

Interviewer

All right, today is March 2, 2012. We're in the studios of the West Point Center for Oral History with Colonel Lance Betros, the soon-to-retire head of the History Department here at West Point. Welcome, Colonel Betros.

Lance Betros

Thanks, Todd.

Interviewer

Colonel Betros has also played an important and critical role—perhaps the most critical role—in the establishment of the Center for Oral History, so we're very grateful to have him here today. Colonel Betros, you come from a military family?

Lance Betros

Not at all, except that my dad was in World War II. He was in the Army Air Corps and rose to the exalted rank of PFC, which he always liked to kid me about that. So no, I was not in a military family beyond that, and therefore, even though I grew up in Poughkeepsie, New York, I never knew that West Point existed, didn't know what it was. Didn't realize it was only 30 miles away from my house.

Interviewer

So how is it that you ended up here as a Plebe, then?

Lance Betros

Well, ironic to what we'll talk about later, I'm sure, I played football in high school, and I was actually pretty good. So one day in my, in the fall of my senior year, the football coach from high school came into my classroom, asked the teacher if I could step out for a couple minutes, and I met Coach Bud Neswiacheny, class of '68 from West Point, who was a football coach here at West Point. And we chatted just for a couple of minutes, and he gave me some papers that I took home.

Lance Betros

Well, I had no intention of going into the military or didn't even know what West Point was at that point, but my father did. So my father looked at the papers that I had received and heard what had happened that day, and strongly encouraged me to fill out the papers.

Interviewer

Where had you been thinking about going to college before that?

Lance Betros

Well, I had always wanted to go to medical school, so I had applied to Cornell, Brown, NYU, and as it turned out, I would get accepted to all of them; but I also turned out to get accepted to West Point. And I figured that if I went to one of the other schools, the civilian schools, I would never know if West Point was a place that I really want to go. Whereas if I went to West Point first and didn't like it, I could always leave West Point and continue on with my—with the other routes.

Interviewer

Were you going to be playing football at the other schools, too, or was this the only oneâ€”

Lance Betros

Yes.

Interviewer

It was all of them.

Lance Betros

Yes.

Interviewer

You were recruited for football for all those schools.

Lance Betros

Well, for Cornell and Brownâ€”NYU didnâ€™t have a team, so.

Interviewer

And what was your position?

Lance Betros

I was a linebacker, and I also played on the offensive line. But I was recruited to be a linebacker.

Interviewer

And so you joined here, you came here as a Plebe in the summer of?

Lance Betros

â€™73.

Interviewer

â€™73.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

And what was it like here then?

Lance Betros

Well, it was during the days when leadership meant a lot of yelling and screaming. We had to be transitioned from civilian to military, and the idea was that youâ€”you break somebody down and you treat them harshly, and you make them know that theyâ€™re in a new

environment. And from that point, once they've accepted their lowly status, then you can build them up somehow. I didn't

Interviewer

You speak about this with a little certain disdain, I can tell.

Lance Betros

Well, I didn't buy it then, and I have never bought it. And thoughtful people in the Army and at West Point also realized that this was not a healthy form of leadership.

Interviewer

But this had been the approach, am I right? We'll get to the history of West Point

Lance Betros

Uh-huh.

Interviewer

In a succeeding interview. But this had been the approach for 150 years at that point.

Lance Betros

Sure, sure. It was very traditional. The assumption was that it was an attritional academy, where you had to when you came to West Point, it was like going through a gauntlet. And if you made it through the gauntlet, then you were you were considered to be an able officer somebody who could adapt to anything.

Lance Betros

Well, that really doesn't fly in the face of reason. People don't like to be treated in a demeaning way, no matter who you are or where you are. And I can remember during basic training they called it Beast Barracks wondering, "Why is everybody yelling at me? Why don't you just tell me what you'd like [me] to do and I'll be happy to do it for you?" But instead, I was rarely spoken to in a calm, deliberate manner. Usually it was yelling, and always rushing around, and you could never do anything well enough, and there was a lot of sarcasm and cynicism and demeaning verbiage.

Lance Betros

So, I didn't know any better, but just intuitively I said, "This is not how I would want to treat my own subordinates, and"

Interviewer

Did you have a thought, then, that this wasn't for you that you wanted out?

Lance Betros

The first year at West Point wasn't happy for me. Again, I was from a basically civilian background didn't really know if I wanted to be in the military thought that I didn't, actually, at the beginning. Football helped me to get through a lot of that, because it was fun and it was a wholesome diversion from everything else. But it really was difficult for me, that first year, because I thought I was recruited to play football, and yet

there was this other thing called “getting ready to be an officer” that was sort of important, too.

Lance Betros

So I was in conflict the whole year; and also I was feeling sorry for myself. It was hard. It was lonely, even being only 30 miles from home. It was still I might as well have been on the other side of the moon. So yeah, there was a lot of stress. This is West Point?

Interviewer

You told me once about a story about driving here for the first time, I guess on your way here”to the Academy.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

Tell me that again.

Lance Betros

Well, like I said, I didn’t even know West Point existed. And we were”Poughkeepsie” on the east side of the river, West Point” on the west side of the river; so for my first trip down here, it was a recruiting trip sponsored by the Director of Intercollegiate Athletics. I was in my dad’s car, driving south. I got it all the way to Newburgh on 9W, Route 9W, so far, so good. I got to Cornwall, and I knew that I’m getting reasonably close to West Point, and all of a sudden on the right-hand side of the road, there was a sign that said, “Military Academy.”

Lance Betros

So I pulled off real quick, and in a minute or two I came up on a ramshackle old dog-eared place with a green rusty fence, and I just looked at that and said, “This is West Point? ” you know, and”well, it wasn’t West Point. It was New York Military Academy. It was a private high school, basically. So I figured it out pretty quickly, and then went 10 more miles down the road, and when I finally got to West Point, you could imagine, having just seen the New York Military Academy, that West Point looked pretty good.

Interviewer

Yeah. So you were impressed by it the first time you saw it.

Lance Betros

Yes, I was. It was everything to be impressed about, yeah.

Interviewer

Who did you meet here when you came for that recruiting call?

Lance Betros

Well my”the fellow who recruited me was”I think I mentioned his name already”Bud

Neswiacheny. And he was a football player from—he graduated in the class of ’68, and seemed to be a fine mentor, terrific football player, and a great officer. So he’s the one that helped me when I would come down to West Point for those trips.

Interviewer

Who was the head coach at that time?

Lance Betros

His name was Tom Cahill, and he was going to have a rough season in 1973. That was the year that the varsity went 0 in 10. It was the worst season West Point had ever, ever suffered through, and as a result it cost him his job.

Interviewer

Okay.

Lance Betros

Now, I played on the plebe team that year, so—well, you know, bad things go downhill, and even though we won a couple of games, it was still not a whole lot of fun playing in the shadow of a very unsuccessful season.

Interviewer

Who was the plebe coach at the time?

Lance Betros

His name was—I forget his first name, but his last name was Stork, Mr. Stork—Coach Stork.

Interviewer

What do you remember about him?

Lance Betros

A fine fellow, and tried very hard to not only have a winning football team, but he really embraced the idea of West Point as a developmental institution.

Interviewer

It must’ve been exciting for you, though, as a Poughkeepsie High School boy to come play football, here, under a real national spotlight—

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

I mean with thousands upon thousands of people in the stands, right? I mean—

Lance Betros

Well, it was. Now, I never played in a varsity gameâ€”I just played in the plebe level. But even still, it was fun to have my high school coach come down and watch, and my parents would come down. It was a lot of fun. And the thought of being on the varsity someday was exciting. But some things intervened.

Interviewer

Yeah, tell me about those.

Lance Betros

Yeah. Well, first of all, when the varsity went 0 in 10, Coach Cahill was fired, and a whole new coaching staff came in. So when we went into spring training that springâ€”in â€™74, that wouldâ€™ve beenâ€”it was like starting all over again. And I remember a couple of not-so-nice experiences with the linebackersâ€™ coachâ€”the new one that came in; and it just wasnâ€™t fun anymore.

Interviewer

What were those experiencesâ€”tell me whatâ€™

Lance Betros

Well, I remember being on the sidelineâ€”I couldnâ€™t do anything right for this man. I wonâ€™t say his name, but I couldnâ€™t do anything right for this man; and he would yell at me. He was like the cadreâ€”would just yell at you all the time. And one day during practice, I was standing not five feet from him on the sideline, but he saw something wrong out on the field, and he yelled out, â€œBetros, get your ass in gear.â€

Lance Betros

And I knew right then if, you know, there I am on the sideline and he thinks Iâ€™m doing something wrong out there, I had no chance with this guy. So thatâ€™s just an example.

Interviewer

He was mistaking, though, somebody out there for you.

Lance Betros

Yeah, he was mistaking somebody for me, yeah.

Interviewer

Okay.

Lance Betros

At any rate, by that time I had really started to change, to mature, and realize that I wasnâ€™t there to play football. It was sinking in, finally. And it wasnâ€™tâ€”as a result of that, it was losing its appeal.

Interviewer

Now, but you say you werenâ€™t there to play football, meaning that something had drawn you to West Point that didnâ€™t have anything to do with football, or do you mean that West Point was a place where youâ€™re going to learn something else, and thatâ€™s

what their intention was for you?

Lance Betros

When I entered West Point, it was really as an experiment. I didn't know what to expect. My dad was pretty encouraging—I would almost say insistent—that I went to West Point, because he said, "Go ahead and try it. You know, if you don't like it, you know, you can always leave." So a young guy at 18 years old who was recruited to play football when I got there that's really what I thought I was there for to play football. And I mean

Interviewer

But had you given up your dreams of being a doctor?

Lance Betros

Not really. I wasn't sure. If I liked West Point, I might stay. If I didn't, I would go pursue the other part of it. So I got there, and little by little, even playing football, I realize from just being there and absorbing it all, that the institution stood for very noble things, and the Army was a noble institution. And I started liking it, and there were a lot of—there were requirements and standards and regimentation, and there were ways to achieve, and it was—that was very appealing; so, football was losing its luster.

Lance Betros

And then during the summertime in my rising yearling summer I went to Camp Buckner and was given a leadership position there. I was a first sergeant for one of the training companies. And boy, that's when it really clicked. It was fun. I was in charge of things, and we were doing real training. And it was—it really was different from what I had anticipated. And from that point forward, I never looked back.

Interviewer

What—what was it that you discovered? You say you were in charge of things. You could've been in charge of the stockroom at Target, but you were not, obviously—something—in charge of what? What was the distinctive thing about

Lance Betros

People.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

I was in charge of people, and I was actually—I was influencing whether they would be successful or not. I was the first sergeant of the company, and I realized that—it was this growing realization that, you know, human beings really can have an influence in other people's lives in a very positive way if people allow.

Interviewer

How'd you see that in this first instance? What did you recognize in the men that you

were leading then that gave you that impression?

Lance Betros

Well, by being put in a leadership position, I had the opportunity to see that their success depended on me doing my job, and me also interacting with them. And in some cases, motivating them—in some cases—in some cases, disciplining them—organizing guard shifts and training—movements to training and admin support and all those things. And it was challenging, but when you did your job and you realized that that directly relates to everybody else's ability to be successful, that's satisfying. There are a lot of rewards to that.

Lance Betros

So, by extension, you realize that when you graduate you're going to be a second lieutenant with upward mobility through the ranks, and you have a greater and greater opportunity to influence in a positive way other human beings. That's meaningful.

Interviewer

You think your hunch was right, looking back now from the vantage point of a near-retirement?

Lance Betros

Yeah, it's been a good career.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

It's been 35 years, and obviously it wouldn't have been 35 years if I had thought any differently.

Interviewer

What assumptions do you think you took in that moment of epiphany that perhaps were wrong? Has it been hard to lead men in ways you had not understood at that—obviously, you couldn't have—you were just beginning to develop the skills by which to do it?

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

What were the kind of obstacles that you never would've anticipated?

Lance Betros

Well, personally, I made a lot of mistakes, and I had a lot of growing to do. And—by temperament, I always sort of backed away from confrontation. It's hard to get in somebody's face and just tell them that what they're doing is not right, or—you need to change, or—you need to stop this, or; I mean there are a lot of very positive things about leadership, but there are those times when you have to confront failure or



problem areas. And for me, that was difficult.

Interviewer

Do you remember any episodes in which that became crystal clear to you?

Lance Betros

Well, yeah. I became, as a first classman, I was a company commander, first an executive officer of a company and then a company commander. And there were the usual things with classmates who weren't keeping their room to standard, or you know, their uniforms were not in order. And you know, you can't let that go, because if you don't correct your own classmates then you're setting a double standard. And you know, there were some challenges, but this is a leader development institution, and this is the place where cadets have the opportunity of practicing those things. So I did my share of practicing and learning during all of those types of experiences.

Interviewer

You were here at West Point during a particularly turbulent time—

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

In the country's history. This was the end of the Vietnam War, right?

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

And the resignation of Richard Nixon—

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

And a real clash of youth culture with the establishment. As a member of the young generation, you were going the direct opposite direction of so many of those who were defining the youth of the '70s. How do you recall all that, looking back now? What was it like to be here in 1973, 4, 5?

Lance Betros

It was one could tell, or I could tell, even at a young age, that—what was going on at West Point was out of step with what I would be experiencing at a civilian university. I mean there was still a lot of, you know, dissent and challenging of authority going on, even by the mid-1970s, after the real wild years of the late '60s and early '70s. So, you know we knew that we were pursuing a route in life or a road in life that was really diverged from everybody else.

Lance Betros

Now, what that meant for usâ€”I mean we were pretty cloistered at West Point, so we didnâ€™t have a lot of opportunity to go out and mix it up with our civilian counterparts, butâ€”

Interviewer

What did you think of them, though? Did you look with disdain upon the protest movements and the drugs and the sex and the hippies and all that that was happening during that time?

Lance Betros

To a certain extent.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

You know a cloistered environment where youâ€™re very regimented, where youâ€™re adhering to certain standards, and you look outside and you see relatively chaos out there. Yeah, you know, there is this idea nurtured in you that youâ€™re better than they are, and that you donâ€™t want to be out there. I mean thatâ€™s not a veryâ€”thatâ€™s not the right way to think about it, but itâ€™s hard not to. And you know Iâ€™ll jump forward real quick, and every chanceâ€”or in many chances here, when I talk to cadets, I warn them about thatâ€”not to consider yourself better than your civilian counterparts.

Lance Betros

You are differentâ€”youâ€™re just different. Youâ€™re pursuing different paths, and whether youâ€™re civilian or military, itâ€™s okay to embrace the civilian-ness or the military-ness that youâ€™ve chosen.

Interviewer

Did you have an attitude about the Vietnam War when you arrived here, â€”cause it was still going on? It was winding down.

Lance Betros

Well, yeah, it was just about finished. I think my parents would not have been as eager for me to go to West Point had the war still been going on.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

I mean, theyâ€™”they knewâ€”everybody knew by then it was winding down, and that made it a little easier to go there. And also the tuition wasnâ€™t bad, too, you know; so, thatâ€™s another reason why I was there.

Interviewer

But you're also arriving at an institution of the Army at a time when the Army had been marked by failure, really.

Lance Betros

Right.

Lance Betros

That, I would imagine, was a difficult time to be here at the Academy.

Lance Betros

Yeah. You know, in general that meant many people across America viewed the military with distrust, with, you know, anger—whatever it was during that period. But it's still—West Point in particular still was very prestigious in the minds of many people, and my parents especially. I mean they viewed West Point as sort of like the city on the hill—Oz or whatever—a very impressive and attractive place. And for their son to go there, they were very proud of that.

Interviewer

Well, let's speak about your parents for a moment, because you come from an immigrant family. I guess we all come from immigrant families—

Lance Betros

Yeah, right.

Interviewer

But yours was your parents were first-generation, am I right?

Lance Betros

They were both born here.

Interviewer

Right.

Lance Betros

Their parents all were born in Lebanon.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

And we've talked about this off-camera before, but tell me about your family and their

role in the history of the Middle East.

Lance Betros

Well, yeah. On my mother's side, my maternal grandfather was actually part of the Arab independence movement during World War I. He fought with Prince Faisal then, and knew Lawrence of Arabia—you know, the British officer—pretty well, actually. My grandfather was Prince Faisal's aide, and you know, fought through the years of the First World War; and actually, when the war was over, Faisal presented my father with a beautiful gold dagger that we still have in the family.

Interviewer

But he also accompanied Faisal to the Treaty of Versailles or to the Paris Peace Conference after the war, and they were very hopeful that the result would be independence for the Arabs. And when that didn't happen, he was crushed. He was so disappointed that he realized that he decided his future wasn't in the Middle East any more, and he immigrated to the United States.

Lance Betros

Now, my other four—my other three grandparents immigrated for other reasons, but all of them ended up in America between the latter years, the very final years of the nineteenth century and about 1923, when my grandfather got here.

Interviewer

All from Lebanon.

Lance Betros

All from Lebanon.

Interviewer

And so, in some ways you—you're—I guess like all of us do, but you seem to have a special line to this relationship with major historical moments there.

Lance Betros

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer

You must be proud of that.

Lance Betros

Yes, I am.

Interviewer

What was your mother's maiden name?

Lance Betros

My mother's maiden name was Mandoor—I'm sorry, that's my

grandmother's maiden name. My mother's maiden name was NeJame, or Nejime, which is a common Arabic name—it's sort of a "Smith" in English. And my father's branch of the family was also Najime. But when he came over—that's my father's father—they decided to use one of the first names of their ancestors, and that was Peter. Now, in English—I'm sorry—in Arabic the name Peter is Boutros, so that's where I get my last name, Betros.

Interviewer

Do you speak Arabic?

Lance Betros

Only enough to get me in trouble, so

Interviewer

Have you spent any time in Lebanon?

Lance Betros

No.

Interviewer

Do you have any interest in going there?

Lance Betros

Someday, perhaps. My brother is an Arabic linguist and spent many years. He's also a West Point graduate.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

He spent many years in the Middle East.

Interviewer

Did he follow on your experience here or was he older?

Lance Betros

He was younger than me, and graduated in 1981, and ended up—I am an Infantry officer. He was a Signal Corps officer who got out after a few years, and yet he has far more years in combat than I do, so it's just ironic.

Interviewer

How would you rank the education you got here?

Lance Betros

Very good. We received a lot of education. I would—I would criticize it only insofar as that

we took so many courses that it was very difficult to study in depth. And of course when I was a cadet we didn't have majors. We had concentrations, something less than a major. But there was so much to do, and we had so little free time, that we were pinging. We used to call it pinging, just back and forth from one class to the next, from one event to the next, that really the emphasis was on learning something quickly enough for the test and then forget about it, because you've got something else to do.

Interviewer

And of course that's not pedagogically, that's not sound. We want cadets to reflect on their education, and to have out-of-class discussions with their instructors and with fellow cadets. That's what really solidifies an education and broadens the education. And yet somehow we did alright. I mean it was still a very

Interviewer

What was your concentration?

Lance Betros

Civil engineering.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

So.

Interviewer

And did you have any interest in history when you were here?

Lance Betros

I liked it. If you look at my transcript, you'll see that my best grades are all in the humanities—humanities and social sciences. So I was a pretty mediocre engineer, but I did very well in foreign languages, history, English. So not surprising, when I came back years later to go to graduate school, I chose one of the fields in the humanities.

Interviewer

Your class is known for some unfortunate reasons with respect to the violation of the Honor Code. Can you speak to the episode? Tell us where you were when you first heard? Tell us the story of it, how it happened from your vantage point as a cadet.

Lance Betros

The incident you're referring to is known as the EE 304 cheating incident. EE 304 was electrical engineering. It was the second of two semester-length courses in electrical engineering. It was a tough sequence. It was a sequence that a lot of cadets dreaded taking because it was just going to be hard. Well, we had a take-home exam, and I've still got my copy of it. I still have it. And it very clearly says at the bottom of the cover sheet, "No collaboration is authorized. This is individual work."

Lance Betros

So there was no question in anybody's mind that they were supposed to do this on their own. And yet a large number of my classmates defied that, and they cheated"got help from one another.

Interviewer

How did you learn about this? Were you aware of it among the ranks, that there's whispering about this, or?

Lance Betros

It took me completely by surprise. I heard about it when one day in the spring of 1976" I think it was in April, I'm not exactly sure"but all of a sudden we had to go to an auditorium. And we"it was explained to us what had happened, and from that point forward, there were well over 100 cadets who were being investigated for cheating on this particular take-home exam.

Interviewer

Tell me about the scene in the auditorium when that happened. It must've been" I mean this is an historic moment for the Academy"a black mark for the Academy. Who addressed you? It was the whole Corps of Cadets that was in there, is that right, or just your class?

Lance Betros

You know, Todd, the limits of oral history here"

Interviewer

Yeah.

Lance Betros

I'm having a hard time remembering exactly who gave us the briefing. But I just remember being very surprised that this would happen"very surprised and angry and disappointed.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

You know I knew that" I knew from the people that I had in my company and from others that I knew that there were some who, for them, getting over on the system was everything. You know, they're immature, all that. But I never expected that there could be a cheating incident like this on such a large scale.

Interviewer

How did"how was the cheating discovered?

Lance Betros

One of my classmates, who got unauthorized help, actually wrote on his paper that

received help from somebody else. So that individual came forward and did a very courageous thing, even though it was against what he should've done"so he broke a regulation. It would've been a regulation problem. He didn't commit an honor violation because he acknowledged the help.

Interviewer

So if you break a regulation but you admit to it before it's discovered, then that's considered to be not a suspend-able act, is that right?

Lance Betros

Well, there's an ill-defined line between regulations and honor"there always has been. I mean you are"we are honorable people, and therefore we should adhere to regulations, but violating a regulation"you know, coming back after the curfew"that's a regulatory thing and you get punished for that. But if you come back after the curfew and you say, "Well, I was here on time, when I should've been here," but you really weren't, now, that's an honor violation.

Interviewer

Uh-huh.

Lance Betros

So"

Interviewer

Because the honor violation deals specifically with "I will not lie"well, you tell me the honor code.

Lance Betros

Well, it's, "A cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, or tolerate those who do."

Interviewer

So once the action moves into that element of trust, then it's a whole "nother level of"it's not just a regulatory"

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

Incident.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

And tell me the"which we've discussed this before"but tell me the importance of the Honor Code. Of those principles, those values, above and beyond breaking curfew or



anything else that might be a little bit smaller offense.

Lance Betros

Yeah. Character is everything to a military officer. Well, it should be everything to anyone, but for the profession of arms, the ability to lead other human beings relies fundamentally on trust. We have to be able to trust one another, so that when I order you, as one of my soldiers, to go do something, that you can trust that I'm not just sending you into an abyss. That I'm going to be there for you, and I'm going to you can trust me to take care of you and to prepare you and give you everything you need to be set up for success.

Lance Betros

And likewise, I can trust you that you'll go out and do what you're required to do without turning and running the first time I'm not looking at you. So, military leadership—leadership in general—is built on trust and integrity. So if I can't trust you to tell the truth, or if I can't trust you to not steal something that belongs to me, then this is not the right business for me or you. We need to go do something else.

Interviewer

When the—when it was discovered that you say 100 members of your class—it's 100 out of 800, is that right?

Lance Betros

Ultimately it was 150—

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

Who left the class as a result of the honor scandal.

Interviewer

Out of how many in the class?

Lance Betros

We had—well, we came in at about 1,400, and there had been some attrition already; so, 150 out of what was left was a very large number. We ended up graduating about 700; so roughly 50 percent in our class graduated.

Interviewer

But only 150 didn't graduate because of an Honor Code violation.

Lance Betros

That's correct, and of those 150, about 90 of them returned to West Point the following year. There were so many cadets who were implicated that the Secretary of the Army made the decision that we would allow those cadets who were expelled to reapply for admission with the following class, and about 90 of them did and were readmitted.

Interviewer

Who was Secretary of the Army at the time?

Lance Betros

It wasâ€”I think [Martin Richard] Hoffman was his name.

Interviewer

And who was Superintendent of the Academy at the time?

Lance Betros

Well, the Superintendent in 1976 was [Lieutenant General] Sidney [Bryan] Berry, and he continued to be the Superintendent until my graduation in the summer of â€™77. And then Andrew Goodpaster, General Andrew Goodpaster.

Interviewer

And General Goodpaster, who took off a star to come here, right?

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm, right.

Interviewer

Was here largely because of that scandal, right?

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

In order to restoreâ€”well, again, you tell me. What was the role of General Goodpaster, who had been a legendary figure in the Army, right?

Lance Betros

Well, he was. He was the advisor to President Eisenhower [as Staff Secretary and Defense Liaison Officer from 1954-1961]. He had beenâ€”he was truly an august presence within the officer corps, and just retired as a four-star general, and now was back, voluntarily taking off one star to serve as a Superintendent at West Point.

Lance Betros

But he came back because the cheating scandal just laid bare the Academy. Not only were there problems with the Honor Code and the honorâ€”well, not the code, but the [honor] systemâ€”but there were many other problems as well that enabled thatâ€”those kinds of problems to occur in the honor system. So General Rogers, who was the Army Chief of Staff at the timeâ€”

Interviewer

You're talking about Bernie Rogers, mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

Bernie Rogers, General Bernie Rogers mandated a top-to-bottom review of West Point. Now, this was a follow-on review from the one that Frank Borman, the astronaut Frank Borman, [USMA] class of 1950, had conducted in the latter half of 1976.

Interviewer

In response directly to the cheating scandal.

Lance Betros

Yes. And the Borman report focused specifically on the honor system, the Honor Code and the honor system. When General Rogers mandated the larger review, that was for everything; and it was the most exhaustive, the most thorough external review that West Point has ever had.

Interviewer

Well, so sounds like what you're saying is that while the Honor Code scandal was terrible, it was a kind of symptom of something going on more endemic"

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

In the whole West Point"

Lance Betros

That's right.

Interviewer

The whole entire Academy. What was that? How could you describe that, and when did it start?

Lance Betros

Well, there was a malaise at the Academy. It was the post-Vietnam era. The Army was"low morale in the Army. We were just starting the volunteer Army. There was"so those"those were influences, societal and cultural issues, within the military. And then, within the civilian society, there were strains of loss of deference to authority, you know, from a whole variety of things, stemming from the, you know, the upheavals of the 1960s into Vietnam and Watergate and"

Interviewer

Well, it's interesting "cause just earlier you were describing West Point as being "cloistered"

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

Shut off from all but largelyâ€”

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

From these social revolutionâ€”

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

Currents that are going throughout the society. Yet it sounds like it wasnâ€™t. I mean it sounds like there were things happening here that were perfectly consistent with what was going on on the larger society.

Lance Betros

Thereâ€™s no doubt that West Point reflects, to a great degree, whatâ€™s going on in society. I mean we draw our cadets from every corner of American society. So there were very conservative areas of America, you knowâ€”still very patriotic and loyal and conservative. And you will find the representatives of those areas at West Point. Likewise, there are cadets who come from areas that arenâ€™t what I just described, and that theyâ€™re there as well. But the idea of challenging authorityâ€”

Interviewer

But this wasnâ€™t just a liberal-conservativeâ€”let me make sure I understand, because I donâ€™t want you to mislead viewersâ€”

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

Into thinking thatâ€”this wasnâ€™t just conservative politics vs. liberal politics, was it?

Lance Betros

Correct. That is correct.

Interviewer

How would you describe what you meant there byâ€”I mean it wasâ€”the problems were not just a loss of respect for authority, or a liberal kind of wave of ideology moving through the society, were they?

Lance Betros

Well, not completely, but I would say that in American society there was a trend during those years to put less—give less respect, less deference to the institutions of authority in America. I mean the church, the government, the office of the Presidency. These were—

Interviewer

Even tradition itself, in some respects, yeah.

Lance Betros

Marriage—“The trappings of marriage—”

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

All those things were under siege in terms of new social mores that were challenging them, and there was new openness. There was a glorification of the individual. So all these influences were there at West Point as well, and overlaid on an institution that was already in crisis as a result of the Vietnam War. So when you put it all together, there were some unhealthy things going on at West Point, and there was a—“we call it a —“cool on honor—” culture that developed. Could this have been prevented? Yeah, I think so, with better foresight and better leadership; but that—™s hindsight.

Interviewer

I—™m curious now that I understand this a little bit better, because the Vietnam War—“how did the failure in Vietnam affect what you saw around you in terms of the education you were getting at West Point? Did it sort of throw a dark cast on the entire profession of arms, would you say, or?

Lance Betros

Well, morale—“professional morale was lower than it should—™ve been; so, whereas you would ordinarily expect to get young officers who—™d just come from the field and they—™re proud of their uniform, and they want to wrap their arms around cadets and just, you know, give hands-on leadership and mentor them, and they want to do it in a positive way, there just was a little less of that. You know, just a little less of that, and there were many of our best officers had left the Army. So—”

Interviewer

Do you think, though, there was less of that because the feeling was that we had failed, or that the profession had failed, or that the political leadership had failed, or that the Army leadership had failed?

Lance Betros

Well, I would say yes.

Interviewer

To all of them.

Lance Betros

To all of those things. They were all influential.

Interviewer

So they felt less respect for their own—the institution they had joined.

Lance Betros

I would say to a certain degree, yes. There were even military authors—some of them stationed here at West Point, who were writing books, novels, articles that were highly critical of the institution. And of course, I'm a great believer in academic freedom, but the kinds of vitriol that you would see and read in some of these things—it was really over the top. Now, I want to go back to one other thing I said earlier, and that is that not only were there cultural influences on West Point, but the culture of leadership was negative as well.

Lance Betros

It goes back to my comments about what I experienced in basic training. The typical way to exercise leadership was not positive, but it was negative. It was a negative cast where —you do this or —m going to punish you. Or —don—t ask me any questions. You just do it because I told you to do it,— and if you don—t follow orders blindly, you—t get into trouble. There were visionary leaders at West Point who were trying to get us by that—trying to reform the leadership culture at West Point. Brigadier General Howard Prince was one of them.

Lance Betros

Now, at the time, he was a major working—and he would eventually take over the—'d be the first head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. Another individual was Lieutenant [General]—or rather, at the time he was Brigadier General—Walter Ulmer, who was the Commandant of Cadets—very much like-minded. But they were swimming against the tide—it was very difficult—and then the honor scandal occurred and then by the way, women also came to West Point that year. So there was so much going on that they really couldn—t get a lot done in changing the leadership culture at West Point before it was too late.

Interviewer

Was the response to the honor scandal one of feeling like they had not tightened the screws enough on their approach to discipline and leader development that had existed at the Academy for all of its history? Or was there some attitude—and I think you're saying Ulmer had some of this, or Prince—that maybe we ought to rethink what we're doing here and align it with some more modern realities?

Lance Betros

Well, there were—there definitely were people here who wanted to make change. And there were tactical officers, you know, people in those positions of leadership, who also realized that we needed to change our approach to leadership. But they were outnumbered. Now, a very interesting development during the honor scandal—General Prince realized—and I call him —General— because he retired as a brigadier general; back then, he would—ve been Colonel Prince.

Lance Betros

Colonel Prince realized in interviewing the outgoing cadets who were all—and anyone who left West Point was interviewed by his organization—he realized that those companies that had a lot of cadets separated for honor [violations] had tactical officers who were transactional in their leadership, negative in their leadership. They were aloof and concerned mostly with being that disciplined enforcer of regulations rather than somebody who would reach out and try to lead in a positive manner.

Lance Betros

There were nine companies that had virtually no cadets separated, and he knew the tactical officers of those nine companies, because he was close to—he knew those people pretty well. And he, in an interview that—we’ve read a transcript of his interview—and he said that those nine tactical officers as a group were apart. In other words, they exercised leadership in a much more positive reinforcing way than the other twenty-seven who had problems in their units. So there—

Interviewer

So he concluded from that what then?

Lance Betros

That leadership had a lot to do with what happened in the 1970s. The negative leadership culture at West Point had a lot to do with the problems that we face, not only in the honor system, but across the board at West Point.

Interviewer

When you were a cadet here, watching all this happen, did you have a similar attitude? That the leadership was in part responsible for what happened, or did you blame it all on your classmates?

Lance Betros

I blamed it all on my classmates. —this caught me completely by surprise. I already mentioned I was angry; I was frustrated. I believed that it—to me, it was pretty simple. The instructions said you’re not supposed to collaborate, and you collaborated, and you got caught. You’re out of here. And I had very, very little patience for those who tried to argue, —Well, it was the system that made us do this wrong.— I had very little patience for that.

Interviewer

Did you have good friends who were caught up in it?

Lance Betros

No. I was in one of those nine Companies that had a tactical officer that was—that exercised very positive leadership.

Interviewer

Who was that tactical officer?

Lance Betros

His name was Major Dave Arthur.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. Where is he now?

Lance Betros

I wish I could tell youâ€”I donâ€™t know.

Interviewer

Hmm.

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Lance Betros

But you said you knew peopleâ€”any confrontation with any of them after the fact?

Lance Betros

No, not with me personally. I was not implicated in any of it, and neither were most ofâ€”neither were anybody in my company implicated in it. But I knew a lot of people who did get kicked out, and it wasâ€”

Interviewer

Well, what I meant, have you ever hadâ€”did you ever have any confrontation with any of them at expressing your feelings about what they had done?

Lance Betros

Well, there was no doubt in their minds how the majority of us felt.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

And itâ€™s been very painful for our class. Here we are 35 years later; weâ€™re going to do a 35th year reunion later this year, and weâ€™re now starting to invite back those who were part of our class way back then. Andâ€”because we feel that after all those years, for those who want to just become associated with the class again, we shouldnâ€™t deny that. But thatâ€™s how long itâ€™s takenâ€”many, many years to overcome those hard feelings.

Interviewer

Because of this, was your graduation somewhat tainted? Not you personally, but I mean the classâ€™s graduation?



Lance Betros

Well, there was a shadow hanging over our class, sure, and that's hard to get away from. I mean our class was the "honor scandal class." But then again, the investigations that took place after the honor scandal made clear that ours was the class where the honor—where the issues with honor actually surfaced, but they were going on in other classes, too.

Interviewer

So you think there were Honor Code violations throughout?

Lance Betros

Sure, absolutely.

Interviewer

No worse in '76 than they were in '56 or something.

Lance Betros

The condition of the Honor Code, the culture of leadership at West Point, was no different in '75 than it was in '76, although after that it started to change quite a bit, but in the preceding two years—

Interviewer

But you do think it's actually part of the '70s as opposed to having been part of West Point for time immemorial?

Lance Betros

Well, I just think that a whole variety of things sort of aligned.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

They were cultural influences from outside of West Point. There were morale issues from within the Army. There was a negative—a culture of negative leadership at West Point. All those things sort of aligned right in 1976, and that's when it exploded.

Interviewer

How ironic it would be—

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

The year of the Bicentennial [of the United States], too.

Lance Betros

Yeah, that's right.

Interviewer

Branch—you branched Infantry.

Lance Betros

Yes.

Interviewer

Do you recall Branch Night when you made that choice?

Lance Betros

Well, I remember—I do remember. We were all in—at the time we called it South Auditorium; now it's Robinson Auditorium. And we stood up and claimed our branch, and I—

Interviewer

You do that by order of rank in the class, right?

Lance Betros

Right—right.

Interviewer

Where did you rank in the class?

Lance Betros

I ranked fairly high. I was—I graduated 114 out of 700, so I was on the Dean's list.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

But I remember that I chose Infantry largely because of the mentorship that I received from another very fine tactical officer. His name was Herbert Lloyd, who is really legendary. The people who know West Point well remember Herb Lloyd. Not a West Point graduate, but a lot of combat experience, and just the kind of officer that you would follow anywhere. And he happened to be the tactical officer for the contingent of cadets that went to Airborne School in 1976; and I was—I happened to be the first sergeant for that contingent. So I had a leadership position and I was working for now-General Lloyd, and it was—

Interviewer

What was so great about him?

Lance Betros

The intangibles of positive leadership, powerful leadership. He just exuded confidence. Heâ€™there was a positive energy about him. He could do anything, and he could motivate you to do anything, and he walked the talkâ€™you know, he was right there with you. I remember at Airborne School there was one of our cadets who decided that he just wasnâ€™t going to jump out of the airplane the next day. He wasnâ€™t going to go to the ramp and get on. Andâ€™

Interviewer

Scared.

Lance Betros

Scaredâ€™he was just scared. This was after two and a half weeks of training there. So we advised Major Lloyd of this, and he brought the cadet in, and the door got shutâ€™shut the door. And about five minutes later, the cadet walked out silently, and then the next morning he and Major Lloyd are on the plane, and Major Lloyd was right behind him when they jumped out of the plane. So thatâ€™s just an example of the way he would just grip you in a very positive way and inspire you to do what needed to be done.

Interviewer

Where is he now?

Lance Betros

Well, he rose to the rank of brigadier general and then he retired, but he stayed within defense industries, and I think the last I heard he was in Afghanistan doing contract work there.

Interviewer

So where were you stationed first, then?

Lance Betros

Fort Ord, California, Seventh Infantry Division. I figured that if I was going to go Infantry that I might as well go to a place of the country that I thought would be very nice; so, Fort Ord is in Monterey, California, and itâ€™s beautiful area, just lovely.

Interviewer

Did you enjoy your time there?

Lance Betros

Yeah, very much.

Interviewer

And, how long were you there?

Lance Betros

I was thereâ€™we were thereâ€™I met my wife thereâ€™for three years, almost three years. And I was platoon leader, executive officer. I took over a company as a second lieutenant

when the captain in my company was relieved, so I had that for a few months. And then I was on the battalion staff, andâ€”so threeâ€”total of three years.

Interviewer

Where did you meet your wife?

Lance Betros

Met her in Monterey, California.

Interviewer

She was civilian, living there, or she was on base, or what?

Lance Betros

Yeah. Well, her dad was a retired chief warrant officerâ€”

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

And he had retired in Salinas, California, just a few miles away. And a bunch of my friends and I went out one night, and she was out with a bunch of her friends, and we met.

Interviewer

And she comes from an Army family, then, too.

Lance Betros

Yes.

Interviewer

So three years there, and then any sense at that point that you wanted to take on a role in academia?

Lance Betros

Not yet, but I knew that I would want to go to graduate school.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

So I went to the advanced course at Fort Benning, and then I went to Germany and had a long two-year command there with a mechanized infantry company. That was a difficult assignment. We wereâ€”it was during the Cold War. We wereâ€”

Interviewer

So weâ€™re now in the early â€™80s, Iâ€™m guessing.

Lance Betros

In the very early '80s.

Interviewer

Yes, sure.

Lance Betros

I got there in '80 "yeah, that's right" in '80. So very early '80s, and we were gone a lot on training missions, so "but when I was home it was still a lot of fun, but it was just a very difficult assignment. My battalion commanders, both of them "would've been very comfortable back at West Point, you know. They were the kind "they were the screamers. They would yell at you and just "it was a very difficult environment to work in.

Lance Betros

So at the end of that command, I was beat. And that's when I was probably most serious about getting out of the Army, but that's when the Army dangled graduate school in front of me, so.

Interviewer

Now, if you'd gotten out of the Army then, what would you have done?

Lance Betros

I don't know.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. Were you still interested in medicine, or?

Lance Betros

Possibly. Possibly, yeah. Probably business school or something like that. I really "at that point I was just "I knew that I was "I needed a change. I knew that. But I was so busy with command that I really hadn't given much thought about where I might go. But, fortunately, West Point was looking for officers for the faculty, as they do every year. I came back to interview with a couple of different departments, and fortunately, history had an opening; and I had done well in my humanities courses at West Point, so "

Interviewer

But let's just say, if it had been electrical engineering, you would be an electrical engineering professor now, or I mean "

Lance Betros

Possibly.

Interviewer

It really is not the discipline that really drove you here. It was being in this environment "

Lance Betros

That's right.

Interviewer

As a totality.

Lance Betros

Right, right. I mean as I said, I wanted to go to graduate school, and frankly, I came back hoping that I'd be sent back to get an economics degree. I wanted to teach economics. But they didn't have room, so I walked next door to the history department, and they had an opening.

Interviewer

And you've spent the last, what, 20 years, really, I guess, either studying history or teaching history or heading up the history department.

Lance Betros

Well, I got to—I went to school at [the University of] North Carolina, and then arrived at West Point in 1986. Spent three years as a rotating faculty member in the department, and I taught American history. Then I went back out into the Army for the next 11 years, and in 2000 returned, this time as a senior faculty member. Now, I had earned my PhD during the years I was here as a rotator, so I didn't have to go back to school to get my PhD. And then since 2000, I've been here, and it's 2012 now.

Interviewer

Well, but let's go back to the—suddenly you're a history instructor here in a rotating, teaching American history. Had you ever taught before at all?

Lance Betros

Not in an academic environment. But I had certainly taught soldiers, and had been around training environments. Now, it's not the same. I wouldn't claim that it's the same, but it's—I certainly was comfortable being in front of whether it's soldiers, students, cadets, whatever it is.

Interviewer

What did you learn about the profession of history? You suddenly were now—I mean in a sense, you had two careers—

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

You were both an academic and a military officer.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

What did you learn having now been given the opportunity to pursue an academic career in history? What did you learn about this profession?

Lance Betros

About the military profession?

Interviewer

No, I'm sorry, about history. What did you have done well, you said, in history?

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

While you were here, but other than that, you didn't have a well-developed

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

Sense of the profession.

Lance Betros

Right. That's right, of the profession of history.

Interviewer

Yes.

Lance Betros

Of the reason why history is important, especially to the military professional.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

History provides the context for everything, you know, and in war or as a military professional, how does one train for the ultimate test of combat, of war? And we don't go out and start wars to do that. I mean we have to use history is the lever that we use. You know, that's where we study. It's our laboratory. So history is very important. Military history in particular, but I would say that all history enables the practitioner to think historically.

Lance Betros

If there's a problem that confronts you now, the first question that should cross your mind is how did other human beings deal with similar kinds of problems in the past? You're not going to get the answers, because every historical event is different, but at least you get a feeling for what the right questions are to ask. And that's really an important beginning to solving your problems. So those were the kinds of insights that I derived from studying history.

Lance Betros

I began to be able to, you know, connect the dots and draw the pictures, and things that were happening in my day-to-day life were things that were being talked about on news programs, or the issues in political campaigns, or whatever it was—all of a sudden, I was able to see cause and effect. And of course that same cause and effect, or the ability to see cause and effect, can help you as a military officer in the military profession. So that was the revelation for me—how important historical study can be.

Interviewer

What was your favorite or is your favorite period of history?

Lance Betros

Well, I'm partial to the Revolutionary era, the American Revolutionary era.

Interviewer

Why is that?

Lance Betros

That's the beginnings of our great experiment in democracy, and it was—you cannot divorce the military from the civilian, even though our Constitutional system requires it. But our nation was forged in the crucible of a military conflict, so it all comes together there. And the noble ideas upon which this nation was founded, it gives me goose bumps to think about it.

Interviewer

And of course, our first President was a military officer.

Lance Betros

Right, right.

Interviewer

Significance to that, you think?

Lance Betros

Well, I mean I am not—not surprising. He was the indispensable man for the Revolution, for the United States of America. Without George Washington there would be no United States of America—at least not like we know it now.

Interviewer

You did your PhD thesis on what? What was your subject?



Lance Betros

It was a slice of New York colonial history, back in the 1680s. It's not interesting.

Interviewer

Well, it must've been interesting to you.

Lance Betros

It got me my PhD.

Interviewer

Uh-huh.

Lance Betros

Yeah. The fellow that I researched was "he was an Irish Catholic Governor of New York.

Interviewer

Name was?

Lance Betros

His name was Thomas Dongan, and he was the Governor of a Protestant English colony, so it was unusual. So I kid around "kid a little bit by saying, you know, I thank Thomas Dongan for getting me my PhD, but he hasn't really done much for me since.

Interviewer

In that period, 11-year period between your first stint here, I guess

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

And your time at UNC

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

And then leaping forward to when you returned, you saw some active combat.

Lance Betros

Well, I wouldn't call it active combat. I was deployed to Somalia, which was considered a combat zone, but I don't want to give the impression that I was in combat. I was not.

Interviewer

What was yourâ€”tell me about Somalia. Set the stage for the viewers of what was going on in Somalia at the time, and then why you were deployed there.

Lance Betros

Well, it was theâ€”there was famine in Somalia in the early 1990s, and there was international effort to help the situation. The United States got involved, I think it was in [August] 1992, actually, and it was the UNOSOM [United Nations Operation in Somalia] mission. By 1993, even though we were there supposedly as peacekeepers, as humanitarian workers and so forth, it was hard not to take sides. And one of the factions there ended up being our enemy, so to speak, and there was the â€œBlack Hawk downâ€ incident of October 1993.

Interviewer

What were the factions? How would you describe them?

Lance Betros

Well, they were tribal factions in Somalia. And the one that ended up being most antagonistic to American presence there was led by Mohamed Farrah Aidid. So his faction was the one that ended up having contact with an element of American forces.

Interviewer

Only because he was most hostile to the American presence there, is that right?

Lance Betros

He was hostile to the American presence and, of course, the American presence prevented his faction from assuming more control than he wouldâ€™ve wanted.

Interviewer

And you were deployed there to do what?

Lance Betros

After the firefight that led to the death of 17 or 18 Americans [in the Black Hawk down incident of October 3-4, 1993], there was a Joint Task Force set up. It was called Joint Task Force Somalia, and Major General Ernst, Joseph Ernst, I think his name was, was the commander. And we had to flesh out the staff sections. Now, I had gone to the School for Advanced Military Studies. I was a Certified Army Strategist, and therefore, I was plucked from the Forces Command Headquarters in October of â€™93 to help with the planning cell within the Joint Task Force.

Interviewer

And so, what did that mean, when you were in-country, lâ€™m assumingâ€”

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

But what were you on a FOB [forward operating base]?

Lance Betros

We actually occupied the burned-out [U.S.] Embassy in Mogadishu. What a broken city! I mean it was it could've been a beautiful city at one point it was, but it was just destroyed by civil war and famine and everything else; so everything was ramshackle, broken, garbage everywhere. And it was just hard to imagine that this could be a place that people would actually want to live. So we operated out of the old embassy, and then we moved eventually to right by the Port of Mogadishu that was as we were exiting.

Lance Betros

The whole purpose of JTF Somalia was really force protection. Once the Black Hawk down incident had occurred, President Clinton decided that we would get out of Somalia. So everything from that point forward was removal of U.S. forces under the protection of Joint Task Force Somalia.

Interviewer

How long were you there?

Lance Betros

About four months.

Interviewer

And did you see in Somalia any of the seeds of the Islamic radicalism we've seen in the past decade here in foreign affairs?

Lance Betros

Well, my view of it was very limited. I did get out periodically with our civil affairs officers, and what I saw were just decent human beings trying to make a go of it. That's what struck me, and so I really can't comment on your question about the Muslim or Islamic fundamentalists.

Interviewer

Looking back at your career, do you feel any regret that you did not have a more vivid combat experience?

Lance Betros

If you look at my Class A uniform and see that what I wear the medals that I wear none of them are for combat. I don't have a Combat Infantryman's Badge, and yet I'm an Infantryman. Do I regret it? No. I was an Infantryman. I volunteered to go in the Infantry. I did my Airborne School. I was a Ranger. I got my Expert Infantryman's badge. I did all the things that would be expected of me to be ready to go to war, and I commanded in tough assignments. I was ready to go, if the Army had called me. Now, in 1989, I entered I was in the Command and General Staff College when Operation Just Cause took place. The very

Interviewer

Which was?

Lance Betros

Which was the invasion of Panama in 1989. So I missed that. And then the following year I spent as a student in the School of Advanced Military Studies, for a very select group of officers, and that's when Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm took place. And then I arrived at West Point in the summer of 2000, and a year later was 9/11. I didn't plan it that way, and so no, I really don't have any regrets. I would've done my duty if I would do whatever duty the Army asked me to do.

Interviewer

You came back to West Point, eventually became a department head here.

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

And wrote a book about "two books about" the history of West Point

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

Which we'll get to in our second interview. But I'm curious about the experience as a department head here in the early 2000s, I guess.

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

How would you characterize the West Point experience today versus the experience you had in the 1970s?

Lance Betros

There are a lot of differences. I mean the basic mission of West Point hasn't changed. It's developing leaders of character to serve as commissioned officers in the Army. But how we go about doing it has changed quite a bit. Now, I was there as a cadet at the tail end of a period when the Academy was very paternalistic. You know, "We know best. We'll create this the gauntlet that you have to go through, and you better make it through." So it was not only paternalistic, it was attritional as well.

Lance Betros

"If you don't make it through, if you do anything wrong, if you flunk any courses, we're going to kick you out." So it was a pretty harsh environment to get through West Point. And also I already talked about the negative leadership culture at West Point. So now fast-forward into the early 2000s, and it's really a lot different now. It's no longer an attritional Academy. It's very developmental now. We really do embrace the

idea that West Point is a leader development institution, and cadets make mistakes and they need to be corrected. But assuming they have the raw materials of officership, we're going to lift them up and move them forward as much as possible, and try to get them through that gauntlet.

Interviewer

How did that happen? How did that change happen? Was it the efforts of just the way the wind started to blow after the honor scandal of the '70s, or was it really driven by a few select important people who came to the Academy to make that change?

Lance Betros

Well, it was a combination of changes going on in the Army and changes going on at West Point. I reference back to the studies that were done—the West Point—it was called the West Point Study Group. It was that very intensive external look that General Rogers initiated back in 1977. That report was very critical of the leadership environment at West Point, and we put in place, here at West Point, we put in place changes that led to a more developmental approach to creating leaders.

Lance Betros

Now at the same time—all we were really doing was mimicking or mirroring what was happening in the Army. The same types of things were happening there. So the West Point that my daughter went through as a plebe just last year is far different, in terms of leader culture, than it was for Cadet Lance Betros back in 1973, and it's a much better environment, I might add.

Interviewer

What does it mean to lead a department here at West Point?

Lance Betros

Well, it used to mean being in charge of an organization that all taught pretty much the same thing from year to year. Before we had majors and a lot of elective courses and a lot of enrichment activities, the departments really did very predictable tasks from year to year. And there was primarily—it was all military, the faculty, so when a department head wanted something done, it got done immediately, and they all got in line and did it. Much different today—now the department heads command—or are at the top of—an organization that does a lot of different things.

Lance Betros

The curriculum is so rich today. We have majors. We have hundreds of electives across many disciplines. We have interdisciplinary programs, enrichment programs, trips all over the world. Personally, I've been involved in fundraising for the Center for Oral History and many other things. There are just so many different areas now that department heads have to be concerned with that—really it forces them to be focused more on their department rather than on the institution as a whole. So that's really the big difference is the scope of duties that the department head has.

Interviewer

What is the difference you see among the cadets, the cadet population today? How that compares with the cadet population of your day?

Lance Betros

Well, in terms of quality, they're just as good, if not better, in terms of who we bring here and the attributes they have. Now, I'm saying that in the aggregate they're probably better. I think you know I have concerns about certain portions of the population here, but nonetheless, it's pretty good. Now, do they have a different set of

Interviewer

Let me just back up—the concerns have to do with the encouragement of sports at the expense of academics, right?

Lance Betros

Well, I would say more generally it's that we are accepting a lot of risk in the lower echelons of the class.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm—in order to get sports achievement here.

Interviewer

Well, I would say sports is a big reason for it

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

But it's just—we would say minorities in general.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

And then—What we've done at West Point is to try to find minorities in the athletic population. So that's causing us to bring in a larger-than-desired number of lesser-qualified applicants.

Interviewer

You're talking about racial and ethnic minorities when you say that?

Lance Betros

Well, it turns out to be that, but it doesn't necessarily have to be that.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

But yeah.

Interviewer

And I interrupted you, so go ahead withâ€”you were in the middle of a sentenceâ€”Iâ€™m sorryâ€”when you were talking about what you regretted about some of the changes here.

Lance Betros

Well, what I was going to say is just that there are, you know, the cadets today bring to West Point all the stuff thatâ€™s going out in American society. So is there more of a drinking problem today? Yeah, probably, and the Corps of Cadets shows that. Are thereâ€”is there more of a problem in being able to focus your intellect on the written word, because theyâ€™re so concerned about video games? Yeah, you see that here at West Point. Are there more cadets from fractured families? Yeah.

Lance Betros

So all those things thatâ€™re really what youâ€™re asking is whatâ€™s the difference between American society back then versus now, and youâ€™re going to see the same things in the Corps of Cadets.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. Youâ€™re leaving here to go be the Dean of the Army War College.

Lance Betros

Right.

Interviewer

What are you anticipating about that? I mean whatâ€™s itâ€™s a great achievement, congratulations.

Lance Betros

Thanks.

Interviewer

But what attracts you to that? What do you hope to accomplish there? Whatâ€™s the importance of that institution with respect to the Army?

Lance Betros

Well, West Point and the Army War College are like bookends on the Army officer education program. So youâ€™ve gotâ€”West Point has those who are entering into the profession, and the Army War College educates those that are at the far end of their career. Now, that said, they stillâ€”both institutionsâ€”put a heavy emphasis on character and intellect. And thatâ€™s previewingâ€”I guess our next segment is going to be on the book that Iâ€™m writing.

Lance Betros

And the thesis of my book is that the most important thing for officership is character and intellect. Here at West Point, we certainly focus on those things. At the Army War College,

we also focus on them, although not as much on character, only because we assume by the time they get there that they're men and women of great character, and by and large, they are.

Interviewer

Well what kind of a difference do you want to make there? Are you going there to be a caretaker of what they're already doing, or do you see yourself as initiating some change there as well?

Lance Betros

I don't ever want to be a caretaker; so there will certainly be ways that I would like to enhance the organization when I get there. Probably not a good idea at this point to, you know, to comment on that, because I don't know. I have to go there, and I will do a top-to-bottom assessment, just like I did in the department of history a few years ago when I first got here.

Interviewer

And what changes did you make here? What kind of a department did you find when you got here, and what did you do to change that?

Lance Betros

It was a terrific department. Brigadier General Bob Doughty, then Colonel Bob Doughty, had been here for 20 years, and he had a very well-running, well-oiled machine running for him. Morale was very high, education was being—or we were delivering education at a high level. Really there were a lot of very good things. Now, that said, he was here for 20 years, so when I became the head, I immediately started a strategic review process and initiated a program of managed change from year to year, so that we would have input from across the faculty on any number of issues. So we did in fact make some changes.

Lance Betros

The first one we made, a very significant one, was actually to change the core curriculum for our plebes, for our first-year cadets. Originally, every cadet would come in and would take either a full year of American history [or] a full year of world history. We decided that—we focused on the world history piece first. And that was very difficult to teach because it was, you know, all the major civilizations from, you know, the beginning of history forward. And not only was it difficult to learn if you're a student, but it was difficult to teach if you're an instructor.

Lance Betros

So we decided instead to get rid of the world history sequence, and in its place we did a semester of Western civilization first—the idea there being you understand your own culture first, as a basis for understanding other cultures. So then in the second semester, you take a course in one of five regions of the world.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros



Latin America, Africa, Middle East, whatever. And then whatever historical or whatever region you study, that's the language that you will take as a yearling, a third-year cadet. So we were leveraging history and language together. Okay, so that was the first big change. Well, just recently we've completed this idea by now going to the American history sequence. Starting next year, a cadet in that, who's taking American, will take the first semester of American history, and then the second semester will take a regional history.

Interviewer

A regional U.S. history.

Lance Betros

No, a regional world history.

Interviewer

I see, so doubling up on the world history.

Lance Betros

Right, right. We think it's so important that our cadets understand or have an appreciation for other cultures.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

You know, it's a way of thinking. They may go to a part of the world that has nothing to do with the region that they studied, but by having compared their own culture to another, they have an intellectual framework to use to appreciate and understand whatever culture they find themselves in.

Interviewer

Is this an Army-down directive, in a sense, because of the need to acquaint ourselves with other cultures?

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

Do you find that is something that's did that come down through the ranks of the Army as a kind of philosophical or policy approach?

Lance Betros

It's actually from the Department of Defense.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm.

Lance Betros

We receivedâ€”well, the Army receivedâ€”from DoD the mandate to studyâ€”to teach more languagesâ€”and to become better at understanding foreign cultures. So the change that I just described very much is in line with that directive from DoD.

Interviewer

Mm-hmm. Well, next time weâ€™ll go into some on your bookâ€”

Lance Betros

Yeah.

Interviewer

But also our Superintendents you knew hereâ€”

Lance Betros

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer

And get more into the Academyâ€™s history.

Lance Betros

Okay.

Interviewer

So I thank you very much.

Lance Betros

Sure.

Interviewer

Right.