Vietnam War draft resister to speak on campus Nov. 20

It was Dec. 14, 1966, more than 18 months after the United States deployed its first combat troops to South Vietnam. Cornell University sophomore Bruce Dancis, the co-founder and president of the local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), stood in front of Olin Hall, wearing a white button-down shirt, a necktie and a blazer.

Surrounding him were hundreds of supporters who knew what he was about to do. The FBI knew, too. Earlier in the day, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover got word that “an active member of anti-draft group … intended to burn his draft card at 4 p.m.”

Dancis, 18, was the first Cornell student to destroy his draft card. Instead of burning it, he tore it into four pieces and mailed it to his draft board, along with a statement declaring his “noncooperation” with the military draft. He would serve 19 months in a federal prison in Ashland, Ky. His story is one of the few accounts of the prison experiences of Vietnam-era draft resisters.

“I have never regretted my opposition to a war that many Americans considered unjust, illegal and immoral, and I’m proud to have resisted the draft rather than having accepted a draft deferment,” says Dancis, whose newly published memoir is Resister: A Story of Protest and Prison during the Vietnam War (Cornell University Press, 384 pages).

“Spending 19 months in federal prison was scary at times, but I didn’t see any alternative to prison that would have been morally and politically acceptable to me.”

Dancis will share his experiences and stories at 3 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 20, at the University Library Gallery as a part of the Friends of the Library’s Author Lecture Series. Joseph Palermo, a professor of history at Sac State and a fellow Cornell alumnus, will introduce him. The lecture is free and open to the public, and will be followed by a book-signing and reception.

Dancis began writing his memoir in 2008 after retiring from The Sacramento Bee, where he was a longtime arts and entertainment editor.

“With our country about to begin a 50-year retrospective look at the war in Vietnam, I felt it was important to remind readers that the war generated a vast anti-war movement and that opposition to U.S. policy in Vietnam grew steadily as the war continued,” Dancis says. “My book provides an insider’s account of what it was like to be a part of the anti-war movement and to resist the draft and go to prison as a part of that opposition. I also believe that many crucial issues with which I was involved in the 1960s – especially voter suppression, U.S. foreign policy and the use of military force abroad – remain important today.”

In Resister, Dancis recalls growing up in the Bronx with socialist parents and participating in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom at age 15. At Cornell, he was a leader in the anti-war and draft resistance movements. He organized the Vietnam War era’s first mass draft-card burning.
And, in August 1967, during a lunch break from a civil disobedience trial in which he was a defendant, young Dancis stood alongside political activist Abbie Hoffman and “a raucous group of demonstrators” as they famously showered the New York Stock Exchange with dollar bills in an anti-greed action.

The Author Lecture Series resumes Tuesday, Feb. 10, with David Covin discussing Princes of the Road, a novel about 1930s Pullman railcar porters. On Thursday, April 9, Sac State history professors Christopher Castaneda and Lee Simpson will talk about the essay collection they edited, River City and Valley Life: An Environmental History of the Sacramento Region.

For more information and a campus parking pass, contact Sally Hitchcock, the University Library’s coordinator for community outreach, at (916) 278-5954 or hitchcoc@saclink.csus.edu. The lecture series is sponsored by the University Library, the Hornet Bookstore, the Center for California Studies and the University Library Gallery.

For media assistance, contact Sacramento State’s Office of Public Affairs at (916) 278-6156. – Dixie Reid