

Interviewee: Waldo “Wally” Meier

Interviewer: Dan Borkenhagen

Date of interview: 23 September 2001

Location: the Meier home

Transcribed by: Dan Borkenhagen, March 2002

Edited by: Thomas Saylor, July 2002

Wally Meier was born on 20 July 1925 on a farm in rural Labuncie County, Kansas, and completed high school there. In 1943, Wally relocated to St. Paul in order to attend the US Navy’s V-12 college training program at St. Thomas College in St. Paul. V-12, which lasted from 1943-46, was designed to quickly increase the number of commissioned officers serving in the Navy. More than 100 colleges and universities participated.

As part of this training, Meier was stationed at a number of stateside bases before he started pilot’s training. He was completing training as the war came to a close. With the war over, there was no need for so many pilots, and thus Wally was discharged from service in late 1945 with the rank of aviation cadet.

Following military service, Wally returned to St. Paul, where he had spent some time during the war, and began working for Montgomery Ward (a retail stores chain). There met his wife, Marian; they were married in 1946 and had three children.

Wally worked for a number of firms, including 3M and Maytag, and then finished his career as owner of a small business and as a professor for a technical school in White Bear Lake, Minnesota.

At the time of this interview (2001), Wally resided in White Bear Lake, Minnesota. Wally was an active member of South Shore Trinity Lutheran Church, and worked on the Trustees and Properties boards. He was also involved in mentoring programs and enjoyed do-it-yourself work.

Interview key:

W: Wally Meier

D: Dan Borkenhagen

[text] = words added by editor, either for clarification or explanation

(*) = words or phrase unclear**

NOTE: interview has been edited for clarity

Tape 1, Side A. Counter begins at 000.

D: This is Dan Borkenhagen and I'm sitting here on September 23, 2001, doing an interview with Wally Meier for the oral history project. Thanks for interviewing with me today, Wally.

W: That's quite alright.

D: I'm just going to start out with some basic biography type of questions. When were you born and where?

W: On July 20, 1925. Down in [east central] Kansas, near Alta Vista in Wabaunsee County [near Topeka]. I was born on the farm, in a farmhouse. This was the normal procedure in those times. All of my life in Kansas was spent at that farmhouse. I believe it was one brother and one sister that was also born in that same house; I had a total of five in our family.

D: Who were your parents?

W: Frank and Ida Meier. Her maiden name was Koepke, K-O-E-P-K-E. We pronounced it Kepkey, but I found later from some German relatives it should be pronounced [Koep'-ka], however.

D: Giving you the correct pronunciation.

W: Yes! *(laughs)*

D: How long did you spend in Kansas?

W: Until World War II came along. I was 17, I was a senior in high school. I was quite interested in aviation, had been all the time. I a model airplane builder. When the Navy came up with the V-5 program, they called it, I signed up for that in February of my senior year. One of the stipulations there was that I could stay in high school until I completed it, and then go into service according to their schedule after that.

D: What year did you first hear about the V-5 program?

W: Well, it was during the winter of 1942-43. The war had been on for a year. In '41 it started.

D: You would have been a sophomore in high school then?

W: Let's see, I've lost track. That's a good question! *(laughs)* I started high school in '39, let's see '40, '41, '42. Yeah, I graduated in spring of '43.

D: What were you doing, where were you when you heard the news about December 7th, 1941?

W: I was at a Walther League [Lutheran Church Missouri Synod organization for youth] rally. We had, I and my brother, and we had a couple of other kids with us, I don't remember now anymore those details. We drove, oh, I imagine it was about a one hour drive. We didn't have the car radio on for some reason. We got at the rally in the early afternoon and we had a chapel service. At the end, when the chapel service was over, the minister said, "I suppose you all know we're at war." I could have just about fallen right through the pew at that time. Because this was already about four in the afternoon, and it actually happened somewhere just after noon central time.

D: So they didn't make any mention of it during the service that afternoon?

W: Didn't make any mention of it, when we came in nobody said anything. So it was kind of a shock. Course at the time, sort of the feeling, oh, that's now and it'll be over in a year or two. I really didn't think too much of it at the time. I did have a cousin that I knew was on the cruiser *Indianapolis*, and he was stationed in Pearl Harbor. So that was a concern, because we were just hearing bits and pieces. It's not like today where you are instantly there. We were hearing radio broadcasts and they were patching them through so that we could listen to the actual reports, but at that time of the day, it was about midday, it was about five, six hours difference. It was getting about midday on Pearl Harbor and they were still trying to figure out what really had happened. We sat up until after midnight listening to the car radio. We had driven back and then we just sat in the car and listened, trying to hear something about the cruiser *Indianapolis*, because of my cousin being on it. But it wasn't mentioned. We found out later that, that weekend, they had gone out to sea on exercise, and they were not even within sight of Pearl Harbor, you might say. They heard nothing other than the information they received, but they were nowhere near Pearl Harbor when that attack came.

D: So it came as a relief when you heard that?

W: Oh yeah, of course it was so much after the fact, that it was sort of neither here nor there kind of thing.

(1, A, 95)

D: How did your parents, or friends and family react when they had heard the news?

W: Oh, I think they took the old German stoic approach. Not a whole lot of discussion or anything about it. It's *(pauses three seconds)* oh, I don't know, it's also

60 years ago. *(laughs)* I don't believe there was really any, no panic or that kind of thing. Another thing was, that's practically the other side of the world, the way we looked at it. You know, you didn't move around a whole lot. I know there was some thinking at the time that the Japanese may try to carry it to our coast, the West Coast and so forth. Actually, as we found out later, they did get within sight of the coast with some of their submarine activity and so forth. But it never really got home to us, in Kansas, so to speak.

That middle of the country was as far away from anything as you could get. It didn't take long, of course, when it started to have an effect. Rationing of course, and the speed limit was moved way down. Then everybody was asked to turn in tires, you could keep one spare tire for your car, you shouldn't keep any additional tires. When I got up here in Minnesota at Fort Snelling, here was a pile of tires that was about a hundred feet high and about a block long. I think they were here at the end of the war yet. So all these tires we turned in stayed here and collected water and mosquitoes all during the war.

I know it was kind of disheartening, you always had a few spare tires around, it seemed like, and we turned in everything. Boy, later on we sort of paid for it with the problems we had. Tires were not available and they sold tire liners, as they called them. What they amounted to was an old tire that had been stripped of the sidewalls and you put that inside of the other tire just like an inner tube. Of course, everything was out of balance, but we were only supposed to drive at about 40 miles per hour, so you weren't going to get fast enough to have a problem.

D: Do you remember any of the other specific rations that they had?

W: Oh yeah, we had meat, sugar, gasoline rationed. Gasoline was one of the things that affected us most, as a teenager, naturally. There was no such a thing hardly for any of us to have our own cars, that wasn't the normal sort of thing. Usually we got to use the folks' car or something like that, and drive around. We did have very few paved roads, it was all dirt roads and gravel. It's not like what we're used to today. The overall usage of the car wasn't that big of a factor.

On the farm we did have ration stamps for agricultural use, and those were somewhat unlimited. I don't recall specifically how many stamps you got, those were "T" stamps as I recall. While I was in service we always had a few extra in our pockets just in case we rented a car. Those were some of the things that we had.

The other things, as far as rationing was concerned, it was simply a matter of things weren't there. Shoes were something you couldn't get, so that was one item. I remember you couldn't have any cuffs on your trousers. I remember that you weren't allowed to have cuffs, and also the patterns got comparatively narrow on the pant legs and things like that, to conserve fabric and so forth. Those things were some things that I still remember.

(1, A, 170)

D: So before you headed out and joined up, you were living on the farm and going to high school?

W: Right.

D: What did you notice about farming changing during those couple of years before you went to war?

W: Well, nothing specifically; farming, of course, was sort of a protected thing. It wasn't like today when you have the big corporate farms, the smaller farms provided more of your food individually. So we were in kind of a good situation. We didn't have to worry about meat rationing, because we had our own meat. Some of the other groceries, sugar, I think, was one of the things that would affect us most. As you went into a store, there were coupon values on products there, and you had your coupon book and you tore out the coupons that matched whatever you purchased. I think somewhere I might still have a few of those.

D: Did you notice life in your community change at all, before you headed out?

W: Well, of course my own attitude changed a lot. I was going to be a public school teacher. So when this whole thing came along, I then, more of a mental thing than anything, I didn't change my school planning too much. We had what they called a normal training course at the time, which prepared you to be a rural school teacher. Right out of high school you could teach, I think it was two years, if I remember right, at a rural school. Which, incidentally, is what I went to for seven of my elementary school years, all eight grades in one school room and about fifteen was the most students we had at one time. I was the only one in my grade.

I gave up pretty much the idea there, because of the draft. The draft had actually started before December 7th, and the draft lottery had already been performed. As soon as you were, the age was eighteen I believe it was, you had to register for the draft. I had an older brother, and I was the youngest in the family. My oldest brother, his draft number was low and he enlisted in the Navy, but when he got home from signing up, why here was his notice to report for the draft. He beat it by a couple of hours. So he ended up in the Navy, and he served most of the time in the Pacific.

Course I had a couple of years to go yet. As it happened, I enlisted before I was eligible for the draft, so I never even had a draft card during World War II. The general feeling, of course, there was a number of people that were going into the service almost immediately because of age. I remember one of our neighbors, he was two or three years older than I was, and he went into the service right away because of the draft, and so forth. He became a lieutenant in the army and was sent down to the New Hebrides, in the South Pacific. This was kind of a sad thing, and it brought things home real quick, because he came down with typhus and died, even before he went into combat. In a rural community where you don't have that many people around, our town was 400 people or so, why, it hits pretty close to home.

D: Did a lot of people react to that right away?

W: Again, there was, it was just sort of accepted. We got into the deal where you have a star in the window if you had somebody in the military, and it was a gold star if it was a fatality. So those things were showing up. And there was even some talk of blackouts and everything, even that far inland. It never was practiced like it was in some of the cities, because kerosene lamps, how far can you see them? *(laughs)* Kerosene lamps because we didn't have electricity.

D: Since this was a rural community, farming community, there wasn't really any industry there?

W: No, the nearest thing to any kind of industry was the grain elevator in town, a mill, maybe a flour mill or something like that. And a creamery, those kinds of things, all agriculture. We were about 60 miles [west] out of Topeka, about 30 miles [south] out of Manhattan and Junction City. Those were the largest towns anywhere close. But we had no manufacturing as such.

D: Could you describe an average day for you during those first couple years?

W: Well, actually the routine didn't change too much. The old deal was that we had to drive ourselves to school, because we didn't have school buses. We lived 7 1/2 miles out of town and we actually carpooled, which is a term that wasn't even originated back then, I don't recall it being used. But one of us would drive, sometimes that was a rotating deal, or else it would be one of us drive the car and there would be a total of four or five people in the car going to school.

D: You and your brothers then, or you and some friends?

W: I had a brother that was still in school, he was three years older than I was, but then we had another neighbor that had a car, and he drove, and I rode with him then. I don't believe I ever did drive the car. I had a driver's license at the time, but I very seldom drove myself unless we couldn't get a ride with somebody. In a rural community, too, you were able to get a driver's license at about age fifteen I think, and it cost us thirty-five cents as I recall. There was no such thing as a driving test.

As far as what changed at school, I think it did change, the emphasis as far as the school was concerned. They started pushing more for your science classes, science and math, for the students. That kind of thing I think was emphasized a little bit more, and it did diminish a lot of other things. Especially my last year, I lost interest in just about every extracurricular item at school because I was already signed up, I was going into the service. We were supposed to maintain a certain level, we had to be in the upper half of our class to get into this V-5 program, the Navy program. So those kinds of things were emphasized.

D: Then you joined up you said your junior year of high school?

W: Actually, I was a senior, in about February of '43, I think it was. I graduated in the spring of '43, and it was about February I went down to Kansas City to enlist. A big adventure, a big city and that, I had hardly ever been away from home overnight

up to that point. I took the train down from Rock Island, train down to Kansas City. My dad went along and this was, I think that was even required because I was only seventeen. I think that I had to get his okay, and I was still seventeen when I reported for duty. Which was July 1st, and my birthday was the middle of July, so July 20th.

D: Why did you decide to enlist when you did?

W: Well, it would have been just a matter of waiting another month or two and being drafted for the military. Basically for the Army, and that for the most part would mean infantry. That was where most of your draftees basically went into. I wanted to fly, I had had an interest in flying since I think Charles Lindbergh flew across the Atlantic in '27. And there was songs and models of Lindbergh's plane, the *Spirit of St. Louis*, carved out of chunks of wood. That was quite an interesting thing back at that time. There was just a general enthusiasm for flying. Like I said, I was very interested in model airplanes, built a lot of model airplanes. All rubber powered, I couldn't afford an engine. That was just sort of a normal progression, you might say. *(laughs)*

D: How did your dad, or your dad and your mom, react when you told them you wanted to go in?

W: Well, to me nothing was ever said to any extent. In retrospect, looking back at it, I think they were nuts to leave me go! *(laughs)* You look at a seventeen year old today, and my good gosh, I hadn't been away from home overnight hardly, and here they're letting me go. But then the other thing was, of course, that was probably better than waiting for the draft. My brother, who was almost about nine years older than I, he was in the Navy already. So I think he, they felt that it was probably the best of a number of evils, if you will.

So, I got into the training program. I was told at the time that it would be a seventeen month program, that it would take that long to get through it. Initially, the program was totally different. There was no college involved or anything else when I signed up. Then, roughly about February, I think, May, I'd gotten my orders to report for training at the college in Lindsborg, Kansas. Oh, just a couple of weeks before I was supposed to report there, I got a change in orders that I had to go to the College of St. Thomas, in the Twin Cities here. The reason was that in Lindsborg, they didn't have the right equipment that the Navy required. One of these was a swimming pool of a certain size and so forth, and the other facilities weren't as good as they wanted. It just so happened that St. Thomas had just, O'Shaughnessy Hall had just been built, and a beautiful swimming pool, and basketball courts, and racquetball, and tumbling and all different kinds of things there. So it was a terrific facility from that standpoint.

(1, A, 339)

D: So you joined up in February of '43 and you shipped out, not shipped out really, but went out to St. Thomas in May '43?

W: Late June. *(pauses three seconds)* Yes, June, because I had to report for July 1st.

D: So you headed up there by plane, train, or automobile?

W: Train. Always the train. We got down to the depot in Kansas City and there was about 70 or 80 fellows there. We reported to the gate we were supposed to report to, and the conductor was at the gate and he said, "What are you guys doing?" We showed him our tickets, and he said, "Sure would be nice to know it." He hadn't been notified. It was on the Chicago Great Western, which was more or less a milk train—go a couple of miles and stop, a couple more miles and stop. So he said, "We don't have a place to put you. We'll have to try and locate a car." So they did that, that took them about an hour, but pretty soon they loaded us up. It was a car they'd rolled directly out of the scrap heap. It hadn't been cleaned or anything. You wiped your hand across the seat and it was just black. But that's what we got; there was no diner on the car, on the train. So it wasn't too happy a bunch of guys. They were a little bit upset about the dirty facility, and then everything was just unprepared. But this was wartime.

So, it took us from about 6:00 in the evening to a little after noon the next day to get up here, which was a long ride. They were all straight back seats, and there was no sleeping facilities. We did the best we could. Some of the guys disassembled seats and laid them out in the aisles. *(laughs)* Laid them right in the aisle. When we got close to St. Paul, we were putting everything back together. We couldn't find a few seats, I don't know what ever happened to them. That was my first experience on a long distance train ride.

D: Had you ever been that far away before, or was this something new?

W: No, this was the farthest I'd ever been from home. We had gone as far as Hastings, Nebraska, where my grandmother lived. That was about 250 miles, but that was always with somebody in the family. The longest train ride, I think, I think we did have what we called a gas powered motor train that used to go up to Hastings from our area, and that was sort of like a glorified streetcar, a little bit bigger than what you normally think of for a streetcar. But that was the only experience I'd had on a train prior to that.

D: How did you feel about being in a whole new part of the country and being away from home for the first time?

W: Well, I'll tell you, it was pretty devastating the first couple of days. One of the things, we got up here, there was 250 of us that reported to St. Thomas. Half were from California and half from Kansas.

D: Different part of the country for those people.

W: I don't know why they did it that way. Our group from Kansas, there were a few from Missouri and Nebraska that were from across state lines, but it was basically all Kansas. Then the other half was from the West coast. So there was a little bit of an intermixing there, but that was no problem.

I did run across one person that I had met at a Walther League Rally. He was there, Arnie Bosker was his name. I had met him just the year before, but just very casually. We had to kind of talk about it to discover that we'd actually had contact. They gave us an opportunity, I think it was the next day, or just within a day or two. They called up an assembly, and said, "If any of you have changed your mind, you can go home." And we had a couple that did. But of course the thing is, that we knew good and well that the draft board would be sitting there, just rubbing their hands, waiting for you to step off the train and you'd be right back to some other place! And this was a lot friendlier than that.

This was a total change of our plans because, going to college, we had been told we were going to go right into military training initially. Here now was a year of pre-engineering that we had to go into. I don't know, I'm trying to put it into perspective, I think the Battle of Midway [1942] had already occurred. The loss of life there had been so high among the Naval Air Corps that they were rethinking their training. You probably recall that somewhere during the war [actually in 1944] that [President] George Bush, Sr. had been shot down. We had been told also that the average life in combat of the naval aviator in combat was ten minutes. Real encouraging! *(laughs)* But we were in, and combat was a long way off at the time.

D: Why were they having you do this college? Was it to give you some officer type training?

W: I think that was part of it. We did have, a lot of the courses I remember were naval organization. I think also there's a sorting out of the group to narrow it down from those that had signed up. Our group here, too, in this Navy V-5 program, they combined this with the Navy V-12 program, this College of St. Thomas was actually the V-12 program. The part that was heading for the flight training was the V-12A. They differentiated there. Most of the people then were deck officer candidates, and we were flight candidates.

D: You were a flight candidate?

W: Yes.

D: Did you guys do your Basic Training there as well then?

W: Yes, we had a chief petty officer. We were apprentice seamen, and we remained apprentice seamen the whole time we were at St. Thomas. That was until February the next late winter [of 1944]. We had, I'd imagine, three hours of physical training a day. We started out with a half hour of calisthenics at six in the morning, then breakfast, and then classes started. I went through the classes and then basically, afternoon we'd get into the physical training. We were involved in everything from

gymnastics, swimming, basketball, football, went through a whole gamut of different variety of things. All done the Navy way of course.

D: What do you mean by “the Navy way”?

W: You know the regular rules of the games didn’t apply. There’s two things they used to say, “Your way, my way, and the Navy way,” or something like that. I don’t remember exactly how that went, but there’s something about that. You didn’t question what rules they went by. One thing I remember, in swimming, a good share of us were non-swimmers. They said, “If you think somebody is going to come and pull you out, it’ll be after the bubbles stop coming up.” *(laughs)* Just remember, if you’re out in the middle of the Pacific, there’s not going to be anybody there to pull you out. So you if you get a cramp, it’s too bad, you’re going to have to work it out. They kind of followed that philosophy. We did have a couple of guys that did get pulled out, I do remember that they did actually finally help somebody out of the water. But they didn’t coddle us any.

D: Was it pretty disciplined? *(phone ringing in background)*

W: Oh yes. We had room inspections and everything. And they checked anything and everything. Water spots on the sink and dust on the tops of the window trim and so forth. And if there was anything that didn’t quite meet with their standards, well, then you got to stay in instead of going out for liberty for the weekend, which was usually Saturday and Sunday. Instead you got to stay and you became appointed captain of the head, as they called it, which is of course cleaning out the bathroom facility. Extra duty as they called it. I had my share of it, and I think most of the fellows did. I don’t think anybody got by without. Which was all part of it, of course; the whole thing was discipline, getting used to it.

Haircuts were of course part of the discipline deal, although you didn’t get the shaved head type, but we did short haircuts. If I remember right, they, just trying to think how the different bases were, I think they did bring a barber in and cut our hair right there. Then we had the whole staff, we had a doctor, a dentist, an executive officer, and a commanding officer. We didn’t have a chaplain or anything there, but what they did do, they gave us a list of the churches in the area. You weren’t required to go to church, but being a Catholic school, if you were a Catholic, you were expected to be in chapel. So the guys that were down as Catholics, they had it a little more regimented than we did. I went to Pilgrim Lutheran over on Prior and St. Clair [in St. Paul], it seemed to be the closest Lutheran church, and I went over there and became acquainted, which was a real help.

(1, A, 466)

D: Helped you adjust to everything? *(phone ringing in background)*

W: Oh yes, much more so, because we were invited out for Sunday dinner and things like that. Also the young people’s organization involved us right away with different social activities and so on, so it was real good.

D: You mentioned liberty and leave earlier. What did you do on your weekends then?

W: Oh, went to downtown St. Paul. For ten cents you could go to a movie. At that time they had beautiful old theatres, the Orpheum and the one right across the street from it. They were real elaborate theaters at the time, and it was within our budget. At the time I was getting \$32 a month, I think it was, as an apprentice seamen. Some of the guys, of course, went out for the typical sailor weekend. That's one of things that convinced me that I didn't want to take up drinking. Seeing those guys come in, literally crawling up the stairs on their hands on knees trying to get back into their rooms. That was sad, making an absolute fool of themselves. But St. Paul was a very good liberty town, people were friendly to you. The last Sunday here, I think I had five invitations here for dinner. That leaves an impression on a person. So overall, it was actually a very good experience.

D: So you enjoyed your time in St. Paul.

W: Yes. It was actually, this was the smallest big town I was ever in, is what I usually say. The folks were just friendly, like a small town. I remember one instance where a guy was heading downtown on a Sunday, and a fellow came over to him and gave him a five dollar bill. Doesn't seem like too much now, but and he says, "Here have dinner on me. I can't take you home, but here, have dinner on me." That was the attitude you ran into here. It was really good.

D: Where did you move onto then after this? It was a year of pre-engineering at St. Thomas you said, right?

W: Pre-engineering, first year of engineering. When we finished that, it was the end of February as I recall. We were then sent to what they call tarmac duty. The whole purpose here again was that, with all the reorganization of their training program, we were put in sort of hold over time. During that they sent us out to the Sandpoint Naval Air Station in Seattle. There we were attached to the VR-5 squadron, which was Naval Air Transport that was flying cargo planes from Seattle along the Aleutians islands to Russia. The Aleutian campaign [of the US against the Japanese] had just more or less finished at that time, this was in spring of '44, and so those things were somewhat stable up there. They were flying DC-3s and DC-4s, that was R4D and R5D designations in the Navy. Flying a lot of freight that ended up supplying the bases up in Alaska, and also some of the stuff that was going to Russia.

D: Was this active duty for you then?

W: Well, yes and no. A couple of the guys did get on the flights, but for the most part they assigned us to different types of training out there. While I was there I went through aerial free-gunner school. Got my arm patch as an aerial gunner. Then we had a Marine drill sergeant and had regular drill practice. Let's see, I'm trying to think... we went through navigation classes. We had pilots that were actually in

between flights that conducted class for us. Navigation, communication, the typical military type of training.

D: More training as well.

W: Yes, this was supplemental training. We couldn't pass or fail necessarily there, it was just something that took up our time. I ended up being in a group that only spent two months there. That was before we went onto the next base then.

D: Where was that next base?

W: From Seattle I sort of lucked out on that deal. We had just been given a job to take all the olive drab paint off of a DC-3, they had given us little scour pads and we were supposed to clean that whole airplane. That's like doing a floor with a toothbrush. We had just gotten there and just started, when they made an announcement that we were supposed to fall out and get in formation there. They started calling out names and got to my name and I think it was only one or two more names, and that was the end of the group. Okay, report for leaving and get yourselves together.

We got on the train and headed to St. Olaf [College, in Minnesota], of all places, almost where we had come from. This train, however, was a much nicer. I didn't tell you about the train going out. It was a converted cattle car, three bunks high, and the bunks were crosswise on the car, so if the train rocked side to side, well, you slid up and down on those bunks. It took us 48 hours to get out there. Anyway, it had a sliding door in the middle of the car and so forth.

But coming back we did have regular Pullman cars, sleepers, they were really a nice deal. Incidentally too, when we got to Seattle, we became seamen 2nd class. They gave us a bump up, I think our pay went to... I think it was \$54. But then when we got back to St. Olaf, then we got our first Naval Air Cadets uniforms. We turned in all our other gear and were issued our cadet uniforms. Now that was what they called "Flight Prep" school. That was almost like pre-flight, a little bit heavier on the academics and not as heavy on the athletics. That was basically all of our courses at St. Olaf.

Oh, we had a science class. I recall there was a Professor Lanchoff, and he was a Jewish refugee from Germany. He was a real character, an excellent instructor. Then we had another civilian instructor, trying to think what his class was. It seems to me it was English composition or something like that, they did give us things related to a regular college course, but bent towards the Navy's use. We were a lot heavier on communications there. We had to pass fourteen words a minute sending and receiving Morse code to finish up there at St Olaf. While we were there, we got the word that one half of us were going to be moved out. They were going to move half of us into the regular Navy. Again, another cut in the program. They took volunteers first, which was good because that meant I got to stay. Other than that they looked to the level of your achievements.

I have to admit that college was a disappointment from the standpoint that I wanted to get into flight training. So I did only enough to get by. We had physics

and math etc. We did have a couple of courses, spherical trigonometry which was related to navigation, and we had celestial navigation when we got to St. Olaf. So there were some of these courses which were not the easiest. Physics was a college course I enjoyed. As we were progressing on, it got more and more related to flight type courses.

D: So some of the guys went directly to the Navy, and you stayed on at St. Olaf.

W: Yes. I was able to stay through the whole flight prep school. The other guys were moved out into other areas, some of them just for direct sea duty, or moved into other programs. Of course we never did really know what happened to them, they just sort of disappeared.

End of Side A. Side B begins at counter 000.

D: So during this time you were still preparing for flight. Did you ever go up in planes at all during this time?

W: No flight training yet, but I could touch on a couple things there. Liberty on weekends, coming to St. Paul. Then I got to get back to Pilgrim Lutheran and keep up my acquaintances there. And my old roommate at St. Thomas was still there because he was a deck officer candidate, and that was a longer program. So it was sort of like a homecoming weekend each time.

We were at St. Olaf until September [1944], then we got sent home for about six weeks, I believe. Kind of embarrassing because here things were really hot and heavy in the middle of the war. D-Day in Europe in June [1944], mid-June, June 6th I believe it was. I was at St. Olaf then. But then here I'm at home on leave, and I hear, Well, gee, aren't you in service? What are you doing home? Had to listen to that.

So then we had to report back and they took us sent to Chicago for overnight and the next day sent us back to Iowa City, that's the University of Iowa, Iowa City, for pre-flight school. Got there in September, and we started our pre-flight. Pre-flight was a lot heavier on scheduling of everything—we got a half an hour a day that was unscheduled. You could do anything you wanted to do in that half hour!
(laughs)

D: Wow, a whole half hour to yourself! *(laughs)*

W: Yes. One thing, I was classified as a non-swimmer, because I couldn't perform... it had to be breast stroke, side stroke, back stroke, and crawl. And I couldn't get crawl down to the Navy specifications. I'd already passed my AAA, or AA life-saving test, and a mile in the water with clothes on, and a mile in the water with clothes off, and all the rest of the stuff, but I still couldn't do the crawl the way they wanted it done. So at 7:00 in the morning during the winter time, I'd report to the field house down there for swimming. The temperature outside would be down below 0 and 20 below, it seemed like. They only had single paned glass on those windows and there

were icicles hanging off of the window sills inside. Boy, the water was 65 degrees, so we kept moving.

After eleven weeks of that I finally think they gave up on the fine points of the crawl. My backstroke was terrific, in fact I was used in the class, I'd get to go out there and demonstrate how to do the backstroke, but they didn't like the way I did the crawl. That's one of those things. We played football, we played soccer, we had wrestling, boxing, gymnastics. Basically six hours of physical training, six hours in class. So they kept us busy.

(1, B, 70)

D: So the classes were all flight stuff then?

W: No, we got into some gunnery classes, we had some shooting on a rifle range, and we had more in the navigation, got pretty heavy in celestial navigation down there. We'd go out at night and have to take shots with the sextant and locate the position and so forth. Communications kept on going, our Morse code practice. In the military, at a distance, Morse code was something—radio equipment wasn't like it is today—Morse code could get through where voice couldn't. So we did that too. We had a sending key in the cockpit for Morse code.

We did more simulated things, for navigation. We'd be given different problems for a different kind of search and things of that sort. But a lot of emphasis was on physical training. They did give us another chance there to go home if we wanted to, and I think we had two fellows that in our group that did opt out. Pre-flight lasted through until February of 1945.

Part of the deal down there was survival training. And it so happened that that came at the end of our regular course, so it was the coldest spell they'd had in Iowa for I don't know how many years. We were sent out with a half shelter, a sleeping bag, and three days of K rations. They took us out along the Iowa River and dumped us out in a field down there, and said, "See you in three days." *(laughs)* They did come around on a daily basis, though, to make sure we hadn't frozen to death! We had to cut our own wood for fire and all we had was a machete. Boy, I had a sore wrist from the vibrations of cutting wood with a machete, for fire.

D: Were you all isolated, or were you guys together?

W: We were in groups of maybe, probably forty or fifty of us, I suppose. We were divided into a group and then we stood what they called fire watch. During the night we'd go around and throw a little more wood on every guy's fire while the other guy slept. In that sleeping bag, the only thing I took off was my packs, the shoes. And you'd crawl into that. They were good sleeping bags, they were down sleeping bags. Lay on whatever you could find, when the snow was about two feet deep. Then we had no water, we had to melt snow. We did cut a hole in the ice in the river and we found out that there was untreated sewage up the ways. We were given Atabrine tablets, and you'd put the tablet into the canteen and shake it until you could smell the chlorine. Then you'd leave it for a while and you could drink it.

D: I bet that tasted great. *(sarcastically)*

W: Well, I opted for the melted snow. I didn't know anything about the, there was a hospital up the river that dumped there sewage we found out afterwards, or so they told us anyway. But they did tell us to be sure to use the Atabrine tablets if you used the river water. But the last night out they brought us steak. Well now, you've got a steak, what do you do with a raw steak? *(laughs)* I found an old lid from an old lid from what looked like a maybe a gallon syrup bucket or a gallon paint can, and that was my frying pan. Got that over the fire, and that was the best tasting steak I've ever had.

D: Oh I bet, after three days of K rations.

W: Yes, that was quite an experience. When we got back, of all the things they had for chow that noon was chicken a la king. Of course, everybody hungry as the dickens, and everybody overloaded it on that stuff, and everybody got sicker than a dog. Our stomachs weren't used to it, weren't used to the richness from something like that. We did have excellent food at pre-flight. They really loaded on the food. We had chicken every Sunday, ice cream every Wednesday as I remember. Food was really pretty good at pre-flight. It wasn't too bad otherwise, but I think pre-flight was exceptional.

That was February [1945], and then we finally, I think, got sent home together for a couple of weeks. Then we were sent to, I went to primary flight training in Norman, Oklahoma. I got there in early March, yes, early March of '45. Started my flight training, and that was, I finally got what I went in for. My first instructor's name was Prophet, he was a 1st lieutenant in the Marine Corps. In the Navy, when you graduated, you could elect to go either to the Marines or the Navy. The same program.

(1, B, 164)

D: Really?

W: Yes. He was a lieutenant that was in the Marine Corps. I had an experience there that really pretty much shaped the rest of my attitude. I had three flights with him and had gone to chow at noon. We'd heard some scuttlebutt about a crash. Talking around at the table there, "Heard about a crash this morning." "Yeah, two guys were killed, a student and an instructor." Another guy says, "Who was it?" "Well, Prophet and Dordy." I tell you, it took the wind out of me. Still does. *(emotionally; pauses five seconds and blows nose a couple of times)*. So then I didn't have an instructor. It was about two or three weeks of just sitting around, you might say, which was not the best for me. During my primary training we had six fatalities.

Then about the end of March [1945] I got a new instructor, his name was Wright. Got back into flight training again, I got my ten hours in and on April 2nd I soloed in the Stearman. Just out of curiosity for you, I ought to show you a picture of the plane. Just a second here. *(gets out pictures and shares them)* Downloaded this

one from the Internet. There's the Stearman. *(points to airplane)* Yellow Peril, as they called it.

D: Yellow Peril?

W: Yes, Yellow Peril. My instructor was killed, he and his student on the 34th dual flight; we had to do an inverted spin. The only witness to the whole thing was another instructor, and he noted that he saw them spinning. We had 600 airplanes, and 300 would go out in fifteen minutes. Now you wonder how in the dickens that could be, the slab that we used there wasn't a runway, it was a one half mile square blacktop. Here are all these planes taking off side by side, and so the sky was full of them, you didn't think too much about it.

The inverted spin was required; you had to do one as part of the flight training program. Something happened, they don't know for sure what. I've got my own theory, but that's sort beside point, I guess. You do a loop and as you got to the top, you would stall her off when you were inverted. I think maybe the student got in a hurry and did something when he was in the vertical position, and the plane ended up sliding backwards. When that happened why the, the elevator snapped; they said the control to the elevator was broken, so he had no up and down control. Then of course the instructor can't leave the plane with the student in it, and I imagine the student froze. He never bailed out. That had a big impact for me, feelings that you have that might not make it out of the program.

I went through the program, finished up near the end of June. *(pauses five seconds to refer to pictures again)* Here is the whole primary flight program here. *(Waldo makes some references here to a flight plan he has, with records of daily activities)* Let's see, the 1st and then it was a month later... it should have only been about a week, because this is when my instructor got killed.

Now on this flight plan here they don't have a date for my solo, but it was before the 2nd of April [1945]. I'm sure I soloed on April Fool's Day... yes, I'm sure that was it. Here, April 2nd, then I also went up on a solo flight, or a dual flight, I had a couple dual flights here, and then a whole series of solo flights here. They didn't differentiate by date, just in between. They just always put the highlights here, if you would. I got through that and went through my solo, then I got a new instructor, Hamilton was his name, and he was with me until I got to my cross-country flying. All of the aerobatics; we did very little straight, level flying. It was almost all aerobatics. Snap rolls, slow rolls, falling leaf, just on and on and on. This differs from the civilian flying so much. I got my cross-country out of the way, and there was night flying, too. I think there was three hours of night flying. I had an extremely close call on night flying. That's another thing that kind of made the old blood run cold. A mid-air collision, darn near.

D: You came close to another plane?

W: Yes. The trouble was, I... it would take all day if I went through all this stuff. On night flying, it was a simulated carrier deck, and you may or may not remember seeing these black pot flares, they're round, just like a bowling ball, with a flame on

the top of it, they're kerosene filled. They had eight of those out, to outline the landing. There was no lights, just eight of these pot flares, four on a side. We had to land, and this was the same size as a carrier flight deck. We had to land so that we could touch and go.

This was at about 2:00 in the morning. Down there in Oklahoma, why the wind would shift and so you'd be drifting one way or another. I got a green light for landing. I was drifting sideways because a crosswind had come up. I didn't correct enough for it and I hit three of the four flares on the one side. Knocked out three of the four. The guy that was just ahead me, he didn't know about it, he was flying a long, oblong flight pattern. He went out, I imagine about three miles turned and come back. So he came in for his normal landing as he came back, and I knew the lights were out, because I'd put them out, so I flew wide, and didn't drop down at all.

As I came around, all of a sudden I noticed out of the corner of my eye, an alternating red-green-red-green light. The Landing Signal Officer had a signal light, nothing more than a hand held stoplight, but they had red and green colors. And that meant immediate danger. When I looked, here was this plane coming up directly from the side. I rolled over and down, and I was only at 300 foot. And *(makes engine noise)* his engine drowned out mine as he came over me. So, you're not scared at the time, until all of a sudden it sort of soaks in. The thing is the exhaust is right up here in this side *(motions with arm)*, and at nighttime there is a flare about so long and so wide *(motions with hands)*, bright orange. That is right where I was at. He was just coming up, and that flare must have blinded him in that spot. We didn't have any landing lights, all we had was just the two clearance lights on the wingtips, and one on the back. I had to then finish up and do the rest of my landings. We had to record three landings, three satisfactory landings.

After this I came back in and a student was just checking in. He says, "He's always getting that red and green light and I can't figure out what the dickens it was." I said, "Were you in plane 54?" "Yeah," he says. I told him then. He had never seen me. So, it got a little bit close enough that I could hear his engine over mine. Of course he was on full throttle pulling up and I was on cruise you might say. That was another of the things... Somehow or other, I think it changes your whole life, something like that. *(pauses three seconds)*

Anyway, finished up there, went home for a week, over 4th of July weekend [1945], then, reported to Corpus Christi, Texas. Another side point here is that I had put in for multi-engine all along, but when I finished my primary flight training, they assigned me to carrier aircraft. Well, I was figuring for patrol bomber or something of this sort; I didn't necessarily relish operating off of a carrier. I figured patrol bomber or something like that.

Now this was early in July. My primary flight training finished. I remember in our recognition classes that we had different ships that we had to recognize, silhouettes and that. We would hear, "That's the last one of this group, we can forget that one." These were Japanese ships they were talking about, as they were being sunk. Around then was the last Japanese battleship, and, "Well, we can erase that from the text."

I can't remember the exact sequence of things at Corpus Christi. We had a situation where we didn't get started on our flight training. This is what we were

flying down there, the SNJ (*shows another picture*), which is, maybe you've seen in some of the movies, they fix them up to look like the Jap Zero. Change the canopy and so forth, 600 horsepower. It was actually designed originally as a fighter bomber. They used it even in Korea for front line spotting and so forth. It was a pretty nice airplane. I think it was August 11th that I had my first fight in the SNJ-5. Well, if you recall the history, August 6th was [the atomic bomb on] Hiroshima and August 9th, Nagasaki. It wasn't until after those two incidents that I got started with my training. I did get fifteen hours in, but then the Japanese surrendered on August 14th.

Morale just dropped, the bottom just dropped right out of morale. Guys just said, "Let's just get out of here and go home." They gave us a week off with nothing to do. We didn't have to report except each morning at 8:00, we had to show up for muster, and then off the rest of the day. Then they told us we could sign up for release to inactive duty. I was just coming back from the flight line one day, and then here comes the announcement, "Now hear this, now hear this, the papers are at the squadron office." I was just right outside the door when the call came in. I walked in and said, "Where do I sign?" (*laughs*) I think I was the first one on that list, because he'd just put the mike down when I walked in. I signed up to get out. There were about 200 in our group, I think it was, and seven guys stayed in. That's how the feelings had gone, the war is over, forget it.

D: Was that the immediate reaction, would you say, to the bombs and then the end of the war?

W: The bombs were a real upper, I guess you could say, because we were getting to the point, and we knew what we were going to facing. This was July, August 1945—about November we would have been finished, and we would have been sent to the Pacific for the final push in on the Japanese homeland. Because of Okinawa and Saipan, we knew how that had gotten. At Okinawa there were a lot of civilians that they had committed suicide rather than surrender. And the homeland I'm sure would have been the same thing. It would have been a door-to-door type of thing. It just got weighing on your mind about what was going to be happening. And then when they announced that morning that we had heard that something had been dropped. They said, "We don't know what it is, it's some kind of device, but it looks like it really is something." They didn't know, they didn't have the word "atomic bomb," it wasn't even anything you knew about. See, Alamogordo [New Mexico] was July 20th, that's when they dropped the first atomic bomb off the tower down there, and this was only a couple weeks later. So there was no word that leaked out or anything that there was anything like that. When the second one came, and boy, it was elation, I suppose you would say.

I remember an F6F Hellcat [Navy fighter plane] came in over the field and did a victory roll, vertical victory roll, and nobody cared, so what. That was forbidden, and before that they would have kicked you out of the Navy. We reported for class after this week off, and somebody called attention because you always did when the instructor came out, and the instructor said, "Oh, sit down, the war is over." (*laughs*) That was just the way things went. So September 29th, the paperwork finally all

came through, and I got on the old train and went up through Houston and caught a train back to Kansas. I got as far as Emporia [Kansas] and I got impatient, so I got out and hitchhiked the rest of the way. Otherwise I would have had to gone into Topeka and then back, as it wasn't going through my hometown. Emporia was about thirty miles away was from my hometown.

(1, B, 408)

D: What do you remember about when you first got back? What was the first thing you did?

W: Well, the first thing I did, when I hitchhiked into town there, there was no one at home—they were expecting me there. During the time I was in service, my dad had moved out to Topeka. My brother had stayed on the farm; he had a farm deferment. He stayed on the farm, and when I got home, I had to wait around until they got back from wherever they'd been.

“Home” was a real letdown. Got home and went to a high school football game. It was a week or two later, it was October, it was the homecoming. And here these kids that had all been freshmen, now they were all the “big guys” on the block. I didn't know them and they didn't know me. A lot of the other fellows, my classmates, which I had been to school with, most of them were still over in Europe or out in the Pacific yet, because they hadn't had the opportunity to get home as quick. I stayed around for, oh, a couple weeks, then I got on a train and came up to St. Paul. No job, no place to stay. *(laughs)* Talk about stupid.

So I got up here to St. Paul, and the money I had in my pocket was money that was left of the money I'd borrowed from my mother. I got here on Sunday, November 11th. The 12th was then the [Armistice Day] holiday, so I went to downtown St. Paul to start looking for a job. We had a state department office and a federal department office at that time. One was closed because of the holiday and the other was open. I can't remember which was which. I started looking for a job and there just wasn't nothing. So, I started around the Midway District, I started about Lexington Avenue, to stop at places to look for work.

I stopped at Brown-Bigelow, and he showed me a stack of papers, it looked like about a whole ream of paper. “Here's what I've got for people looking for work. Here's a guy with ten years of accounting experience and I can't even find a place for him.” He just pushed the paper back in the drawer. So in other words, don't bother me. Well, Montgomery Wards was just a little ways up the block, up the street, and I went in there. “Oh yeah, we need somebody in shipping, packing stuff for Christmas.” You know, the war is over now, and so I got a job there, a whole \$.71 an hour. So I went to work there.

I had written a letter to the church, Pilgrim Lutheran, and the pastor had sent me back a letter that said, there was a widow, and she was looking for somebody to rent a room, and it was at 1954 Palace [in St. Paul]. So I walked in on her that Sunday evening, and when I got there she says, “Well, I suppose.” But she hadn't said yes or no to me. She says, “I'll let you stay overnight and we'll talk about it tomorrow.” So I stayed there and ended up staying there most of the summer [of

1946]. But, I got back up here and things weren't quite as rosy as I remembered. You know, you're on your own now and nobody's taking care of things. But I was pretty fortunate and got a job, it was enough to pay my rent anyway. That's where I met my wife incidentally, too, at Wards. I tell people I found her in the bargain basement. *(laughs)*

D: When did you meet her?

W: I met her just before Christmas in 1945, and then of course I got laid off at Christmas, because there's no work. I went home over Christmas, then my sister and her husband, who was just getting out of the Army Air Corps, we went out to California for a week. I came back the last of January. Then they hired me back at Wards. Then one thing led to another, and got engaged in May and got married that fall [of 1946]. So things worked out.

D: Well, if you don't mind, I'm going to pop back to some of those years, and ask a few more questions.

W: Sure.

D: Is that your picture? *(points to picture of Waldo in album)*

W: Yes. Official Navy photograph. That was the flight uniform.

D: In the aviator jacket. Wally, when you were spending your entire time in service, you were at a lot of different schools. Did you ever see people of different races come into contact at all during that time?

W: Racial stuff? No, we were almost totally segregated, you might say. At Norman, Oklahoma, we had a couple of barracks there that were blacks, Negroes, Afro-Americans, whatever you want to call them, Negroes at that time. They were flight crew people and so forth that worked on the flight line. With all those planes there was a lot of maintenance there.

In Oklahoma City, I ran into one of the first things about discrimination that I ever ran into. I got on a bus there one day, and I liked to ride in the back, so I walked in the back and sat down. It was right at the end of the bus line. I had dated a girl, close to downtown, it was the end of the bus line, and I went over and sat on the bus and sat clear down in the back. The driver was sitting there looking in the mirror, not moving, motioning like this to me. *(makes waving gesture with hand, come forward type motion)* Finally, he says, "Get out of the nigger section." I says, "Well, hey, can't I sit for a while?" "That's the nigger section, get up here," he says. So I had to move out, way up to the front.

D: You're the one that had to move.

W: Yes, discrimination, I don't know if it was reverse discrimination or what. Yes, that was the first area I saw anything like that. In Kansas we didn't have anything

like that, not that I was aware of. Of course, I was never around buses in Kansas, maybe it was in Topeka or Kansas City. But this was the first thing about discrimination I'd run into.

Then at Corpus Christi, we had Negro mess attendants. That was the first experience I had. Well, we had a little of it at the Naval Air Station out in Seattle, and I just didn't pay a lot of attention there, I guess. But here in Corpus Christi they specifically were acting as servants, you might say, in the mess hall. They had their fun, too. I remember one day in the mess hall I turned my plate over, and here a cockroach comes out from under the plate; they had put a cockroach under the plate. We could use regular chinaware, and they had put this down over the bug. When I turned the plate over there it was. *(laughs)*

But, there never was many problems. I don't know, we never did notice any kind of friction at all. Actually, it was something that I never even thought about. I suppose I was rather naive at the time. Those are the only two items that I can think of.

We also had women groups, there again very segregated. We had women that were on the flight line. They were in the WAVES. We did have some women officers at Corpus Christi. Our rationing officer there was Gloria Moninger. Boy, was she really a sharp gal. She wasn't so old that I couldn't notice anyway. *(laughs)* I don't remember what her rank was. But I think that's one of the few. We did have some class instructors, we had a Canadian, he was a man, but he was a Canadian actually was one of our instructors, and I think that was at Corpus Christi, too. But he had been in the Canadian Air Force. In our case, he had an American Navy uniform on, but he had the British wings, as a British pilot. So that was kind of a little twist. But for the most part there wasn't anything. We had no black officers to my knowledge that we ever came across in my training or anything of this sort. That did happen in some of the other branches.

Of course the Tuskegee, how do you say it, flight crew, they were all blacks [pilots of the 332nd Fighter Squadron], flying over in the European Theatre, outstanding record. When they flew escort in the bomber squadrons they never lost a single bomber. They lost some of their own personnel. As far as discrimination was concerned, that's just about it. No big deal with us.

We were quite segregated. At Sandpoint Naval Air Station, there was blacks there. I had kind of a bad taste about that outfit, thinking back on it. One incident that happened out there. When we went swimming, we threw our clothes in the locker, and the blacks used the same locker room area. When I came back from swimming one time, I opened up my locker, and my billfold was gone and my shorts were gone, and here was a filthy old pair of shorts in there. *(pauses three seconds)* But that was how you got clean shorts, I guess. But my gosh, they were dirty. Of course, right away my thinking was, one of those blacks had switched on me. I lost \$11 out of my billfold, and my address book was also in the billfold, so I lost a lot of addresses. And my shorts.

D: Never to be redeemed, eh?

W: Never to be redeemed. I wasn't even looking for them. I don't know what I did with them, I just threw those things in the trash. I went back to the barracks without any shorts on. I just pulled my pants on over them and forgot about it.

D: Were there any individuals that you remember, throughout, whether it was buddies or officers or anything, that had a real impact on you?

W: Well, I am still in contact with a fellow that was my roommate at St. Thomas. Another fellow from St. Thomas ended up being best man at our wedding, in '46. He now lives in Florida. My roommate from St. Thomas is from Kansas, and he's living in the same area down there. He had moved around all over the United States. He had been with Prudential Insurance, I think it was, he was a regional manager of something like that. He's now retired, living in a new house on the old home place. This Bosker that I mentioned. He has died. He was also from not too far from where my roommate lived. Another fellow, Dick Stoppel, he was also from down in that same area, but he also died. We've had a couple reunions of the group that they were in. A couple reunions at St. Thomas and also St. Olaf.

D: Any stories or pieces of information about them that you remember that made such a big impact on you from them?

W: Well, one was a roommate, when you live with a guy for eight months, nine months. It was kind of different, because we never went out on liberty together or anything. Yet at the same time, I don't think he ever really went to church to any extent, and I always went to church. He mentioned that even one time, here when I was visiting, I visited a couple times in the last five years. "Yeah, I remember you always going to that Lutheran church up there." He, I think, is semi-active in church now, but I didn't question him on that. Just from talking to he and his wife. The other guys, of course, one was the best man in our wedding. He and I were together at St. Thomas, he went up to Seattle at the same time. I came back, his name was Miles and mine was Meier, he was just a name or two after mine and at the cutoff. So he came to St. Olaf a couple weeks later. He washed out of primary flight training at Norman, Oklahoma, so he went on and got his commission as a navigator. They sent him right out of there to navigator school and then he went out to the Pacific for a while after the war. He and I both, I got him a job at Wards when he came back, because he had a girlfriend in St. Paul, who he eventually married. So he moved away, went to college, down in Indiana someplace I think it was. We kind of kept track loosely, but not real well. But other than that, nobody really.

End of Tape 1. Tape 2, Side A begins at counter 000.

W: I was just saying, *(pauses three seconds)* talking about the various people that I can recall. One of the things that really is kind of unnerving, going back to these fifty year reunions, is how many people there were in your group and here you have a dozen people show up. The thing that also really struck me was how many of them were using walkers, canes, or wheelchairs. Jiminy, I'm not that old. *(laughs)* Or so it

seems. I've been very fortunate. They had almost the whole list of those that were at St. Thomas, and they had been marked off deceased, deceased, deceased, and so forth.

I remember one incident about St. Thomas, Wardrom was the guy's name, and he come from the fleet. He was, he looked like the short one of [the 1930s comedy team of] Abbot and Costello, I can't think of the name now. For inspection one week, he had bet a couple guys five bucks a piece that he would shave his head. Sort of a protest for the short haircut. So he shaved his head except for a tuft of hair in the back, it was the weirdest thing, he had a real round face, he was sort of a rolly polly guy, short. So here he was with this tuft of hair in his back. And the commanding officer is walking down the line, stops in front of him and says, "Wardrom." "Yes sir." "For the sake of the name of the Navy you'll be confined to base until your hair grows out." (*laughs*) So he won several five dollar bets, but it cost him his liberty. That was kind of interesting; he was in the obituaries as one of the guys that had died. (*pauses three seconds*) Yeah, that's how it goes.

Another sideline, I suppose, is that my cousin was on the [US Navy heavy cruiser] *Indianapolis*. I don't know whether you remember, but near the end of the war, about July 28th [1945] I think, it got torpedoed in the Pacific, with a loss of 800 or 900 people I think it was. It went down in fifteen minutes. The war was just ending; it had carried the atomic bomb out to the island [of Tinian], prior to the bombing raid, and they were coming back. That was a real disaster. For all practical purposes the war was over, then to get torpedoed like that. Most of them were lost to sharks and that. They were in the water for more than four days.

So, prior to this, my cousin had gotten his hand caught in some part of the gun mechanism, the breech or something. He had been sent to the hospital, so he was not on the ship. When the ship got sunk out there, why, he wasn't on it.

D: Why was it that those guys were in the water for several days?

W: Because of the laxity, you might say at the end of the war. They were not expected in port anyplace. The communications got fouled up, so when they didn't show up, nobody knew. They just accidentally, a patrol bomber just accidentally happened to fly over it and seen something in the water, turned back to investigate it, and here were a whole bunch of men in the water. They didn't get in to any lifeboats, there was no chance to lower lifeboats. The commanding officer was court martialed, and he finally committed suicide [in the 1960s]. Now they fully pardoned him a year or two ago [in 2001]. It wasn't his fault, but they needed a scapegoat.

D: So you still stay in contact with some of the guys, you said?

W: Yeah, actually two out of all of them. (*pauses three seconds*) Then at one of the reunions, this is kind of interesting thing, a fellow by the name of Goode, G-o-o-d-e, I think it was, from down in La Crosse. I didn't know where he was from, but at the reunion at St. Thomas, he was there. They were asking the group, it was just a general group, "Who's from such and such a battalion? Who's from such and such a battalion?" And I spoke out, and then he spoke up, only the two of us from our

group, I think. I remember him specifically, because he had been our top cross country runner. He had been in competition down at... I said St. Thomas, it should have been St. Olaf. He and another fellow were competing as the two top ones, and he had won the race. So I mentioned that right away, "Oh yeah, cross country." He said, "Boy, you made my day."

D: A good memory, huh?

W: Yeah, he didn't remember me, I was just one of the cadets, but I was able to remember him because of the competition. Actually it was kind of a sad thing. The guy that was competing against him got so overheated that he lost direction, you might say. He took off at an angle and they had to go chase him, grab him, and throw him down. It was a hot day, real quiet, July 4th weekend. We were standing in formation, and I think about a dozen guys passed out while we were standing at attention. That's what you do sometimes when you're standing too rigid. That just stuck in my mind, that his name was Goode and he was a good cross country runner, allowed me to remember the name.

D: Wally, why do you go to reunions and keep in contact with people?

W: Why? Well that's something I've always wondered. I mean, it's been really a downer. I went once to St. Olaf and once to St. Thomas, but I haven't any more. *(pauses three seconds)* Really now, that was 1943, 1944, 1945, and we're all, the youngest ones are 75+. *(pauses three seconds)* I don't know, it finally just gets to the point where I think you just more or less put it in the past and forget it. I've heard a couple of announcements this year. The final reunion of such and such a unit, things like that. I think the lives have been so divergent that there's very little common ground anymore.

The best man at our wedding, he had been an engineer for Transcorp for a number of years; there he had stayed connected with aviation. Myself personally, I got out of the service and I went down to the airport Topeka with every thought of getting my civilian license. The guys says, "Well, you'll need two hours, at \$14 an hour. That'll be \$28 to take your flight check" Well, \$28 was more than a week's wages at that time. I thought, boy, I don't have the cash, so I can forget it. "Well, no, by the way," he says, "I got guy that's just going to take a Stearman up, do you want to go along for a ride?" So I went out with the guy, they let me borrow a parachute, and there's no seat cushions on military planes, you're parachute pack is the cushion. So they let me borrow a parachute no charge and went up for an hour with him, did a little bit of the aerobatics again. That's the last time I've flown a plane. I never got my civilian license. At the time, because I said that I'd been in the military, my life insurance that I'd gotten had a rider on it that if I was in an airplane accident my insurance was void. Well, I wasn't figuring on getting killed, but yet at the same time what do you do, with, as time went on there I got married, what can you do to your family? And then the other thing was, Piper Cubs, which was about the only thing a person could possibly afford, 65 horsepower at the time. The smallest thing I'd flown was 220 horsepower and the SNJ was 640. We never flew straight and

level, to speak of, because most of the fun was in the aerobatics. None of these other planes were satisfactory for aerobatics, that's all. A Stearman burned thirteen gallons an hour, and the SNJ used about thirty-some gallons an hour. I couldn't afford it. So, one thing led to another and it all slid away into the background and I've never gone up as a pilot since.

D: Do you regret it some?

W: Well, if I ever wanted, this still counts. But I just stay away from airports for the most part. My youngest son got his pilot's license. I went up with him, but I didn't fly, I didn't take the controls. I just kind of crossed that off as ancient history. I let it go.

D: Change to a new topic: During the war, did you write letters and stuff like that?

W: Oh yeah. Still got a lot of them that my wife has never seen. Once she said, "Why don't you burn them?" Well, no, I'm going to keep them. One gal I was getting a lot of the letters from, she ended up being godmother to our first son. I look at it from the standpoint that it's historical, and I don't know whether any of the kids will ever be interested in them, look at some of them. It might be interesting sometime.

I also kept a five-year diary that had about four lines of space per day, it wasn't a journal by any means. I'll have to go back and look through that sometimes, just to kind of refresh memories. I've been wanting to do a personal history. What I'm figuring on doing is, just sitting down in front of my video camera, and also dig up a lot of the old photographs, the house that I was born in, the school where I went to school, and those kinds of things. Just kind of reconstruct that. We've been trying to put some genealogy together, and this is a one of the things that you sure wish you'd done when you had a chance. People are gone now and there's no records.

D: Those letters, was that a pretty important thing for most soldiers?

W: Oh yeah, letters from home were real important. It was sort of your tie to reality, or whatever you want to call it. I'll have to check, I don't know how many letters I got from my old girlfriend from high school. I got a "Dear John" letter from her; probably had been in the service for three, four months is all. But the football captain had a farm deferment and a car so... *(laughs)*. They're still married, never had any children. I've seen her a couple of times; they're members of our church down home. They're in Kansas. That's ancient history, too. Yeah, letters were extremely important.

D: You came back, did a couple of things and you ended up working in St. Paul at Wards, and you got married. What happened in that next year then?

W: Well, I worked of course, but it was sort of dead end job, that's all it appeared to be. We got a pay raise, they changed the minimum wage to 75¢ an hour, so they had to give me a four cents an hour pay raise, so then they cut my hours. I ended up with

one penny extra on my paycheck. So I went over to... had a fellow telling me how wonderful US Bedding was, production work over there, and how they could turn stuff out and get some fantastic pay. Well, I went over there for a while, busted my tail end and made my base rate, which was also 75¢ an hour.

After that, I went to Link Belt for a while over in Minneapolis, thought I'd get into engineering there. Based on the my mechanical drawing that I'd had at St. Thomas and so forth, I got a job as a detailer, draftsman, and that got me up to 90¢ an hour. In talking to the fellows there, one guy said that after five years, he was at \$1.15 an hour there. Jiminy, this don't sound like anything either.

So, I backtracked, I actually slipped back, you might say, I got a job just a block from our house, from an apartment we had over on University and Randolph. I got a job working as an order filler for a sign company. That, too, I thought there was a chance of getting into sales there, but that didn't develop, in fact they laid me off, which was the best thing that ever happened. So then I went in as an auto mechanic, worked for four years as an apprentice. After a while, it was five years total I think there, and one year as a journeymen, got a job in maintenance with 3M. Transferred into engineering there, was a senior lab tech in what you'd probably call manufacturing process development. I had my own little shop and would build up prototype production equipment. I worked out a few things that, as far as I know, they may still be using today, a method of handheld epoxy dispenser that measured the quantity and mixed it, and heat-cured it, and so forth. Oh, and handling different abrasives, abrasive engineering.

Here again I ran into the same thing, that I didn't have a formal degree, although I had almost enough time in college to have gotten it, yet I didn't have the paper. They said, "Sorry, but they couldn't... I could be a senior lab tech, but that's all I could be." (*pauses three seconds*) Well, so I just plain up and quit. Young and foolish. I had been offered a job there in field tech service, but that would have been away from home a good share of the time, and our kids were just starting grade school, being away from home for weeks on end, I couldn't do that.

Then I spent a little time working in my own shop down here [in White Bear Lake] where the Freedom station is now, that was a gas station at the time. I got back into the automotive trade for a while, pumping gas, made money for everybody but me. Finally I got in as a lab tech over at Whirlpool, and I was there for twelve years. There again that was doing a lot of development work. Interesting work, because they gave me enough free reign to build up test equipment, simulating active usage of things. For example, how do you run a vacuum cleaner continuous until it quits, do it all mechanically and record it all? Well, I did that, and a number of those types of things. It was somewhat interesting work, although the tech writing was a bit of a bore, I had to write up reports and so forth.

D: So Whirlpool was the place you worked the longest, then?

W: Yeah, that's the longest I'd worked at that point, then the Vo Tech over here opened up [Technical School in White Bear Lake that has now joined up with a community college to form Century College]. During this time, I always had two or three jobs. During this time, I'd started my own business of lawn and garden

equipment sales and service. The school had been one of my customers. So when Dr. Knapp, who I had dealt with in the White Bear Lake system, went over as the director at Vo Tech, he asked me to come and work for him. So I went to work over there, and I was there seventeen years. Teaching power equipment, running power equipment and stuff like that. I was the first instructor they hired in the Vo Tech, April Fools Day again, April 1st of 1971. Which is kind of a quirk—I don't know whether that date, April Fools Day, is trying to tell me something or not.

I worked there for seventeen years and then I retired from there. I sold my business, I had a business over there, not too far from our church, on County Road F. I had that going over there, after I had been working from home here, in fact the shop used to sit right here where the house is. The house next door to us used to be our house. So this is the lot that my first shop was on. Every year our taxes on the lot was about the same as we paid for the lot originally. Either we would have to sell the lot or the house. Well, at least this way I know what's next door, if we sold the lot and then someone came and built something I didn't care for, why we wouldn't be able to do anything about it. So we built this house in 1982. I got interested in solar homes and so forth, so the solarium here is part of that. The floor, we couldn't have the floor in here and get energy tax credits that were available in '82. With the windows to pick up heat—you can't notice it today of course, there's no sun out—but we wouldn't sit here if the sun was shining. It gets around 90 degrees in here.

D: I guess at this point, it's just some more retrospective things, looking at the whole experience. What does the war mean for you personally at that time?

W: Well, I guess I didn't have a philosophical idea thinking about it at the time, it was just something you had to do. Looking back at it, it's a lot different today. The fact of going into the military and thinking of flying a plane in combat, well, at thirty years old you'd be too smart to do something like that. You look back at that and you have to be young and foolish to be a good military personnel. You're invincible. Like I said, this incident with my instructor and another near miss was two things, an awakening that I think kind of spoiled me for later on—too much reality.

As far as the war effort was concerned, I didn't have any misgivings about that. My family came from Germany, for instance, I wouldn't have been involved with the European war. I was quite sure that there was family over there that was involved, though, and I found out later that they were. So, from that standpoint, you feel kind of hesitant if I'd been assigned to the European Theater, because my dad's first cousin was still alive over there, even though he was still too old to be a combatant. His son was a tank driver, and we have visited him since. Quite interesting. So there again, you sort of revisit the whole thing.

It was something though that I felt had to be done. I wasn't at all hesitant about enlisting. As far as what was done, it had to be done. I guess that when it was close to reality, you really didn't think too much about it. Under the circumstances, of course, we felt that it was a justified war, not like the police actions we've had in Korea and Vietnam. Then the sacrifice that was going on at home, we knew that people were giving up there. It wasn't as though we were the only ones, it was costing at home, too. My brother went through eight major invasions in the Pacific,

and survived them. He was back here getting ready for the big push in on the [Japanese] home islands, too. He was sent back to Dearborn [Michigan] and was in classes. He'd been taken off a ship right at Okinawa, just as that campaign was going, and was sent back here for some advanced training. He was a radar technician.

D: So, taking in all the experiences and looking back on it, those close calls you've had, how do you think it changed you—or did it?

W: Oh yeah, I think it did. The things that come through on that, I think you recognize your own mortality. You know something could happen to you, when your own instructor gets killed. The thing was, that guy was a knight in shining armor, nothing can happen to him, well... To have something get that close to you, and then later on, have also something happen that was almost certain death you might say, and then just scrape by it by the skin of your teeth, those two items I think probably changed everything, whether I knew it or not, changed my philosophy.

I didn't realize a whole lot of changes in myself, I don't think, but when I got home, my mother told me, or told somebody else and I heard it, "I wouldn't even know him if I wasn't sure that I was her son." Of course I was only seventeen when I left home. My good gosh, seventeen years old, it's scary to think, the kids next door now, one just graduated from high school, the other one is in his junior year, awfully close to the age group that I was in. To think I was out on my own at that age.

But my own feeling about it, I think that today if we could assign, right out of high school, two years of some type of public service, just as a part of the procedure. If we did that, I think it would help. I could talk about my own grandkids this way; I think that when they got out of high school, they didn't really know what they wanted to do. I think that it is a tempering of a person. It's like you take metal—if it's not properly tempered, it isn't worth anything. This is the way that I think, that going out and seeing what a little bit of reality is, learning a little discipline, learning a little bit of the reality of things, and yet under a kind of supervision, away from what you grew up with. I think this can make a tremendous difference in a person, and for the better. I would be totally in favor of having a situation of this type. You maybe have seen some of the signs up, constructed by the WPA or something. Well, during the '30s, President Roosevelt, one of the few things I agree with him on, the WPA and CCC, Civilian Conservation Corps was one of them. They took these kids that had no direction, put them in a military setting, and had them in the North Woods building lodges and cabins and things.

All of a sudden do something meaningful, not because it's a good-paying job, but because it's fulfilling a purpose. The WPA of course, rather than operating like welfare, where you can just walk in and get a check, you had to go out and work. There again, you look at the WPA projects, out at Como Lake [in St. Paul], the original zoo and everything, I think there was all built by WPA. You go up to Duluth and the zoo up there was, too. Now in our area in Kansas, they had a rather lowly kind of thing, they build outhouses for the schools. We got a lot of WPA outhouses. *(laughs)* They had a solid concrete base, and a nice upper part. So, they did a lot of

things, like building and improving the country roads and putting in culverts and things of that sort. But it wasn't a handout type of thing, and I think it taught a good lesson and the country was better for it. Today, of course, now just the incidents in the last week now [reference to the attacks of 11 September 2001] will change some of this again, good or bad I don't know. I think overall what happened is a terrorist attack, but I think overall we'll come out the better for it. I think myself (*pauses three seconds*) that we needed an awakening.

One of the things that [TV preacher] Jerry Fallwell said—I don't know if you heard his little deal. If the same thing could have been done in a little different context... In general, I agree wholeheartedly with him. This is kind of an awakening.

D: Yes, I agree there.

W: But, it came across wrong. On the internet is his statement, how I should have said it, or something like that. I agree with him that we've gotten so slack. It reminds me of the children of Israel when they were out in the wilderness [reference to Old Testament of the Bible], the way they kept slipping off and things would happen from time to time and get them back on track again. I think that's what we're seeing.

D: Yes, one of the professors at my school [Concordia University, St. Paul], the day of the attack, during our chapel service he led with a message very similar to what you said.

D: That kind of covers the questions I had directly for you, but I do want to open it up for any additional things you may want to add.

W: Well, one story on the subject of chow and that in the military. I liked the breakfasts we had at the Naval Air Station in Seattle, because that was an operational base, as they called it. Baked beans, potatoes. I liked a large breakfast. People say chipped beef on toast would be pretty bad. That wasn't the popular term for it, but... That was excellent stuff for the most part, and on an operational base like that we did have excellent food. But when I tell some people about baked beans for breakfast, they think it's, well, unthinkable.

On the subject of liberty, one time when we were at Corpus Christi [Texas], we wanted to get down to Matamoros, old Mexico. I don't know how far that was, a couple hundred miles I suppose. Already things were getting down pretty close to the end of things. I think there were five of us, we went into a car rental agency there in Corpus Christi and rented a, I think it was a 1940 Mercury, which was about as new a car as there was. A '40, '41, but very few '42s that were available. We rented this Mercury and when we rented it, the guy said, "You're not leaving the city limits with it, are you?" "Oh no." The guy said, "The engine has just been overhauled on this thing, so take it easy." "Okay, we'll take it easy. We're only going maybe 200 miles."

Well, the speedometer was busted and not registering anything, so okay, you don't have to worry about mileage. Well, I had the "T" stamps for gasoline, so I

furnished the stamps and we headed out down the road. So we pull into the first station and figure we better get some gas. Let's check the oil, we don't want to run this thing out of oil, this engine was just overhauled. Especially not way out of town like that. So, here the battery—that was something that was hard to visualize—batteries were hard to come by too in the war. Well, here there was no top on this battery. There was the hard rubber case and three open cells, so the acid slopping in there and the plates were sitting down in there. What they had done, they had rebuilt the battery, and they didn't have covers for it, so they just set it in there open. So the acid is not splashing too much, because the cells kept that from happening.

So we checked the oil and so on, and got gas, and then on down. Well, we got Brownsville and there we parked at the bridge and walked across, because we didn't want to take the car into old Mexico. They let us in all right, but they said, "Remember, you have to be back by midnight. You've got to be back across the international bridge before midnight." So we went into old Mexico and it was really a downer there—mud streets, and shacks and so forth. Mostly it was just bars and so forth and a lot of street vendors. If a car was to come down the street, you couldn't meet, there wasn't enough width for two cars to meet. And there was mud puddles in the street and so on.

Anyway, we came back and got in the car, and another guy had been going a little bit of imbibing and I had been taken along sort of in the designated driver situation. So we got into the car, and those four guys all sort of passed out. We started heading back and there was only one headlight and only on low beam. There was no high beams, just one headlight on low beam. If it had burned out there would be no lights. So, started out after midnight, heading back. Go back in Corpus Christi, it was this time of year [September], so the dawn is comparatively late, but the sun was just starting to come up, that's how long the drive was. I was driving, and the guys were all unconscious, so to speak. All I could do was to see the white line on the road, so I just sat there with my eyes glued on that white line, following this white thing, there wasn't enough light to see anything. Of course there was very little traffic, too; during the war there was almost no traffic. Got back to the base, and if I remember right, I think it cost us something like two bucks a piece, is all it was. With the gas that we pooled for the five of us, and the rental, and then the mileage, there was hardly anything because the speedometer was busted. And we brought it back with a full tank, and that's all it took.

D: The guy at the rental company never did know, huh?

W: He never did say anything. We were fortunate of course, because we didn't have a problem when we were 150 miles out of town. There's only town between, Kingman I think is the only town between Corpus Christi and Brownsville. I think at that time that was the only place of any size at all. That was one of those escapades.

Oh, I remember another time in Corpus Christi. Things were winding down, and for the 14th [of August 1945], our battalion had reserved a dance hall. I don't remember exactly what that was, because it was a combination with the USO. So, we had reserved it for a battalion party. This was done several weeks ahead of time,

but this just happened to be on the 14th, V-J Day. So it was a victory party, you might say.

What they did in Corpus Christi that day, they closed all the bars as soon as the surrender was announced. All the bars were closed. But they still had a victory parade, and I can still remember this one sailor, he had a quart of milk. Oh he did some whooping and hollering, celebrating with a quart of milk. You couldn't buy liquor if you wanted to, so that was the best he could do! That night they even closed the retail stores; they all closed down. The only thing that was open was the movie theaters. There were some of those little ma and pa local markets, grocery stores that were open, but that was the only thing. You've got this guy with a quart of milk, but boy, was he celebrating!

D: Thanks very much for doing this interview; I enjoyed it.

W: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW