

A Deep Love of Country

Interviewer

If you could just actually spell your name for the transcriber.

Vincent Viola

V-I-O-L-A, first name Vincent.

Interviewer

And look at me, actually, instead of at the cameraâ€”

Vincent Viola

Okay.

Interviewer

So weâ€™ll just have a nice conversation here. So what class are you, did you graduate with here at West Point?

Vincent Viola

Class of â€™77.

Interviewer

And so that means you arrived here in 1970â€”

Vincent Viola

July 2, 1973.

Interviewer

What was it like?

Vincent Viola

It was much the same as it is now and probably was for many years before: a very concentrated, specific social culture that was extremely singular in purpose. You felt that from the first day, because it wasâ€”the first day is transformational. You come here, and itâ€™s interesting because society was just integrating, and internalizing the disruption that it experienced from the middle of the Vietnam War until its end.

Vincent Viola

And we were the first class to actually enter after the war had officially ended, which was, I think, January 12, 1973. That date might be wrong, but I think the armistice peace treaty was signed January of 1973â€”so everyone in the class had applied with the foreknowledge that we were a nation at war, and yet before we entered, it was a nation now post-war. But what it was like was, again, a very Spartan environment, and Iâ€™m sure the differenceâ€”or as I like to say, the arbitrageâ€”between what life was in the civilian world for entering cadets on July 2, 1973 and life at the academy, Iâ€™m sure that difference was in fewer times in our nationâ€™s history larger, because the society had

undergone a social revolution. West Point had not undergone a social revolution, for obvious purposes.

Interviewer

Now, where were you coming fromâ€”where did you grow up?

Vincent Viola

I cameâ€”I was raised in Brooklyn, New York, and a very, very parochial, if not insulated, Italian-American neighborhood.

Interviewer

Did you haveâ€”did your family have an Army background at all?

Vincent Viola

Yes. We were [a] extremely patriotic family. My dad served in combat in World War II, many of my uncles did. We had war heroesâ€”

Interviewer

In Europe or in the Pacific or where?

Vincent Viola

Europe, Pacific, the Army Air Corps, Army Infantry, support soldiersâ€”so on both sides of my family, we had Bronze Star winners, CIB recipients, too, navigators, bombardiers on B-17s, and many, many missions. So this family pulsed with a patriotic sense of duty to this country that gave us a great life.

Interviewer

Now, didâ€”are you the first to go to West Point in your family?

Vincent Viola

Yes. Yeah.

Vincent Viola

And so theâ€”it mustâ€™ve been quite an achievement for you.

Vincent Viola

It was, yeah. For us, it wasâ€”I only knew I wanted to be an officer, and I wanted to be an Infantry officer, because thatâ€™s what the vision and image around the Army that I received from my dad. Some of these very general storiesâ€”not too specificâ€”and I thought West Point would be the best place to attempt to become commissioned. So for me, it was quite an abrupt andâ€”but heartening transition.

Interviewer

And when you arrived here, as you said, the country was undergoing a lot of social turmoil. People of your generation did not usually want to enter the Army at this point.

Vincent Viola

Right, right.

Interviewer

And you went to a public school, I take it—is that right?

Vincent Viola

I did, yes.

Interviewer

So you had to be something of a maverick to want to stand up and say, “I’m going to go to the [United States] Military Academy now,” particularly in the middle of the Vietnam War—or actually, at the end of the Vietnam War, even more—

Vincent Viola

Yeah.

Interviewer

When the distaste for the Army was at a peak.

Vincent Viola

At a peak. So there are some—there are a couple of capstones in that journey. The socialization of the anti-military and anti-war movement had trickled from the campuses to the high school hallways by the time 1969, ’70, ’71, that period. And much like the gestalt of the popular culture takes root, and it is least commonly denominated, people would just almost organically attract to antiwar protests. A few had very committed, intellectually grounded reasons for participating in these protests. Many just did it almost as a social activity. Maybe because my family had grounded in me a deep love of the country and a deep love of service to the country, I saw through that.

Vincent Viola

So I distinctly remember sophomore year of high school, there was a very spontaneous antiwar demonstration, and there was a small group of us that basically picked up flags in the hallway of the high school and went outside and carried the flags and raised the flags. And it was a very interesting face-off between the protestors—who really were sort of socially enjoying the protest—and that small minority of us who felt that this almost romantic attachment to the ideals of the country and took it very seriously.

Interviewer

What was your own attitude about the Vietnam War at the time?

Vincent Viola

Well, of course, as a young man, you yearn for it to be a chivalrous and successful national mission and national adventure. So I remember distinctly, as a young man, reading about some of the first battles—I can’t remember specifically which ones. And I remember reading an article in the daily news about the landing of the Marines in Vietnam, and even as a young person, sensing that this wasn’t as grand a mission set as maybe World

War II was. And then as a young person, seeing the first soldiers returning from Vietnam from the neighborhoodâ€”it was a working-class, basically uneducated neighborhoodâ€”

Interviewer

What part of Brooklyn was this?

Vincent Viola

The Williamsburg section of Brooklyn â€”seeing that they came back a bit detached and unsure around the heraldry of their service. I distinctly remember that. And I remember, in 1971, a young soldier from my neighborhood, who my family knew the family, got killed, and he was an infantryman. And I remember the impact it had on his family, especially his dad, who served so honorably in World War II. And I remember a real almost unquestioning allegiance to the idea that this was Godâ€™s will, and fate had interceded in this manâ€™s adventure, the way it was meant to be, and he died an honorable death. And that stuck with meâ€”sort of confirmed for me that the military was an honorable profession.

An American Family

Interviewer

Did you think you would be going to Vietnam when you entered here?

Vincent Viola

Yeah. I remember as a young man unrealistically wanting to go to Vietnam. I was young, but I had this sense like, â€œI want to go there if, when Iâ€™m 18, I can.â€ But that was probably a bit sort of romantic in my assessment or a bit nostalgic in assessment. But there was a very, very clear ethos that was sown into me by my immediate familyâ€”my nuclear and extended familyâ€”that you absolutely must be ready to sacrifice for this country that gave us so much. Iâ€™ll veer off to a very interesting story. My dad was a combat support officerâ€”

Interviewer

In World War II.

Vincent Viola

In World War II. And basically, he was assigned to the supply ships, and I donâ€™t quite know exactly what his duties were, but he would facilitate equipment onto the shore during invasions. So for more than one invasion, he was in the middle of the landing and in the middle of the action. So he tells a story about how he was assigned then to a maneuver battalionâ€”Iâ€™m sure as a supply sergeant of some sortâ€”following the invasion of Anzio, and he received a V letter from my grandfather, who wasâ€”my grandfather had spent approximately 14 years in the Italian cavalry and horse-drawn artillery and served with a very prestigious Italian artillery regiment and participated in the series of a campaign in the Alps and the Isola Valley in World War I. And it was a great point of honor for my grandfatherâ€”he actually left the military as a noncommissioned officer of the Italian Army.

Vincent Viola

And my dad received a V letter from my grandfather, commanding him, basically as strong Italian fathers will do to their sons, that he must go visit his relatives in the village where my dad was actually born. My dad was three years old, approximately, when they came to America. So my dad went to his captain and asked him if he could go and see his family,

these small hamlets in the mountains in the south of Italyâ€”are very interesting and isolated subcultures. They havenâ€™t changed much, even â€˜til today, for hundreds of years, really.

Vincent Viola

And my dad tells a story that the captain said to himâ€”my grandfather did mention that they were starving. And the captain said, â€œWellâ€”my dad was not bold enough to say, â€œIâ€™d like to bring them food or something.â€ He would just figure outâ€”so the captain gave him a day pass to go and visit his family, and suggested that he bring some food and other supplies, sundries to them.

Vincent Viola

Anyway, my dad did that, and in 1980 my dad took a massive heart attackâ€”1979â€”1980. It was really the trigger for me to leave the Army, actually. And my dad said to me, â€œBefore I pass, I want to go to the village.â€ And so in April of 1980, we went to this villageâ€”I had never been thereâ€”where my dad was born. My dad hadnâ€™t been there sinceâ€”

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s the name of the village?

Vincent Viola

Sanzaâ€”S-A-N-Z-A. Itâ€™s a small town nestled in the Valiano region of, mountainous region of Basilicataâ€”Basilicata is the region, Campania is the greater region. Anyway, to make a very, very long story short, we get to the town, people start collecting around my dad spontaneouslyâ€”because itâ€™s a very small town, even in 1980. And about five minutes into the gathering, I see these adult men crying and grabbing my dad, and lo and behold they had remembered how they were starving, and how in the war he brought them a truckload of food, and actually stood with them for two days, as I remember now.

Vincent Viola

And thatâ€™s very powerful continuum there of an Italian-American immigrant family that, not more than 17 years prior, 20 years prior, had been in that village, and now my dad and three of his brothers were in combat. My mom had two of her brothers and five nephews in combat. So this family, from thisâ€”they both came from the same village, my mom and dadâ€”from this little hamlet had over ten persons serving this new country in harmâ€™s way.

Interviewer

In the American Armyâ€”thatâ€™s amazing. I mean thatâ€™s really the immigrant story, isnâ€™t it, really?

Vincent Viola

Itâ€™s phenomenal, and immigrantsâ€”the concept of self-identity is evolving and changing so quickly as culture and the gestalt of culture evolves, and the access to the stimuli changes and evolves. So when you would ask my dad, â€œWhat are you,â€ he probably would say, â€œIâ€™m a male, husband, father, American, Catholic,â€ or â€œCatholic, American.â€

Vincent Viola

But [being] an American was critical to his deepest identity. The relationship between him and the nation was ephemeral, and so when you're raised around that, you really get a sense that there are principles at work and mechanisms at work much, much more important than they're gifts. These freedoms are gifts. My dad used to always say, "Freedom isn't free." Guess that was just that's kind of a little bit of background.

The Honor's Scandal
Interviewer

Let's come back to the time here at West Point during this period. What was it like to be here in the period immediately after the end of the Vietnam War?

Vincent Viola

It was very fascinating, and I could actually say, for me, it was quite—I was self-aware of it, because the academy—my class—I think this can be documented. It is a class that must be chronicled and studied at a granular level from a sociological and military perspective, because it came—we applied at probably the nadir of commitment to the military in the nation. So as would follow, the qualifications of my class were not as high as classes before and classes after. And I think that can almost be quantified by the average SAT scores and other statistics that are used to judge academic and other standards. And the cadets that were here had gone through a traumatic experience, because the class of '74 entered in the, I guess, summer of '70.

Interviewer

Right.

Vincent Viola

And I'm sure it was enormously evolving around the subculture here or impactful on what was going on outside the gates.

Vincent Viola

So what was it like? The military mission and the duties, day-to-day, they take up so much of your consciousness that you are Puritan in your pursuit of the Spartan ethic. But how does that really translate? Everyone has a different capacity or understanding of it, but the principles of the Academy are overwhelming, and they are sown into you. It's very hard to come here and not leave not having a selfless sense of what duty means, what honor is, and the importance of your country.

Vincent Viola

Despite the fact that when we were off-post, or when we would observe the civilian world, it was a very almost non-linear set of conditions. Most persons had been introduced at some point to drug use—drinking was very, very accepted. The Sexual Revolution was abound. And the academy was a place where those inputs weren't really defining the environment.

Interviewer

Did you find yourself when you would travel off being mocked and harassed by people?

Vincent Viola

It's very interesting. For me, it was almost the opposite, because when I would go off-post, I'd return to my neighborhood, which is very small, parochial, patriotic neighborhood, so I was heralded every time I would go home. And every time I went home, until my first class year, just because we could go home in civilian clothes, and it was easier, I would go home in uniform, and I was always heralded. New York City quietly, socially, is a very conservative place, so if I'd go out in uniform to a bar anywhere in the city, most of the persons in bars or in points of culture, even at those points, in those years were somewhat older, born of the Korean War or World War II generation. We were always heralded and really, really accommodated.

Vincent Viola

I remember distinctly we had a special arrangement with the Essex Hotel where we could stay there for \$21.00 a night. So here you are in Central Park South, a young man, and you are standing on Central Park South.

Vincent Viola

But I do want to make one point about what the Academy was like. I remember the first time I heard an upperclassman kind of bad-mouthing some of the policies of the Academy. I'll never—I was startled, because I thought that this was a monolith, and I quickly realized that every individual cadet's interpretation of duty and honor or country started from a very, very different perspective of what those words meant and how they internalized them.

Vincent Viola

But I could see over the period of those of us who stayed—and again, during my years, attrition was fairly significant—the people who stayed, sown into their souls almost, were those principles and that commitment to service. And of course, my class suffered the honor scandal of 1976.

Interviewer

Yes. Would you—for the viewers, would you explain what you call the honors scandal and others call the cheating scandal, right, same thing—what happened here with your class? —Cause it seems almost to epitomize the nadir of the Army—

Vincent Viola

Absolutely—yeah, it did. In some ways it does, absolutely, I would say. Well, what I remember of it is interesting, because there are very stark, deeply, almost burnt memories and images of it. So I'll try to take you through the first day, and to graduation.

Vincent Viola

I think it was the spring of our Cow Year, our third year here, and I remember during breakfast formation—these might be false memories. I'm kind of grasping back. But I remember there was a formation, and I remember there were a host of names called out to fall out at the end of the formation. That's my first memory of the honor scandal.

Vincent Viola

And I remember hearing later that the people were called out of formation, because they were informed that they were under an honor investigation for an exercise, a take-home exercise that we had in electrical engineering.

Vincent Viola

So letâ€™s talk a little bit about that. Electrical engineering, we refer to it as â€œjuiceâ€”it was one of the required engineering science courses that you had to take at the Academy. If I remember correctly, when I was a cadet, everyone had to study fluid mechanics, solid mechanics, electrical engineeringâ€”these were the sort of core engineering sciences that everyone had to take, as I rememberâ€”long time ago. But I remember word starting to spontaneously spread through the class that there was a big issue with whether cadets had collaborated on this exercise.

Vincent Viola

Now, as I remember, the exercise was a very, veryâ€”it was a almostâ€”it was a problem around designing a particular circuit, and it was a 3.0 valued take-home test. So that was sort of the lowest quiz or take-home exam you could have. So Iâ€™m sure people probably didnâ€™t have it as an academic priority like, letâ€™s say, the social sciences paper that we had to write our first class year.

Vincent Viola

And I remember hearing that, in fact, a group of professors had seen identical submissions from cadets, and it was uncanny, and therefore, they began to investigate. And upon further investigations, they found enough to where it was a systemic problem and challenge to the honor code.

Vincent Viola

And the decision was madeâ€”and the right decision was madeâ€”to examine every paper and to see if, in fact, any papers that looked somewhat similar, to simply ask, call the cadets in and say, â€œDid you collaborate? Did you know you shouldnâ€™t have collaborated? And if you did, why?â€”And I guess bring it to the next level of the honor procedure.

Vincent Viola

The problem was that the academy now had to make a decision around how to process these honor boards in a way that protected the principles of the honor code, and from an administrative and just execution perspective, was not overwhelmingâ€”as it did began to overwhelm.

Interviewer

Did you knowâ€”you mustâ€™ve known some of the cadets that were involved with this.

Vincent Viola

I had an enormously fascinating experience around the honor scandal. The company that I was a member inâ€”as Iâ€™m sure you knowâ€”after Beast Barracks you are assigned to a company in one of the four regiments. And individual companies had distinct ethos, because back in those days, as I remember, you stood with the same company, as far as I knew, the whole four years.

Vincent Viola

So we were together in the same company for the first three years of my cadet career until the scandal. My company was very unique, and I'm sure there were others like this. I don't have statistics on this, but we were what you called a sort of gray company. We were very, very Spartan and committed to the Academy and to its principles. We were probably one of the most extraordinary in that regard.

Vincent Viola

Part of that was because we had some former soldiers in the company who were cadets throughout the four classes that were there any time, and part of it was because we had a tactical officer, then was at the rank of major, Major Joseph Kinzer, an old-guard Infantry soldier who was a Vietnam combat veteran, a phenomenal infantryman and a fantastic tactical officer. He retired later on as a lieutenant general from the Army. And he just was extremely involved effectively at forming us as officers.

Vincent Viola

So my class and my company of A4 did not have one person's paper questioned, so we were almost in this kind of vacuum. Now, my roommate is a person you should interview for this. If you haven't interviewed the honor committee, the senior leaders of the honor committee of the class of '77, Mike [E.] Ivy, Mike [Burnell] Henry, oh gosh, I think Carl [Axel] Swanson, you need to sit and have hours around the honor scandal. This is very, very unique.

Vincent Viola

And my roommate at the time was a secretary to the honor committee, and so his life changed overnight. The honor committee became basically a full-time job for him, to the point where, as I remember, he missed many classes.

Interviewer

Now, he's sitting on the honor committee in judgment of his fellow cadets, right?

Vincent Viola

Yeah, actually, and even more important, organizing the conduct of basically what, the honor code and the administration of the honor code, the enforcement of it, is not much unlike our jurisprudential system. You have an event that calls to question whether or not there was an honor violation, and you have what is a pre-honor committee hearing, almost grand jury-type mechanism, where cadets decide, after speaking to the cadets involved in the potential violation, whether or not there is enough doubt or evidence to bring it to a full honor committee, so all of the due process had to be protected.

Are You Cool on Honor?

Vincent Viola

What occurred next was extremely, extreme, this is my perspective, of course, but extremely instructional. Some of the cadets that were indicted, if I dare say that word, were indignant. They had been in companies that basically had been very, very broad in its definition of honor. They were called, the term was used, Are you cool on honor? And I found this out later on as the scandal evolved, and

Interviewer

“Are you cool on honor?” meant what, though?

Vincent Viola

“Cool on honor” meant to the people who apparently would cheat and collaborate was that you were okay with collaborating or cheating.

Interviewer

I see.

Vincent Viola

So they—and this is my perception. I don’t have objective evidence. But what happened next was the popular media got hold of this story. And so two or three fundamental challenges then faced the Academy.

Vincent Viola

One was the cadets who were completely indignant, and almost felt they should be able to cheat, and were very reactive to the potential that they could be thrown out for an honor scandal—which was and should be the standard—started to agitate, basically against the whole surety of the honor code as it was being practiced.

Vincent Viola

So as I remember, there was a period where cadets basically—cadets who were charged basically claimed that everyone cheated at the Academy, and the honor code wasn’t being upheld. Well, the Academy had a duty to then examine and investigate every one of those charges or derivative of accusations.

Interviewer

So were you investigated—was every cadet investigated for their commitment?

Vincent Viola

No, I was never investigated in that.

Interviewer

But their claim that—was that everybody cheated.

Vincent Viola

Yeah, yes.

Interviewer

Everybody violated the honor code, so they were just following the trend kind of thing.

Vincent Viola

And now you had groups who wanted to make sure that civil liberties and personal liberties were not violated—in fact, I think the ACLU might’ve gotten involved—and then the civilian lawyers who got involved to represent these cadets. Because now it had elevated past the control of the Corps, and it became a challenge to the administration of the

Academy.

Vincent Viola

And I remember there was this phenomenon called the honor drill roll, where they would sit down with charged cadets and basically ask them to put a check next toâ€”theyâ€™d go through each ofâ€”the drill roll was basically the roster of each company of everyone in that class. So one of the things you had to do after Plebe Summer, just to go back, is you had to memorize the drill roll for each class in your company. So you knew everyoneâ€™s name when you began the first week after Beast Barracks that you would spend with your new company, called reorganization week.

Vincent Viola

Well, these drill rolls actually existed, and they were physical lists on paper, and these cadets, many cadets would sit down and just put checks down next to peopleâ€™s names if they even thought they mightâ€™ve ever cheated. And I was never called for even a drill roll check, nor were any persons in my company. I think there was my company, A4, and one other company that didnâ€™t have anyone in it questioned.

Vincent Viola

And it was interesting, because again, that exercise was going on. The protection of civil liberties was being focused upon. The conduct of these honor committee hearings was going on. And fast forward to the summer now of our Cow Year, into our first of yearâ€”now, you have to remember, the First Class year of a cadet is so phenomenally anticipated and so waited for, because, obviously, itâ€™s your last year at the Academy. Youâ€™re transitioning from really leading the Corps, ensuring its duties are fulfilled, preparing to become a commissioned officer and enter the real Army, so to speak. And you have more privileges than youâ€™ve ever had. Itâ€™s a very enjoyable year.

Vincent Viola

A definite weight was put on my class because of the honor scandal, and I remember my First Class summerâ€”I was a squad leader in the first detail at Beast Barracksâ€”having to watch approximately somewhere it seems like 50 or 60 of my classmates wear the same uniform every dayâ€”different than what we were wearing. They would wear khaki uniforms, and they were called the speed battalion or the speed company. It was a special provisional detachment. They were all cadets that had been found guilty on honor, or were awaiting their trial, their honor trial, or awaiting results. As I remember, they lived in central barracks, and they were almost like a foreign antibodyâ€”it was horrible. And I had a few friends from other companies that were in there.

Interviewer

Iâ€™m just trying to understand this. So the cheating happened in their Firstie Year?

Vincent Viola

No, in the Cowâ€”third year.

Interviewer

In the Cow Year, soâ€”

Vincent Viola

I think the exercise was handed in over the holiday period of 19â€”

Interviewer

So the investigation goes on sort of in the Spring semester of the Cow Year.

Vincent Viola

Spring through First Class year summer, yeah.

Interviewer

Spring through Firstâ€”yeah. And in the First Class year, then thereâ€™s theseâ€”are they suspended out of the Academy? Is that what happens next, or is theâ€”

Vincent Viola

I canâ€™t quite remember, but what I believe happened was they were expelled from the Corps, and the federal government, at the Department of Army level, reacted to the forces, the social and political forces that were bringing to bear on the construction, which challenged the idea that, in fact, the Academy had protected the honor code well enough so that it was functioning and being followed. So the Department of the Army commissioned, created a commission, which was led by Frank Bormanâ€”who I believe is class of 1951, he was an Apolloâ€”

Interviewer

Astronaut, right, yep.

Vincent Viola

And very other senior persons from a bipartisan commission, and after reviewing the conditions which led to the honor code breaking, so to speak, one of the recommendations from the commission was that each of the cadets found guilty would be given a chance to return with the class of 1978. And I think I have about 100, close to 100 classmates, who graduated with the class of â€™78â€”many of them, many of them went on to have stellar military careers.

Interviewer

Now, the honor code says not only not to tolerate lying, cheating, or stealing, butâ€”or does it say something to the effect of â€œor knowledge of?â€”

Vincent Viola

It simply says a cadet will not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate those who do.

Interviewer

Tolerate those who do.

Vincent Viola

You have an affirmative duty, if you seeâ€”

Interviewer

To report that.

Vincent Viola

To report that.

Interviewer

And so there mustâ€™ve been cadets who, rather than cheating or stealing themselves, were nonetheless implicated just because they were aware of the fact that it was going on down the hallway.

Vincent Viola

Iâ€™m sure there were. I donâ€™t have specific memory or recall. But I know that it got extremely non-linear, the interpretations of the code and peopleâ€™s reaction to the code. It was absolutelyâ€”I would say that is the nadir of theâ€”Iâ€™m sure in the history before my lifetime, the Academy has come under the threat and challenge of its premise. Iâ€™m sure that Spring of 1976 through the Spring of 1977 was one of those periods.

Interviewer

Of course, it also dovetailed with the larger story going on outside of the Academyâ€”

Vincent Viola

Absolutely.

Interviewer

Which was that the nation was in decline, the Army is in decline, old traditional trusted places were not to be trusted anymore.

Vincent Viola

Exactly.

Interviewer

And so it fit that narrative toâ€”

Vincent Viola

It absolutely did, and as it, thankfully, always does, the Academy and itsâ€”the accommodation of its Spartan core and Athenian, almost, force, or pilot flame, is almost this intellectual curiosity that must exist here and does, always lags and doesnâ€™t react as broadly, deeply, or as quickly. Thatâ€™s good, because the principles at demand for combat leadership, they really donâ€™t change.

Interviewer

Who was Superintendent when all this happened?

Vincent Viola

We had a gentleman who was a war hero. He was a combat commander during Vietnam. He actually commanded the forces during an operation up in the central highlands near the

Cambodian and Laos borderâ€”it was 1970â€”â€™71â€”called Operation Ripcord. He was a devout Airborne soldier named Sidney Berry. He had commanded a brigade in the combat organization of the 101st Airborne Division during the conduct of that battle.

Interviewer

He was removed after the scandal, right?

Vincent Viola

I donâ€™tâ€”

Interviewer

When General Goodpaster comes back, is that right?

Vincent Viola

I think heâ€™s not removed. I think heâ€™”well, I donâ€™t know what you would call that. I think he finished his term, as I remember. But we graduated with Major General Berry as our Superintendent. I think General Goodpaster became the Superintendent the following year or the following year.

Interviewer

I seeâ€”and actually took off a star in order to return here, isnâ€™t that right?

Vincent Viola

Yes. Yes.

Interviewer

And with the idea that he was going to clean up the Academy from the scandal.

Vincent Viola

Clean up the Academy, bring some pace and depth around what was really the most important principles that had to be at work every day in a cadetâ€™s life.

The Meaning of West Point

Interviewer

Did your class feel shamed by this, you think? I mean even those whoâ€”certainly those who actually did it must have, but did the rest of the class feel tainted by this?

Vincent Viola

Yeah, I thinkâ€”now, I have to qualify this, because I left the Army after five years. I remained a reserve officer for the next 13 years, and I always stoodâ€”I try to remain current as far as my officership, and in contact with classmates and other soldiers.

Vincent Viola

I think our class did feel shame and does feel shame, because I think our class, in some ways, bore an enormous unspoken responsibility. We came from a civilian world that had undergone enormous social disruption. We only knew we wanted to serve our country.

Vincent Viola

I hardly remember a classmate saying, "I'm here because it's a free education." If you felt that way, you quickly realized in the first two, three, four weeks that going through this formation, this transformative process, was not worth all the money in the world, and you would move on.

Vincent Viola

But we had a very, very unfair burden hoisted upon us, because we had to internalize, maintain, protect, defend, and live these core values that defined West Point at a time where there was never more challenge put upon them and never more physical evidence of doubt by the population and society that we were sworn to defend. So my class would be a fascinating study.

Interviewer

Do you think that there was the feeling, anywhere in the Army—in the leadership or among other alumni and classes, that, as you referred to before, that the standards may have lowered in admitting your class?

Vincent Viola

Oh, absolutely.

Interviewer

And therefore, that's why the scandal happened.

Vincent Viola

I'm sure there's some of that. That theme—there's a saying and a phrase that's used amongst cadets and graduates.

It's a simple saying

"The Corps has." In other words, the Corps has seen its better days—it's not like it used to be. And there's a phenomenal awareness of graduates and cadets that the experience at the Academy is so pervasive, it internalizes so deeply, because your physical experience is so commanded and defined by your cadet duties and schedule, that it's almost osmotic. You transform to depths that you're not aware of. I guess that's where success on the battlefield really stems from—this almost deep well of unassumed courage and unassumed dedication to your soldiers.

Vincent Viola

But absolutely—so what I'm describing here is instructors would say things like to us, "When I was a cadet, we were not allowed to blank," or "We had to wear this uniform at this point." Every fine detail of the cadet experience is so valued by its graduates that the compulsion is to keep it the same and have every feature the same, because graduates feel so proud and also confident that they are the product that was desired.

Vincent Viola

And I think that proves in the military service, I mean I think if there's ever been a

period where the Academy's value to the nation should be celebrated and demonstrated, it's the post-Vietnam era –til today.

Interviewer

Did you ever find yourself either because of the rigor of the training or because the temptations from the outside world or because of, perhaps, disappointment in your own class over this scandal that you really wanted out?

Vincent Viola

Never wanted out. It caused, for me, a redoubling of my dedication to the Academy. When I would go home on leave, all of my friends had gotten into some level of drug use, so I had to make a very specific choice, and that choice was, "I cannot do this. I cannot be around this." And I came from a very cloistered neighborhood nonetheless, we were much the same as the rest of America, especially uneducated, lower middle class, and upper lower class areas.

Interviewer

Did it look to you at all, though, like the kids, guys back at home your age who were doing the drugs, were having more fun than you did?

Vincent Viola

Oh, absolutely.

Interviewer

It had to be tempting I mean tempting literally, but it had to tempt you had to look at it and think, "Wow, I'm going to go back, and I'm going to go through this rigorous schedule, and they're going to go off and have fun, and play, and listen to rock and roll, and"

Vincent Viola

Well, and I remember my one buddy, who did go to college two or three of us went to college describing to me frat parties, you know. I mean, you know, and living in coed dormitories.

Vincent Viola

I think you this place overwhelms you in a positive sense. If you are slightly potentialized to want to be here slightly potentialized in your deepest personality to be selfless if you have the United States of America as part of your core identity you have to understand that the rewards of selfless leadership are enormously infectious. Dare I say they are they're definitional.

Vincent Viola

So I was experiencing I don't want to paint the picture like we felt estranged here. The place was enormously proud of itself. We were enormously devout around the values and principles that we were living here. And dare I say even the cadets that suffered the current popular cultural gestalt of moral relativism while they were here, at their core desired and wanted to be combat leaders. You cannot help but that feeling.

Training For War Interviewer

Let's actually go to the nature of that kind of training. People always say you learn to be a leader at West Point, but I find it hard to imagine how you teach leadership. Tell me how you experienced that.

Vincent Viola

Okay.

Interviewer

You said osmotic, but sort of how did—what were the core elements that you took away from here that led you to feel that you were a leader, not only in the world of the Army, but out in the civilian world, too, where you've had enormous success, and where you have taken some of what you've learned and applied it to the outside world?

Vincent Viola

Yep. So you started your question by asking me how do you teach leadership? I think you teach leadership by living leadership. I think leadership is grounded in very clearly discernable and understood principles. And you learn them here from the first day you're here.

Vincent Viola

So what are they—this would be my take on those incontrovertible principles. Integrity—honesty—attempting to become an ever-improving subject matter expert. You have to study battle. You have to study leadership in combat situations. How does that happen here?

Vincent Viola

I can tell you that a vast majority—if almost every one of my professors that were uniformed here, and when I was a cadet, I dare say that seemed like 95 percent of the staff—were combat veterans. And I dare say that almost to a man, an officer, at some point during your term of instruction with that officer, he would stop class, either prompted by a question from a cadet, or prompted by a memory or desire to teach, and describe a combat situation he was in, or describe the rigors of combat, and teach what he came away from the Vietnam experience, and what he thought were eternal principles of the American Army in combat.

Vincent Viola

Now, I'm sort of casting that, but I remember as a young cadet on a Saturday morning, more than one time having a math professor—when we were cadets, I'm saying it again—when I was a cadet, when we were cadets, we attended class six days a week—Saturday—til twelve o'clock or something, maybe even later—one o'clock maybe. And I remember—and we had to recite, every day, in most classes—particularly mathematics, where we would take positions at our blackboards and solve a problem, and then brief on that problem.

Vincent Viola

And I remember more than a handful of my mathematics professors finishing the work with

the boards with 15, 20, 25 minutes left in the class and describing a combat experience. And remember, from the first day you're here, you understand what singularity is—you understand what singularity is. If singularity in the computational world is the point at which speed to process information eclipses the information available which to process, there's a singularity around military ethos. It's the point where you ask yourself do you understand the importance of your role as a combat leader.

Vincent Viola

If you don't understand all of the inputs to that self-realization or self-decision point, you seek out and you ask, "What is it like to be in combat" physically, psychologically?

Vincent Viola

And you are taught here that you have a responsibility unlike any other profession, because when you are engaged in combat and you are firing upon an objective and maneuvering to take it, you are going with forethought to make decisions knowing that there's a great chance the person that you send forward to execute either fire or maneuver is not going to come back. And it's a very grave, simple, but singular point in which your responsibility to duty and your understanding of it intercedes with your desire to take it on.

Interviewer

These instructors you had at the time, they were—you said some of them were Vietnam veterans.

Vincent Viola

Most all of them—I don't remember any that wasn't.

Interviewer

So it was not the Korean generation, you were being taught by people who were a little bit older than you are, then—senior officers?

Vincent Viola

That's a great point. The senior staff, as I remember—I remember seeing the Korean service ribbon on some of the senior staff and permanent professors—dare I say when I started our Superintendent, William Knowlton, General Knowlton—he served in World War II, in fact. But our close, most closely contacted—the officers that we had most close contact with—our instructors and our tactical officers and trainers—they were all Vietnam. I remember a Major Davison, in military instruction—I think, believe he was class of 1964.

Vincent Viola

A very tall fellow, ramrod straight, and he wore the Silver Star, and I can remember he taught us small unit tactics in military instruction either my Plebe or my Yearling Year. And I can just remember the passion with which he spoke about operational planning, and the conduct of a platoon operation. And I remember as a young man saying, "That's his life. That's his passion." And his devotion and his enthusiasm around it and pride in it was completely infectious. You wanted to be that guy.

Interviewer

But you were there, though, at sort of the cross, it seems to me, between the heroic stories of World War IIâ€”

Vincent Viola

Yes. Yes.

Interviewer

And then the intersection of that with the very non-heroic stories of Vietnam. And between a sort of big land forces kind of Army, like World War IIâ€”

Vincent Viola

Yes.

Interviewer

And a counterinsurgency kind of fight.

Vincent Viola

You got it.

Interviewer

So this wasâ€”

Vincent Viola

Small unit, guerilla-based campaign, although there wereâ€”the initial strategy doctrine was based in â€œsearch and destroyâ€”and clear the areas to hold them without, maybe, the counterinsurgency piece initially in Vietnamâ€”Iâ€™m not an expertâ€”

Interviewer

Well, counterinsurgency wouldâ€™ve come, though, before youâ€”I mean war shifted withâ€”

Vincent Viola

Vietnamization, actually, wouldâ€™ve done some of that.

Interviewer

Exactlyâ€”wouldâ€™ve shifted, then, before you actually completed yourâ€”

Vincent Viola

Yes. Yes.

Interviewer

So the storyâ€”Iâ€™m saying the story had kind of gotâ€”I mean you had two kinds of wars here.

Vincent Viola

Yes, absolutely.

Interviewer

Very much. One sort of out of the movies, in a sense, and the other oneâ€”

Vincent Viola

But you have to understand one thing: to a soldier, the craft doesnâ€™t change. You know, soldiering is as specific, is asâ€”the skills of soldiering and the operational art that you must study and feel comfortable mastering is not unlike any other intellectual academic discipline.

So when youâ€™re here, and youâ€™re studying the subject matter, youâ€™re not conditional or conditioned by the environmentâ€”youâ€™re going to ply your craft. So Iâ€™ll give you an example

Iâ€™m sure heart surgeons that study today are not thinking about the difficulty to navigate the administrative Byzantine labyrinth of how the Medicare system will allow him to operate at will.

Vincent Viola

Itâ€™s the same thing hereâ€”this is extremelyâ€”in the end itâ€™s a very insulated, but positively reaffirming, environment. Itâ€™s an internally generated strength. Youâ€™re learning your craft because you must learn your craft, and the other thing here is youâ€™re executing the tenets of your craft every day. Standing in formation, being of correct order, marching in formationâ€”so youâ€™re physicalizing on your leadership ability, and it was the same always. The upper classes led the military formation of the cadets as much as the staff here, so itâ€™s a very unique environment.

Interviewer

Tell me about Branchâ€”

Vincent Viola

So to an extent, we were sort of isolated.

â€œSingular in Your Desire to Serveâ€

Interviewer

Right. Tell me about Branch Night for youâ€”what did you choose?

Vincent Viola

Very fascinating, thatâ€™s a great question. I always knew I wanted to be an Infantry officer. My dad took ill during my Yearling Year, and I was theâ€”I had become quickly the sole source of leadership in my family, andâ€”

Interviewer

He took illâ€”this is before his heart attack, though.

Vincent Viola

Yeah.

Interviewer

So this is a differentâ€”

Vincent Viola

Yeah, yeah. And so he had to retire with a very small disability pension. And so I had to help financially, even while I was a cadet. And in fact, I remember some of my cadet summers actually working to make money to give to my family. Andâ€”

Interviewer

What did your father do? What was he?

Vincent Viola

He was a truck driver. So branch night, I stood up and said, â€œInfantry,â€ with great pride. Now, my dilemma was my branch assignment, because my family really wanted me to stay close. Remember in the East Coast, the only place that was close was Fort Dix, and that wasnâ€™t a operational unit, it wasnâ€™t an operational base. It was a training, basic training location. And one of the few times I defied my parents, and I selected the 101st Airborne Division.

Interviewer

So thatâ€™s where you went.

Vincent Viola

Thatâ€™s where I went.

Interviewer

Yeah. And what was it like?

Vincent Viola

And Branch Night wasâ€”oh, it was the best days of my life, being a platoon leader in the 101st Airborne Division was justâ€”for someone who always desired to lead soldiers and experience the feeling of building an esprit and a camaraderie, it was just simply amazing. In fact, my first company commander is a very, very successful soldier, the class of 1975, Lieutenant General Benjamin Freakley.

Interviewer

Ohâ€”I know who Benjamin Freakley is.

Vincent Viola

Yeah, and he was my first company commander. I was very blessed.

Interviewer

Heâ€™s down at Fort Monroe now, I thinkâ€”is that right?

Vincent Viola

Yes. Heâ€™s a wonderful role model and a great soldier, and I still keep in touch periodicallyâ€”just simply very blessed.

Interviewer

Sure, sure. Now, whyâ€™d you get out of the Army? You only put your minimum, five years and gone.

Vincent Viola

Five years. I basically was torn. My classmates used to tease meâ€”they said I had a very, very thick rubber band that was sewed in my back, and it would only stretch up to West Point and then spring back to my neighborhood in Brooklyn.

Vincent Viola

Basically, to take care of my familyâ€”

Interviewer

After your fatherâ€™s heart attack.

Vincent Viola

Yeah. My mom and dad were my dependentsâ€”and my younger brother were my dependents from the day I graduated. I had to actually leave Fort Campbell, and I took a compassionate reassignment to Fort Hamilton in New York Cityâ€”actually, Fort Dix, and I got assigned to Fort Hamilton.

Interviewer

Your father wasâ€”in that period your father was suffering from what? What was theâ€”it was notâ€”

Vincent Viola

It was a combination of heartâ€”he had congenital heart disease that went undiagnosed, and just was rendered incapable. He also suffered from alcoholism from when he came home from World War II until my Yearling Year.

Interviewer

And your mother was sick also, had you said, orâ€”

Vincent Viola

My mom was not sick, but she was an Italian-American housewife. She didnâ€™t work. She didnâ€™t have any skills, per se, except to be a housewife.

Vincent Viola

So it was a pretty challenging situation, and I decidedâ€”and even myâ€”hereâ€™s the thing about the Army thatâ€™s very hard to describe until you experience it. People, soldiers donâ€™t judge other soldiers. Theyâ€™re so committed, generally speaking, to

them, so even when I was getting ready to leave and had put in to resign, I had more than one senior officer come to me and say, "If you stabilize your family or your dad and mom are actually able to move with you, I'll help you get an assignment and pick up on your career again." It was just amazing—you always feel as though you're part of the Army.

Interviewer

Yeah. Did you feel—you must've felt disappointed and—

Vincent Viola

Horribly, horribly—well, it's a strong feeling. It borders on failure or guilty—you feel like I let down my central purpose, you know.

Interviewer

Even—you still feel that, to this day.

Vincent Viola

I think—

Interviewer

When you look back on that, you think, "Gee, I wish that—"

Vincent Viola

Yeah, I think—yeah, I do. You always want, in your mind—yeah, because if you come through here, you can't help but to be singular in your desire to serve.

Vincent Viola

Now, maybe that's not the experience for every cadet, but I would say a vast majority, a solid amount—maybe majority, vast majority of people who leave the Army after five years leave a part of themselves with the Army, and have to have a feeling there's a void there—absolutely. I think that's why many persons who get out continually try to serve, either in their community or in other capacities.

From the 101st Airborne to the Trading Floor

Interviewer

Right. What did you go to do after you left? What was your—

Vincent Viola

Well, I stood in the Reserves. Oh, what did I do professionally?

Interviewer

Yeah.

Vincent Viola

I had absolutely no idea—I never really took serious in my own contemplation the idea that I would ever leave the Army, so I didn't know how to look for a job. I applied—I

paid someone to write a resume. I wrote a clumsy letter and sent it out to companies that I looked up at the library—back in those days, that’s what you did.

Vincent Viola

And I got absolutely no responses, and it was a pretty tough period—it was still a deep recession.

Interviewer

Sure, —cause this is—

Vincent Viola

Right, 1982—the stock market rally begins in late August of 1982, and as we all know, the beginnings of long-term economic expansions don’t feel like they’re going to be long-term economic expansions. And I was born in a neighborhood that was very close to Wall Street, and the generation before me—cause Wall Street always had a demand, especially in those days, for pretty much cheap labor. The persons on the floors who would grant the orders and run them from one broker to the next, and enter the order into a—

Interviewer

They had runners, right?

Vincent Viola

Runners—runners and clerks, and my neighborhood had a good amount of runners and low-level Wall Street professionals.

Interviewer

So you joined the crowd.

Vincent Viola

I joined the crowd. And they said to me, —Vinny, you have to do this.— I started law school in the evening, because basically my mother told me to, to be quite frank, and—

Interviewer

—Cause she wanted you to have another skill.

Vincent Viola

Exactly, you know. My mother’s first advice when I told her I was going to get out of the Army, she said, —You need to take the civil service test for different positions in New York City,— which I thought a little bit about.

Vincent Viola

But the story—its kind of interesting because my friends said, —You have to come down here. You were always very good at mathematics.— I was always pretty good at mathematics. And from the first day I entered the trading floor, I couldn’t believe it, because it had many of the physical characteristics of being around a platoon environment.

Interviewer

This is what I wanted to ask you, and weâ€™ll close with this question â€™cause we have to stop.

Vincent Viola

Yeah.

Interviewer

But then I think Iâ€™d love to pick up on it againâ€™

Vincent Viola

Yeah, sure.

Interviewer

Because you said this at the beginning, and I think itâ€™s really important to get you to talk about it a little bit moreâ€™that in a sense, the framework that you learned hereâ€™

Vincent Viola

Yes.

Interviewer

Could be transferred and translated into other worlds. And you walk into Wall Street, and suddenly it is an environment you can recognizeâ€™it seems familiar to you.

Vincent Viola

My management leadership operation, dare I say, capacity, capability, is bounded in the skills around platoon leadership. If you believe that you cannot effectivelyâ€™effectively, comprehensively, lead more than four persons other than yourself on a physical day-to-day level, then everything you ever wanted to know about anything, youâ€™ve learned in platoon leadership.

Interviewer

Letâ€™s stop there.

Vincent Viola

Yeah.

Interviewer

Weâ€™ll pick that up later.