

(Tapping on the microphone)

L: Were you in Europe at the time?

B: No I was in South America, I was in Peru.

L: Oh

B: My wife is Peruvian.

S: How did you meet?

B: Met her at Oxford.

S: Oh that's nice.

B: Yeh, she's a gringo just like me (laughing)

L: Let me just put you on here....ah, Professor Sy Bunting  
ah, May 23, 1989; Borinsville(?) School.

B: Okay

S: Maybe you can just begin by telling us a little bit  
about yourself, and how you got ???????

B: I went to VMI in the fall of 1959 and I graduated in 1963  
so that I overlapped with Jon Daniels for 2 years. I went  
to VMI to get a commission in the Marine Corp. Ah, I had  
had a ah, dismal career in school and was unable to get into  
college. So I joined the Marines and spent a little under 2  
years in the Marine Corps as a private. I had a company  
commander in the Mediterranean who was a VMI alumnus and  
that's how I heard about VMI and I applied and was accepted  
there. Ah, like so many people ah, in these days, who had  
planned all along on going to college, I decided ah, I  
hadn't done very well in school, but I decided to go into  
the military was a sensible thing to do. A lot of people  
did that then, of course we still had the draft and so  
that's how I wound up in VMI. In those days I was living in  
Connecticut, I had no prior affiliation with the south or  
with Virginia or with VMI. But I did know that ah, it was a  
school that was well thought of by the Marine Corp and ah,  
there had been several Marine commandants and generals who  
had gone there. So that's literally why I went there. And  
after I had been there, it seems to me about 6 weeks or 2  
months, I discovered this place called the Timmon's Room.  
The Timmon's Room was on the top floor of the library at  
VMI. It was a room which had been given by a family of a  
man who had been killed in Korea. It had 6 separate  
listening booths and ah, there was a cadet organization  
known as the Timmon's Society and they would ah, they  
collected money and bought classical records and you could  
take these records and sit in a booth and study. It was  
really quite an oasis. Ah, VMI was a very tough school in  
those days. Anything you could do to get out of the ah,  
what they call the rat line, this rat system, you would do.  
So one night I was sitting up in the Timmon's Room in a  
booth and I was playing, if you can believe it, a Boston  
Pops recording of the Marine Corp Hymn ah, for some reason  
the Boston Pops recorded all these march marches one summer  
and ah, I was sitting there listening to it and I had it  
turned up very loud. Suddenly the door opened and this  
cadet walked in, this upper classman and I can't remember  
exactly what his words were but he said ah, "Turn that stuff  
off. Ah, it's appalling that you would play something like

that in a place like this." And ah, he sort of waved around the room at all of these records Bach and Mozart and Brahms, "It's just appalling that you would do something like that in here." And so, you know, I don't know what I did but I certainly implied and I didn't think much more about it. I went back to the barracks and ah....that night or the next night, I can't remember precisely when it was, this was more than 25 years ago. After taps, this fellow came into my room and barracks and it was Daniels and ah, I sat up on the edge of my bunk, he said, "Mr. Bunting, my name is Jon Daniels" and I said, "Yes sir, I know who you are." He said ah, "I apologize for losing my temper with you in the Timmon's Room. It was not right of me to do that. It occurs to me that ah, that kind of music is pronanly just as important to you as ah, Bach and Mozart are to me." and I said, "Well thank you very much." and then he left the room. But now that's an extraordinary thing for an upper classman to do. And then I began to see,

S: An apology?

B: Yeh, and I began to see him ah, around and we became pretty good friends. We used to have long, long conversations either in my room or down at the English department building or in the Timmon's Room and we became close friends after that. The irony of it all is that ah, I am a ah, serious and passionate and long time lover of the same kind of music that ah, Jon loves and ah, I'm a classical pianist, I'm not very good, but ah, I don't know why I happened to be playing this one loud thing and ah. So that's how I got to know him.

S: We hear stories that he was sort of ah, the defender in a lot of ways.

B: Culture

S: Culture and lower classman at VMI

B: He was.

S: How did that work?

B: VMI, ah VMI in those days was at least superficially hostile in the cadet culture to what you and I would loosely call the humane letters, to ah, philosophy, literature, serious music, poetry, sculpture, painting. VMI was known predominantly as an engineering and military school and you went there to prepare yourself functionally to be a successful professional. And ah, to be an english major in those days was to make a serious statement about what you considered to be important in life and your statement was not something endorsed by most of the other cadets and Jon was known as a very serious writing, practicing, poetical kind of english major. Um, the military, the stature of the American military or of any military, at least in Western history, has changed radically according to the different societies it represents. There was a time when to be a professional soldier was to be very highly regarded probably for your intellect. That's not typical of the status of armies in most societies. I don't want to get off the subject but ah, in any case at VMI, the military, VMI, the



'M' in the 3 initial was the ah, was the characteristic of the institution you thought about the most and it was sort of hostile to the fine arts. But Jon was ah, invariably admired and respected and ah liked by everybody because he was ah, you know, I mean he just had, he just, he had so much integrity and he was so straight and he was so honorable and he was so good that everybody admired him and ah,. But it was a climate that was quite hostile to what we're talking about and I would imagine it would have been more hostile to the activities that Jon undertook after he left VMI. He got a Danforth fellowship and he went to Harvard and then soon there after he decided he wanted to prepare for the episcopal priesthood.

S: He had some problems at Harvard.

B: Did he? Academic problems or just social?

S: Personal, psychological problems

B: Aha

S: dropped out and came back and lived in Keene and it was about a year or so before he made that decision. How about befriending lower classmen like yourself at VMI? There were some pretty terrible treatment of fellow classmen.

B: Ah, I think, you know, I don't know how many friends Jon had among the lower classmen, but he didn't have the kind of character or personality that could be hedged more governed or directed by a military system. If he liked somebody or he wanted to engage somebody, he didn't care whether they were a cadet captain or what we called a rat. The rat system at VMI in the early 60s was a ah, a system which still endures, like the bleep system at West Point, in which ah, you are given a lot of rigid regulations that you have to abide. A very tough disciplinary system to which you must inform ah, you are not allowed to look around the barracks, you have to walk in a certain manner along a certain prescribed line, everybody is surly, you have to eat in a certain, that kind of thing. And ah, I think Jon respected that but he didn't ah, he didn't let it interfere in friendships and relationships with rats. Jon was ah, very close to a professor at VMI called Herbert Dillard. Dillard was then head of the english department. Dillard was a ah, in a way, sort of a 60 year old version of what Jon Daniels looked as though he might become when he was young. He had gone to VMI, he graduated in 1933 or 34, he was a Harvard Phd. In a military situation like that, you have typically sores of culture and they are amazingly zealous people ah, it's a little bit like what Mary McCarthy said in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, when you learn english history in the hands of catholic nuns, it really sticks to the ribs because they are zealous and ah. I also knew Jon in the summertime, I used to see him in the summer in Washington. We spent a lot of time together. It seems to me this would have been between.....my.....it would have been between my sophomore and junior summers, it would have been the summer after he left. He had a job in Washington that summer, I can't remember what it was but he was around all summer.



S: He might have been an aid to Senator Cotton

B: Maybe that's what it was. But ah, he was a ah, absolutely rare and stunningly memorable person. He had great integrity, he had ah, remarkable sweetness of disposition ah, he spoke english with extraordinary precision and lyricism.....He was very very special.

S: What about the whole question of interracial relationships at VMI? Did that come up at all?

B: Never came up, it never came up as far as I knew ah, at least in conversations with him. Ah, .....I mean it was so completely alien to our consciousness in those days. There was no sense, for example, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, things like that. There was no sense of that in that part of Virginia until about 1964, 5 and 6 after we had left, long after he had gone.

S: How about just meeting black people perhaps working at VMI?

B: Ah, there were blacks who worked at VMI, they were invariably and subserviant positions ah, there were ah, blacks who worked on what we called the stoops, I don't know if you've been to VMI and walked around the barracks but ah, the barracks is a place of incredible osterity and the rooms give on to the, directly on to the outside. It would be like an Italian palazzo. You step out the door and you're outside and they, each one of these galleries had 2 or 3 black men who cleaned them. I mean they didn't clean your room or anything like that, but they were in positions of ah, menial work. But ah, VMI in those days, was, the correct adjective is remote rather than hostile. I can ah, although one thing I can remember, it's neither here nor there, but I remember being a rat and ah, the football team after week or 2 played against a school called Marshall University, in those days it was called Marshall College and one of the boys broke his leg in the game, upper classman and I remember hearing him say in the barracks he had been run over by a big buck nigger, " I got run over by a buck nigger" and ah, I had never heard that phrase or ah, heard anything like that before. Ah, even though I had been in the military. It wasn't said with any particular animosity or hatred but, this was the old south. To take incendently, a 30 second cultural detore. that part of the south that you're going to on the whole, has a much more admirable and venturesome and early record of success in the civil rights movement, particularly in the integration of its schools and central and eastern Virginian and North Carolina. What you are dealing with in West Virginia and the Shenendoah valley is settlements basically by Germans, Scot-Irish presbyterians from the 17th and 18th century from Alster County New York, Lancaster County, Pennsylvannia. Ah, there was never any slave culture at all. West Virginia as you know became a union state in 1863 so that on the whole cities like Stanton, Waynesboro, Roanoke, Lexington, the places you'll be visiting, were not, were not the cesspools of American segregated culture ah, still ah, colleges in the

south in those days were almost invariably all white. I guess James Meredith entered Mississippi in 64, 62 was it. The question of ah, that you asked before, just to respond quickly to it ah, I can't imagine what his motivation was ah. I can't remember, I cannot remember conversations about the subject. Ocassionally you met people there who did not get into West Point. VMI always had a lot of those people, but he had no interest in West PPoint that I knew of. There may have been some remote family connection or something. S: There's a theory, I don't know if it will hold up or not, that he went there because he was rather a rebellious, misbehaving sort of ???? and ah, perhaps felt that he needed some sort of discipline and order to structure his life a bit.

B: He was instinctively drawn to something like that.

L: MAY I turn these on?

B: Sure.....if that's the case, I'm not certain why he didn't go to Norwich Academy or West Point or someplace up in New England.

S: Well you know, in high school he mentioned the south. When he was very, very young, we can't quite get the dates yet, we will. MAYbe when he was 2 years old, jis father went into the service as an army doctor and part of that was spent down in Kentucky and ah, parts of the south and even when he was going through high school at Keene High, he had a fondness for the south which is sort of mystical the way he eventually returned south.

B: Are his parents still living, either of them?

S: No both of them are dead.

B: Both are dead.

S: In fact I was going to ask you, his father died when you came to VMI that year.

B: 59

L: Down around Christmas of 59, long illness ah, liver kidney deterioration.

S: He had a painful death. Do you recall any of that?

B: Nothing at all.

S: Nothing at all?

L: In fact, Mrs DeBold told me, I think she said it was caused by a schrapnel injury in WW2.

S: His father was a wonderful man as far as we can tell. One of these doctors who just spent hours in the office and would go out and do housecalls.

L: We're taking these down,

B: That's his father huh?

L: Yeh, there's his father and mother, and there's,

S: Taking these down to the system.

B: The invariable snow, the first thing you see out there...

L: In fact if there's anything we can send you, a copy of the tape or,

B: I'd love to have something like that. I think, you know this is all very speculative and ah, but I think that ah, VMI in a paradoxical way, in those years, was extremely hospitable to the kind of idealism which lead Jon to do what he did ah, I mean this was a place that ah, had no blacks and had no particular social consciousness. But it was also a place in which ah, everybody wore a grey suit. There were



no social distinctions. You really had to make it on your wits and it was a time in American History when no one dreamed of owning a big car at the age of 23 or ah, going to Wall Street and merging a company. I mean there, it was a quite pure time and as it happened that this was a military place and most of the people thought in terms of military vocations. But I remember other people talking about serving in the Peace Corp when I was there. I mean the Kennedy ah, the Kennedy culture, this is something George Bush doesn't understand, I mean people who talk about the White House as a bully pulpit, it really is if that kind of personality in the presidency is communicating, we can go out and make things better. Think what Bush could do for education if he really wanted to, if he really wanted to. But anyway, I think in that culture and that context ah, Jon probably had a great deal of time to think very hard about what he wanted to do ah, .....I don't know if you were listening to us before when I talked about when I got married but ah, that's ah, I mean that sounds like something out of ah 19th century novel, doesn't it?

L: Jonathan was shot early Friday morning on August 20th?

B: Yeh

L: And you heard about it?

B: Saturday morning at 11:00. I had been taken out of my wifes house by ah, a friend of her fathers and he said, you must come to my house and get dressed, you should not be around your wife on your wedding day, so you'll see her in church. So we went down the street and I remember asking for a drink, and he said, "You can't drink, you have to have milk. I don't want anybody to drink before they get married." Anyway, but he had this Zenith radio and we turned it on and the first thing I heard was "A young episcopal seminarian from New England, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, has been killed (I can't even remember the name of the place in Alabama)" What county? Lowndes County?

S: Yeh he got killed in Lowndes County in Hainville.

B: Yeh, and then of course everything I learned and heard after that was just sort of ah, herese. I never really, I participated in a ah, a little drive to raise some money to name a room after him at school and, but you know, even that was carried on with a certain weary defensiveness by the people that were doing it there.

L: We got that impression.

S: Yeh, from what we understand it's changed now um,

B: Yeh, it's all changed. It hasn't changed as much as they would like it.

L: Well can we set up the lights and do a few minutes on camera?

B: Sure

L: Would you mind?

B: Not at all

S: When you were with Jonathan, what would the topics be that you would talk about?

B: Music, um, why I was interested in the military, ah, women. We talked a lot about girls.

S: Tell us about that a little bit.

B: Well, the summer I spent so much time with Jon was in Washington ah, I was ah, desprately in love with this girl and ah, Jon thought she was an airhead, just thought she was a chuckle head and I thought it was stupid. Ad we had long long talks about that and ah, he could not understand that and, that's really about all I can remember.

S: Did he have a concept of women ah?

B: No I never, Jon was ah, I mean this in the best way possible, JOn was sort of at the scene. I can't remember Jon ever being interested, I'm sure he was, but ever sort of being drawn to men or women or sex or anything. Maybe he was later on, but at that time he was literally that way. Jon would have been a heck of a priest and ah, when I look back on how he lived and how he died, I'm certain he was called to do that.

S: that ah, did you talk about vocations, priesthood, military, college prof, any of that?

B: No, he talked about teaching in college. He talked ah, when we talked about things like this, he talked about writing and being a college teacher and ah, if my memory serves me right, the Danforth fellowship that he won was to enable him, I think, to get a doctorate degree in English and be a college teacher. Jon was very interested in such poets as Keats, Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth. That was his big period.

L: The irony, paradox rather, the ???? nature of Jon, it's interesting, we've come across 3 women that were totally head over heels, devotedly in love with him, and they seemed to be platonic relationships. One, and all 3 have agreed ???? , it's kind of interesting, in fact all 3 have kept memorabilia and all 3 I think have ???? and all from distinct periods in his life. Very Very intersting man. I think he had a profound effect on them, it might have been that removed quality that interested them.

B: I have a ah, manuscript of a novel I haven't touched in 10 years, five or six hundred pages, sitting in a closet about ah, my experience in the school, in which Jon is ah, present. There is a character who is sort of based on him at the beginning although he's changed drastically as you go along as happens in fiction um, .....I guess the point I would make was, in those days, a school like that attracted a lot of very singular, idealistic people who hadn't quite defined what it was that they were persuing or what they wanted to do with their lives, but they were there. I mean it was quite peculiar and he was obviously one of them but I guess you would say the ah, the precipitation of all these elements that were in suspension, didn't occur until 1962 or 63. I was seeing and knowing Jon as he came close to the end, figuring out what he wanted to do.

L: Nicely put.

B: Did he ah, did he.....have what now a days would be called some kind of a religious experience. I mean, did he just suddenly

S: Well as far as we can tell, I mean, he had to drop out of Harvard, it wasn't, I think he decided at that point the intellectual life without service was not what he wanted and



ah, to play amateur psychologist, was having probably delayed reactions to his father's death and was sort of confronting that. And ah, came back to Keene and then at one point in that period, he went into chapel, I think it was at Harvard and had sort of a religious conversion um, that pushed him more towards a religious sector um and finally arranged through the local episcopal church to ah, go on to ah, ETS in Cambridge. That was sort of like one of those dark life crisis, go to church, find some kind of answers there, that kind of existential sense I think.

B: I had a ah, I don't know, a yearbook or some VMI publication, I can't remember what it was ah, which Jon wrote in. I have no idea where it is now but I remember what he wrote. He said, this is the typical Daniels locution, he, I'll tell you a couple of funny things he wrote. He wrote 18th century prose, you know, "It is something of a tribute to your possession of the certain indefinable id that I have come to admire you as a colleague and love you as a friend." He wrote that in the book and ah, that was the first time I had ever heard a man use the word love in describing friendship and ah, I remember another thing. I mean these are just stupid, stupid things that pop into my mind. He ran this Timmon's Room with a kind of loving sternness and these cadets,

S: Was it his function there?

B: Ahha, he was president of the Timmon's Society and ah, each night whoever was the duty officer had to shut down the room and you know, sign out, the typical military stuff and make any comments. Typically the record player in room 4 doesn't work, that sort of thing. One night he wrote, ah, in the comments that "We are given to understand through a graffito on the wall of booth 3 that Othello eats it."

(Laughs) I thought was very funny. "Othello eats it" you know. Can you just imagine some freshman writing that.

L: Let's set up the lights, it's going to take us a couple of minutes, can we pause for a second?

B: Sure yeh (Recorder goes off).....

L: Give us the old tes tes there and sort of say hello, Test.....test, test testing, test. Did I get a good signal

S: Umhum

L: Okay, well we'll have to sync it all before. So when we actually, I'll say rolling and you can put your hands in front of your face and just say ah, Sy Bunting Take one, like that.

B: You want me to do that?

L: Yeh please

B: Okay

L: We'll give you a copy of this stuff when we get it

B: Okay

S: So let's get back to Daniels a little bit and ah, maybe you can ah, go back to the point again where ah, you were talking about that one event.

B: When I met him?

S: When you met him,

B: The first time?

S: Yeh



L: Should we put that on camera. Why not? we had plenty of film, there's no reason to be nervous about that.

S: Yeh we'll do it again

L: Okay well let me just get things rolling and um

B: Okay and then you want me to just go like that

L: And take your hand skind of away, that will give me a take point, just say Sy Bunting Take One (clap)

B: Okay, you just point at me when you want me to do it.

L: I'll just yell out roll. And I'm still ????, we're not doing anything fancy or anything like that

B: Okay

L: Okay

B: Sy Bunting, Take one.....I met ah, I met Jon under unusual circumstances. At VMI in these days, on the top floor of the library, there was a place which we looked at as a place of refuge known as the Timmon's Room. It was set up sort of like a suite in a college dormitory. There was a central room and around this room were 4 or 5 booths and in each booth was a chair, a table and a turn table and some speakers. In the Timmon's Room was a table, somebody sat behind it and he checked out classical records. I had been at VMI maybe a month and I had brought over from the barracks my own record, it's funny how you remember things like this, but I remember this with perfect clarity, of the Boston Pops Orchestra playing Marshall music and I'd gone into this room and I put the thing on and turned it up very loud and the Boston Pops Orchestra was playing the Marine Corp Hymn and I was just sitting there studying or something. A couple of minutes passed and the door opened and a man walked in, I looked up at him, this was Daniels. I had never seen him before and he said to me ah, something like, "You know, you really ought to be ashamed of yourself, coming into a place like this and playing that kind of music. It is barbaric and I very, very disappointed that you would do something like that. Turn it off." So of course I turned it right off and he shut the door and left. Then I guess I went back to the barracks and didn't think anything of it aside from feeling bad. But at VMI when you were a freshman or a rat, you feel bad anyway so. That night, or maybe the next night, after taps, this person came into my room, and I call him "this person" because I still wasn't sure what his name was. The lights were out, I was in bed, I guess I had maybe one or maybe two roommates and I heard this voice say, "Mr. Bunting," and I sat up and ah, he walked over and he said, "My name is Jon Daniels. I was the cadet on duty in the Timmon's Room and I burst into the booth where you were listening to this music." He said, "I'm sorry the way I acted at that time, I apologize. It occurs to me music like that is as important to you as classical music is to me." I'm paraphrasing but I think I'm pretty close to what he said. "And anyway I;m sorry" and then he shook hands with me, um, which is a very rare thing to have an upper classman do and the he just turned around and walked out of the room. So that was how I met him and then during the remainder of that year I would see him from time to time and got to know him very well.

L: Cut good

S: Great. I was going to ask you, while this is running too, did you have any ah, knowledge of his work on the paper, I forget the name of it?

B: The VMI Cadet, umhum. I worked on the cadet. We were both associate editors but ah, there was nothing unexceptional, I mean, it was just ah, you know, typical, 1961 newspaper.

S: Ahha, he did write some editorials or something against,

B: I don't remember them

S: Yeh, don't remember them, Okay

L: Bill, anything else you want to get on film?

B: But try to find those things. I would think they would be interesting.

L: We're going to. I think Mrs ??????

S: Well I think we're all set

L: I mean I'd be glad, you know, things are set up if there's another story or something.

S: Well the death, the way he learned about

L: We can put that on film.

S: Okay, why don't we just do that.

B: I can tell it very quickly

L: Well that's okay, we're fine. Let me see what I have left here. I just got this.....

B: I remember the sheriff, the fellow that shot Jon, at least the story I heard, claiming that Jon had a pistol in his hand when in fact Jon had a quarter or something he was going to put into a coca cola machine. Something like that. Is the sheriff still living?

S: He's dying now.

B: He's dying.

S: He's dying yeh. His sister is alive and we hope to be able to contact her. There was an interview with Coleman about what, a year later?

L: A year later on CBS.'

S: Yeh and he just says he'd do it again.

L: He said the niggers in the south are good niggers until, this was never aired. I went to CBS and saw it. Until northern whites came down and made them bad niggers.

B: Did you see Mississippi Burning?

S: Yeh, didn't like it.

B: Well you know, that movie had a problem, I didn't like it either and ah, I didn't like it for the same reason I didn't like, did you ever see a movie called The Great Santini?

S: Yeh, I like that film.

B: Well I like it, but about half way through the film, Santini starts to beat up his wife, remember that? He slaps her, the audience doesn't know where to go then. I mean he had been presented as this sort of endearingly idiocentric, off the wall, right wing guy but then you saw and ah, in Mississippi Burning, I couldn't tell if it was supposed to be mythic or realistic. Do you know what I mean? The guys walking around the swamp in their suits and. It's a powerful film. The opening scene is a great, great scene but then it sort of lost me.

S: Yeh, became a buddy film. Two cops from different



backgrounds trying to ah, work together.

L: Shall we do Take Two? Now that thing is still running?

Is the ????? still syncing?

S: Yeh

L: Okay and are we getting a signal on the microphone?

S: Yeh

L: Good. God things are working right. Okay, I'll get it cranking and the we'll ah run Take Two with the clap of the ahnds and

S: And this is when you learned about his death.

B: Yeh

L: Okay, rolling

B: Take two...My wife and I were married August 21st, 1965 in Lima, Peru and late that morning I had left my wife's house where I had been staying and ah, to go be with a friend of hers, friends of their families, on the theory that bride grroom should be out of the way. And I remember asking this fellow ah, for a drink and he said "No you can't have a drink, you have to drink milk. The bride groom must be perfectly sober. Go in this room and change." So he took me into this guest room while he went to get the milk, and there was a Zenith transosianic radio. Remember those great big handsome things? I turned it oin and ah, it was a news broadcast from the United States and the first item on the news was something like the following: "A young, episcopalian seminarian from New England, has been killed by a sheriff in Alabama. The young man's name is Jonathan Myrick Daniels, age 23, of Keene, New Hampshire" and then he talked about something else and ah, what can I say. It was the most stunning and unbelievable thing to have happen at that time. That's the incident and ah

L: Cut

S: Okay thanks

END OF INTERVIEW