties. So regardless of how the whole thing began, the whole event was increasingly born in on the campus. No one had any delusions that he was not going to get involved one way or the other. Of course you know that the Canadian forces were volunteers. So it wasn't a question of facing a draft or anything because nobody was doing the drafting. It was just a question of what time you chose to join up. That mood gradually became pretty prevalent. I think that the attitude was...well in my own case I thought nothing would be harmed if I stayed around and got my degree and then joined up. I figured if I broke off, I might not get back at it too readily.

Mr. Specht: Actually the government encourage students to get their degree before enlisting.

Mr. Bonner: I don't know that there was any actual encouragement. There was no discouragement.

Mr. Specht: Well, I think there were statements to the effect that they'd be more valuable to the war effort if they got a degree....especially in engineering and applied sciences. But at the same time, military training was compulsory.

Mr. Bonner: It was on the campus, yes.

Mr. Specht: I'd like to ask you a little bit about the social side. Did you attend the Smokers?

Mr. Bonner: I don't think I did.

Mr. Specht: How about the annual dances? They followed the parade.

Mr. Bonner: I guess I attended most things. I remember hearing about a smoker that I failed to attend. It was probably unwise not to have attended....(laughs). It turned out to be quite a boisterous affair. But for one reason or another I just didn't attend it. It wasn't a matter of principle, I just didn't get to it.

Mr. Specht: How about dances though?

Mr. Bonner: Oh yes. Lots of dances.

Mr. Specht: But you can't recall the military service dance? Specifically they don't stand out?

Mr. Bonner: No. I'm not sure that there were military service dances as such.

Mr. Specht: Oh well, following every parade and annual inspection they would have a ball. During the war years, because there were so many students in C.O.T.C. they would have the ball only in honour of the students who were that year going to be going overseas. It was in the Hotel Vancouver. Maybe speaking about dances generally....do you remember any of the songs that were popular 1940?

Mr. Bonner: I suppose if I thought about it. It was the so called Big Band period you know. Glen Miller and Tommy Dorsey and that fellow with the clarinet?

Mr. Specht: Benny Goodman?

Mr. Bonner: Yes, Benny Goodman. Locally of course there was Mark Kenny and His Western Gentlemen. (laughing) I don't

think that I could reel off a number of people. Whatever was popular, I enjoyed it. The gal who eventually became my wife and I, we attended everything.

Mr. Specht: What kind of dance steps did you do?

Mr. Bonner: Well, we didn't do jitter-bugging but not everybody did. Just normal ballroom....fox-trot, cheek-to-cheek and so on. I don't think this generation calls it cheek-to-cheek!

(laughing)

Mr. Specht: Okay, back to the war. Could you describe the procedures by which you got your commission with the Seaforth Highlanders?

Mr. Bonner: There was a Regimental Selection Board before whom you appeared as an Officer Candidate. It comprised a committee of commanding officers, including the then current commanding officer of the regiment. We got paraded in and there was a general interrogation.....questions and answers and so on. In the course of this you were sized up and eventually you learned whether you were accepted or not.

Mr. Specht: And you were commissioned as a lieutenant.

Mr. Bonner: No. I went on active service with the rank of Acting Sergeant as an Officer Cadet.

Mr. Specht: Oh. First you went to Gordon Head.

Mr. Bonner: Yes that's right.

Mr. Specht: What did you do at Gordon Head? Was this a completion of your training?

Mr. Bonner: Well, that's where training really began, I think. The Gordon Head training was three months, very intensive and highly professionally instructed. It was a six day a week

affair.

Mr. Specht: This is where you think you really learned....and received preparation for actually going to the front.

Mr. Bonner: Yes, that's right. Prior to that time you had a certain facility to deal with troops and you had a certain amount of knowledge which was practical but not intensive. But the difference between reserve and active force is the difference between three hours a week and six days a week. So the result has to be much different.

Mr. Specht: Did you go through field exercises?

Mr. Bonner: At Gordon Head, yes.

Mr. Specht: What weaponry did you deal with?

Mr. Bonner: Fundamentally the rifle and machine gun.....mortar.

Mr. Specht: As a Sergeant were you working with several other men?

Mr. Bonner: No. You should understand the rank of Acting Sergeant was purely for pay. Your effective designation was officer cadet.....so that you were back in the ranks again under professional professional officers in so you were in effect/an infantry platoon situation again. Right in from the ground up and you would take opportunities from time to time to be section leader or platoon sergeant. Responsibilities would be rotated in other words. So everybody had an opportunity to work on everybody else. That further heightened your appreciation of how to deal with people. The whole exercise apart from the special technical knowledge you may acquire in the course of it, is one of psychological conditioning. You assume after a while a certain similarity with what

is required, how people react under certain circumstances, how to react to them, and... The whole thing was really intended to give you the kind of confidence and superior knowledge which is required to furnish leadership under awkward circumstances. So the three months were very intensive. Subsequently you were qualified as a Second Lieutenant in the Active Force. Then our next phase of training was an additional minimum of a month. I think it turned out in my case to be about two months at Currie Barracks in Alberta which was an advanced officers training unit....on the conclusion of which you became a lieutenant, two pips. At that point and thereafter you were available for assignment overseas.

Mr. Specht: What was your first assignment?

Mr. Bonner: Well, I went overseas as a part of the reinforcements string. Well, I got to England. We were at Aldershot at Barracks and at that point I think I was about 26 or 27th on a list of officers intended as reinforcements for Seaforth Highlanders. I guess I jumped a few spots but I didn't jump enough to get into the regiment as it moved out. But I was in the first line of reinforcements. It was the Sicilian Campaign so as the casualties began to occur, I think it was within two and a half weeks of landing in Phillipville, I was on draft with a small company of reinforcements to a second brigade in Sicily .

Mr. Specht: This was in North Africa? Phillipville, North Africa?



Mr. Bonner: That's right.

Mr. Specht: How long were you there?

Mr. Bonner: Just a couple of weeks at that point.

Mr. Specht: Was this before the landing in Sicily that you were there?

Mr. Bonner: Concurrently with. As the landing went in at Pachino in Sicily, we were landing in Phillippeville in North Africa. So it was a simultaneous exercise. Invasion.. base. We had a brigade of reinforcements at Phillippeville and drafts from the reinforcement base would gradually fill up the ranks in Sicily as required.

Mr. Specht: I see. At Phillippeville, did you get to meet any of the veterans of the British 8th Army?

Mr. Bonner: There were some in the vicinity, yes.

Mr. Specht: Did you have any impression of them after the campaign they had gone through in North Africa? Did you talk to any of the men?

Mr. Bonner: I don't know what kind of impressions you would receive under those circumstances. The British 8th Army, the people I saw were out of battle, of course at that point, but they were pretty lean and tough looking people. I remember a few Irish and they affected this peculiar North African dress which the army had adopted. They had sweaters down to the knees and handlebar moustaches and this sort of thing. I remember one impression. I took my platoon out one day and we were marching through British lines, I think they were pretty fed up. They'd been out there for a pretty long time. I remember noting the number of nepathane

pills in the sand. We were required daily to take against malaria. In fact we would make it a platoon that the pills would go out and we'd see each man swallowed his pill. I took the conclusion from the number of pills I saw in the sand that the British discipline at this point wasn't quite the same as ours. (laughs) The other curiosity was of course that we were marching around in the noonday sun like a bunch of mad dogs and the British having been out there a while weren't stirring at noon.

(laughing) But we really had to get into condition.

Mr. Specht: What were your feelings entering the war zone? It was the first time you were personally in danger and you would have seen things. Possibly heard the artillery at night, planes. Can you describe your emotions?

Mr. Bonner: I'm sure there must have been a certain amount of apprehension everywhere. I think that for the most part, people were strangely calm. The only night that the thing really got to me was on the eve of our invasion into Italy. We had taken up a position south of Catania on a plane, a bit of an outward plane. Another chap and I were sharing a blanket. All our kit had been put to one side. We were stripped down, so to speak. It was a little chilly through the night and I remember waking up a few times and walking around sort of wondering how many nights I was going to see. You know, you got over that when you got moving again....quit thinking about it.

Mr. Specht: You didn't take part in the actual landing. Did you at the time, as a lieutenant have a conception of the

of the Sicilian campaign?

Mr. Bonner: We were in the landing in Italy.

Mr. Specht: But I'm talking about the landing in Sicily.

Mr. Bonner: Oh, no. The question?

Mr. Specht: Did you have a concept of the strategy to take Sicily?

Mr. Bonner: Oh yes. It was pretty well described. The general line of progress was pretty well laid out. We knew in general terms though not in specific ones what was going on. The British, for example, got hung up rather badly south of Catania. The British had to have the toughest fighting. The Americans were doing a loop, a lazy loop around Palermo without really that much opposition. But the British had a very bad time. There is one place known as Hell Fire Corner where they engaged in battle for a week or ten days. We went through that about a week afterwards and it was just utter desolation. No, we were pretty well in the picture in general terms.

Mr. Specht: You didn't see any actual battle yourself in Sicily?

Mr. Bonner: No.

Mr. Specht: Then shortly after that you made the landing in Italy. What was your experience in Italy?

Mr. Bonner: Well we landed at first light brigade at that particular point. The landing had not been heavily opposed and it proceeded pretty much according to plan. Our battalion moved inland quickly to a rest point. We had something to eat in the late afternoon and then proceeded

to march. We moved all that night 'til pretty well dawn and we marched solidly for three days. We must have moved inland over mountain trails, I would think a distance of close to 70-80 miles in three days which is pretty good going. The first night in there was a bit of confusion on our flanks. We bumped paratroops at one point. I remember at one particular spot the whole battalion sort of picked itself over the bodies that were in the road. We just marched through them. The Germans were pulling back pretty fast then at that point. They correctly appreciated that they were vulnerable to

So our duty was to keep contact and to keep up there with them.

Mr. Specht: In the early battles both in Sicily and in Italy....

Well Farley Mowatt wrote a book called The Regiment and he referred to this as the apprenticeship for the Canadian forces. Do you think this was apprenticeship for yourself? Actually being in battle. What things do you think you learned?

How did it change you?

Mr. Bonner: Well, I remember telling myself at one point that if I ever survived this thing I wouldn't worry about very much of it afterwards.....and I never have. (Laughs) I suppose in a more material way you learn a good deal about handling people. You learn about the fundamentals of physical organization and the structures in which people function. Really there's nothing as straightforward as a lean military organization. It has application to government and it has application to business. I think from the stand point of organization and dealing with people it's the most fundamental experience you could have. I rather counted that exposure as

one of the most valuable things I've encountered.

Mr. Specht: Did you develop any ideas yourself that you thought should be brought back to the men in U.B.C. or training?

Mr. Bonner: Yes, I suppose so. It's hard to think of them at this point. The approach to battle which was learned in Britain and which was applied in the field, tempered by the experience of survival and the technique which was then devised was the so called 'battle drill'....about which there was no particular knowledge or understanding in Canada. The battle drill was just the technique of moving forward against fire.. how you approached and contained it. There were half a dozen variations that were pretty simple...a device by which you fixed fire, you flanked it , you went in on it and put it down. So as far as infantry was concerned, I used battle drill conceptually when I got back.

Mr. Specht: How were you wounded?

Mr. Bonner: I got caught in a short bracket of artillery. A shell landed on a small stone parapet that I had built and pushed everything in on top of me. Fortunately it didn't explode. So I got a fractured skull out of that, a broken left arm, and a dislocated right shoulder. My face was very black for about a month. (chuckles)

Mr. Specht: Where did you convalesce?

Mr. Bonner: In North Africa for a couple of months. Then it must have been the diet or something...but the arm wasn't healing so they thought it would be better if I went to a Northern climate and I was shipped back to England. I was in hospital all together five and a half, six months...in North Africa and England.

Mr. Specht: After hospital you remained in the services.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. It was at that point that I went back to the reinforcement stream and took command of a company in the reinforcement depot.

Mr. Specht: What was the training that you gave the men in England?

Mr. Bonner: Well, it was fundamentally the battle drill concepts. The people who were going through our hands were reinforcements going up so we were really seeking to brush up their fundamental skills in weaponry, brigade handling and fundamental tactical conceptions.

Mr. Specht: Were there any problems as you ran short of regular reinforcements coming from Canada? You had to retrain men who were in the....

Mr. Bonner: Oh yes. As a matter of fact within two weeks of the invasion going into France, we couldn't meet drafts....the draft requests. Eventually units were being scavenged. We got a company of a couple of hundred men...odds and sods, reconnaissance people, service corps, gunners and all were being put together for reinforcements. I was given 48 hours with our instructors to brush these people up for the front. We worked them around the clock but they were a sorry bunch. I figured that from the state of their training they had a pretty poor individual chance of coming out of the thing at all well. As a result of that experience I paraded myself to Col. \_\_\_\_\_ of the reinforcement unit and complained bitterly about the reinforcement policy which would see people sent up to the line in this state. I thought he might have given me a blast as a result. I was

pretty presumptuous. I was just a lieutenant and he was colonel of the outfit. I ticked him off pretty badly. (laughs) But he didn't. He sat back in his chair and said, "Bonner, I agree with you. It's a bad system." He promoted me a couple of weeks later.

Mr. Specht: To what rank?

Mr. Bonner: Captain.

Mr. Specht: So you were captain of recruitment and training then, in England.

Mr. Bonner: Yes. At this point there was attention being given to forces in the Far East. A number of people were asked if they would consider going back to Canada to train a Far Eastern force. I was one of the people approached and we were sent to a selection camp for a week or ten days when people were being looked over and selected from the stand point of experience and suitability. I was selected to come back for that purpose. When I got back here to Vancouver, I was on a bit of a leave and Gordon Shrum heard that I was in town. I'm not sure how it all came about but he asked me if I would come with the unit and be the training officer. So I said that I had this other obligation but if he could get me out of that, that's fine with me. So apparently there was no great liason between what was going on in Britain and what was going on in Canada as far as continuity of method. There was no particular problem of releasing me. So I wound up with the O.T.C.

Mr. Specht: I see. You still were training troops for the

European battle ground?

Mr. Bonner: That's right.

Mr. Specht: What was it like when you returned to campus here, after more than two years in Europe? Did you notice any changes on the campus?

Mr. Bonner: Well of course everybody was civilian and a good deal younger.

Mr. Specht: How about the military atmosphere on campus. Did it seem in tune with what was going on overseas?

Mr. Bonner: Well, I think everybody was very keen. The O.C.T. had been an accepted part of the campus activity at that point and those who were active in the O.T.C. at the time I thought were doing a pretty good job, students and staff alike. I thought the students were particularly keen and I had some advantage from having been overseas. They'd pay attention and were eager to learn.

Mr. Specht: You became chief training instructor.

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: What were your duties as chief training instructor?

Mr. Bonner: Well fundamentally to be in charge of the training curriculum and general exercise and putting the programme together. In the summer time I became Brigade Major for the 30th Reserve Brigade. I was involved in training reserve troops that were in the

Mr. Specht: Did you initiate any changes as chief training instructor.....reorganize the syllabus in any way?

Mr. Bonner: Well yes, to some extent. Not the academic side so much but the drill side. I was interested to see introduced



at this early stage the battle drill concepts with which the active army was familiar. I think if I'd single something out that was the chief variation.

Mr. Specht: Did you give drill yourself?

Mr. Bonner: Yes, on occasion.

Mr. Specht: Did you give lectures?

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: You also would have attended the summer camps. Is that right, as a training instructor for the men?

Mr. Bonner: Yes.

Mr. Specht: And what summer camps did you attend?

Mr. Bonner: Well the summer camps I attended was the one at Chilliwack at which two or three students got drowned.

End of Track II