

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM R. STALKER

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES OF WORLD WAR II

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY

JULY 24, 2003

TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins an interview with Mr. William R. Stalker on July 24, 2003, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and ...

Jared Kosch: Jared Kosch.

SI: Mr. Stalker, thank you very much for coming in today and sitting for this interview.

William Stalker: Thank you.

SI: To begin, could you tell us a little about your father and his background?

WS: Well, my father was born in New Brunswick. His father was Scottish and his father started in a tea and coffee business with a horse and wagon and, eventually, had a grocery store in downtown New Brunswick for many years. My father never finished high school and he had an early motorcycle and had an accident in 1913 or thereabouts and lost his leg. So, he got around on one leg for the rest of his life, which was quite a few years. He did run one of the first garages with gas stations in New Brunswick for quite a while and, later, as he got a little older, he was a telephone operator. It was a good job for him, because he couldn't get around too well.

SI: Did he have his auto service station during the war years?

WS: No, actually, he had it before the Depression and he went out of business in '29, when things got tough.

SI: Is that when he became an operator?

WS: Yes.

SI: What about your mother and her family?

WS: My mother was also born in New Brunswick and her father was Dutch and her mother came from Sweden as a young girl and she also never finished high school and she worked in local factories for a while before she got married.

SI: Do you know which factories she worked in then?

WS: ... Yes, there was one called the button factory, I don't remember the name, and she worked for Potter's Needle Works, a needle factory in New Brunswick.

SI: Did she ever talk about what it was like to work in these factories?

WS: Well, she always said that she didn't want me to go to work in a factory. So, that was it. That was the extent of what she said.

SI: Your father's family had deep roots in this country. Was it your great grandfather that was in the Civil War?

WS: Yes, that was his great-grandfather, right, and he was in the Civil War. That was my grandmother's father. The family, apparently, there were a lot of Dutch families in Central New Jersey and they had a farm in the Middlebush area for quite a few years.

SI: Was it just a general farm? I know there are a lot of dairy farms out there.

WS: I really don't know what they did.

SI: It is always interesting for us to talk to people who grew up in New Brunswick and the New Brunswick area. What do you remember about New Brunswick as a young boy?

WS: Well, it was different. It was different than it is now. Downtown was a major shopping area for people and I remember going to see Rutgers football games. That's one of the things I remember.

SI: Was that at Neilson Field?

WS: Yes, in Neilson Field, until I guess it was 1937 or '38, when the new stadium opened.

SI: Were you there for that game?

WS: I was there, the one game I remember was 1938, when Rutgers beat Princeton for the first time since the beginning. That was a very big time then.

SI: Do you know how your parents met and married?

WS: Not really, except that they both grew up in New Brunswick. I don't know exactly how they met. No, I don't.

SI: When you were a child, did you work with your father?

WS: Yes, I didn't. No, I didn't work with him.

SI: What can you tell me about your education in New Brunswick as a child in elementary school and junior high school?

WS: Well, actually, we had moved around quite a bit within [the] New Brunswick area, so, I attended three or four grammar schools. Eventually, I ended up at Livingston Avenue School, and then, from there, actually, I guess the education was pretty good. I remember that I was able to skip a half grade or so, now and then. Of course, I think I was a little late starting school, because I really started in a one-room schoolhouse in Franklin Township, on Easton Avenue, and I wouldn't stay there, and so, my mother had to take me out for half semester. I was a little late getting started, and then, of course, I went to junior high school and high school in New Brunswick. That was a good education there.

SI: What were your favorite subjects or interests?

WS: Well, I like math and I enjoyed Latin, too. We took it in high school.

SI: Were there any extracurricular activities that you were involved in?

WS: Well, yes, ... I ended up being president of the senior class at the high school. That's about it. I wanted to play on the football team, but I didn't start that until I was almost a senior, so, that didn't work out.

SI: Was there any division between the rural kids and the city kids?

WS: No, I think we all pretty much got along together and mingled together, but there were kids from all around the area coming over into New Brunswick.

SI: How did the Great Depression affect your family and, also, New Brunswick?

WS: Well, it was pretty tough on our family, because my father lost his business and I guess he was out of work for quite a while, and then, he got the job with the WPA [Works Progress Administration] doing some bookkeeping work and we were pretty short of money.

SI: Did he do the book keeping work for the WPA itself or a company working with the WPA?

WS: I thought it was for the WPA itself.

SI: Did you see any of the effects of the Great Depression, such as homelessness, in the New Brunswick community?

WS: Yes, I saw some of that. We had a home just off of Franklin Boulevard before he lost that, too, and there was a large dump nearby where they used to just dump in the open and there was a small community. A number of hoboes built little shacks there and I can remember that. I also can remember some, one or two, coming to the back door looking for a meal. So, it did affect the area.

JK: How did New Brunswick react to that?

WS: ... I think people didn't think too much of it, but I didn't know, really, the general feeling and I'm not sure there was any help offered.

SI: What did you and your family think of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal?

WS: Well, the family was all Republicans back at that time, ... but I think, in general, they decided he was doing a pretty good job.

SI: Were you able to see the effects of other New Deal programs in New Brunswick?

WS: I don't know that I was too much aware of what was going on then, so, I really can't answer that.

JK: Do you remember seeing any of the later New Deal legislation in effect in New Brunswick?

WS: I just remember what was the Civilian Conservation Corps, CCC; I can remember that and a lot of young people going into that. I was too young at the time and I was of course still in school.

SI: Did you have to find part-time jobs to help support the family?

WS: No, I didn't, although, as soon as I graduated from high school, I got a job and I applied to Rutgers, and so, I worked that summer in a paper box factory, which is probably the toughest job I ever had, and then came fall, when I was ready to start at Rutgers. I only had, I think it was one hundred dollars, and the tuition then was two hundred dollars. I came up to see the dean and I think there were tears in my eyes and he found a little scholarship for me to cover the other one hundred dollars, so, I always appreciated that.

SI: Do you remember which dean it was?

WS: He was here a long time and I'm sorry I've forgotten his name now. He was here in '41.

SI: It seems like the University was rather small then.

WS: Yes, yes, that's right. It was. We had, I think, about 450 in our freshman class, but we ended up with one of the smallest classes, because of the war.

SI: Before going into Rutgers, in the 1930s and particularly after the war started in Europe, were you aware of what was going on in Europe? Was it discussed at all, either at home or in school?

WS: Yes, I was aware of it, but probably not as much as I should have been, because I was pretty much concerned with what I was doing.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were talking about how aware you were of the situation in Europe and overseas.

WS: Yes, I was aware of it. There were problems, but not really as aware as I should have been. I think I was more concerned about getting into Rutgers.

SI: Was college always on your agenda when you were in high school?

WS: Yes, yes, although I never was quite sure that I would make it, but I always wanted to go to college, yes.

SI: Did your teachers encourage you in that direction?

WS: Yes, they did. I think I said I enjoyed math and [the] teachers suggested that I consider engineering, which I did.

JK: Were there more opportunities for someone from New Brunswick to get into Rutgers or to get a scholarship?

WS: Yes, there were. They had a lot of State Scholarships. As a matter-of-fact, most of my classmates had State Scholarships and I was told that if I didn't live in Middlesex County, if I lived in another county, they probably had one for me, but they had too many of them here.

SI: Do you remember the process of getting into Rutgers?

WS: I'm sure I had to take an exam of some sort. I don't really remember it and I don't remember interviews, except talking with the dean here. So, it wasn't too difficult then, I don't think.

SI: How interrelated was Rutgers with the New Brunswick area?

WS: Well, let's see.

SI: Was it a part of your life before you actually came to Rutgers?

WS: I had two uncles who went to Rutgers. They were both in the Class of 1930, so, ... of course, they were encouraging me, too.

SI: Were they your mother's brothers?

WS: They were my father's brothers and one of them also had studied engineering, the same course that I took.

SI: He was encouraging you to become an engineer.

WS: Yes, although he himself never practiced in engineering. It may have been because of the job situation in 1930, but he went to work with J&J and spent his entire working life with J&J. He did very well. He became a vice president of purchasing.

SI: Did you enroll in the mechanical engineering course right away or did you take a while to decide?

WS: No, I started out in the mechanical engineering course and stayed there.

SI: Was the College of Engineering separate from Rutgers College?

WS: Well, it was a little bit separate, but it was all over there in what was the Engineering Building, just across the campus here. We took just about all the courses in that one building. So, we didn't see too much of the people in other courses.

SI: What made you go into engineering?

WS: Well, I think, then, ... my classmates and I ... were all interested in doing engineering work, you know, drawing pictures and calculations and, I remember, we had to take one course which they called basic accounting, which we objected to. We didn't think it was worthwhile spending time on that. We found out later, we should have.

SI: How so?

WS: Well, you do need to know accounting when you're in business. We were just interested in the details of engineering.

SI: Do you remember any of the Rutgers traditions that you were exposed to as a freshman?

WS: Yes, we had the dinks and white socks and the green tie. We had all of that. I think, perhaps, that was the last year that that was enforced, but, then, a lot of the traditional things, like dances and social affairs, were dropped.

SI: You lived at home for your entire time in college.

WS: Yes. I did.

SI: How far away was it?

WS: Well, it's probably a mile-and-a-half or two. It was off Livingston Avenue and I did manage to get a car. It was a '35 Ford, which I paid thirty-five dollars for, and so, we used to commute and I had a friend who also was from New Brunswick, Alan Walker. He took the same course, and so, we used to drive over together and I was able to park any place I wanted to on College Avenue.

SI: You were basically a commuter, but you lived very close by. Did that preclude you from a lot of campus activities or were you still able to take part?

WS: I'm sure I missed a lot of them, but I did take part in some. ... I played on the freshman 150-pound football team, so, I did manage to get into some.

JK: Were you part of the Commuter's Club?

WS: No, I was not part of that. I pretty much came over to the campus to my classes and went home and did my homework.

SI: Do you remember any public discussions or debates over whether we should get involved in the war or not?

WS: Yes, I know that there were a lot of discussions. I can't say I particular remember any of them in detail.

SI: Can you tell us where you were when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

WS: Yes. I had a Sunday job. My friend and I got a Sunday job at the Bond clothing factory in New Brunswick. We worked there on Sundays, sweeping up an area of the factory. ... At noontime, I guess, we heard somebody calling outside the factory and it was one of our other classmates who came and told us that Pearl Harbor had just been attacked. So, that's where I was.

SI: What did that mean to you on that day and in the days after?

WS: Well, it meant that I was sure things were going to change. Actually, when I started at Rutgers in '41, I was seventeen and I think the draft age, then, was twenty-one, so, it was kind of a remote thing. It didn't concern me a bit, but, in November, I became eighteen and, on December 7th, Pearl Harbor, or shortly thereafter, they reduced the draft age to eighteen. So, all at once, I was there, you know.

SI: Do you remember any initial paranoia or fears of an imminent attack in the area?

WS: No, I can't say I did, not at all, no.

SI: How did the war begin to affect Rutgers?

WS: Within the first year after Pearl Harbor, or maybe even the first six months, the war was most apparent when you went up to the old gym for phys ed and you'd see lockers with open doors and dirty socks lying around. The guys had kind of left in a hurry and, of course, you probably know, a lot of people were very patriotic then and wanted to fight. So, that was the earliest thing I can remember about the war.

JK: Did you feel like you wanted to go out there and join the war effort?

WS: Not right away, I didn't. I really was hoping to stay at school. I stayed in school. So, we continued. ... I don't know when I got a deferment; I'm not sure when I first got one of those. I had one summer vacation at the end of the '41 year, school year, and then, in the fall I went back to school, and then, they began to initiate this accelerated program where we went all year long and, as long as you were going to school, as long as I was going to school, the local draft board kept giving me a deferment.

JK: What did you think of the accelerated program when they first initiated it?

WS: Well, I thought it was good, because I was able to get through the education quicker. When we got near graduation time, I think there were one or two courses that were required that they had no instructors for. So, they said, "Sorry, you have to miss those courses," and so, we graduated in July of '44, but we still considered ourselves Class of '45.

SI: What do you remember about the courses?

WS: It was tough and we always had Saturday morning classes, for a couple of math courses that ... I still don't understand, but we managed to get through all right.

SI: Were there any other classes required besides the engineering classes?

WS: No, there was nothing else really required. The only required classes I can recall was the freshman English and this accounting course and the rest I think were pretty much standard engineering classes.

SI: Do any of your professors stand out in your memory?

WS: There was a Professor James J. Slade, Jr., who I think grew up in South America. He was a real mathematician and he was kind of off on his own. ... You know, we had blackboards all around the room, I don't know if they still do, but he would come into the class and start writing, go all the way around the room and leave and we all often said that it didn't matter whether anybody was there or not; he'd come in and proceed with his lecture and leave, but I remember him saying that there was a guy who was trying to get an even number for π and he had worked it out to, I think, 707 figures, and then, he gave up and, of course, now, they've tried with computers, but they still can't get it.

SI: In ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps], did the pace pick up after Pearl Harbor?

WS: Well, I think we all had to take two years, the first two years, and then, I can't say that the pace picked up during that two years, but we had the government saying the soldiers had to be trained here.

SI: Oh, the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program]?

WS: The ASTP, yes, so, that ... brought the number of people on the campus up pretty good.

SI: How separate was the ASTP? Were they in the classes with you?

WS: No, they were completely separate, from our classes, anyway. They may have been in with some of the other classes, but not in the Engineering Department.

SI: Where were they housed?

WS: I think they were in some of the older dormitories. Yes, as a matter-of-fact, I think some of my classmates were displaced for the ASTP.

SI: Were you able to see the effects of Camp Kilmer on New Brunswick?

WS: Yes, you could see there were more servicemen downtown than there ever were.

SI: Were there any concerns about this, such as fighting or drunken servicemen?

WS: I think there were some concerns. I can remember seeing one fight in downtown New Brunswick, so, I'm sure there were concerns, yes.

SI: Did you have any opportunities for entertainment?

WS: Not a great deal. We did manage to have a dance over at the engineering school. The big dances were all cancelled. ... In '43, the school had decided they weren't going to have some of the athletic programs. They were not going to have football, but a lot of the students said, "Oh, come on, let's have a team." So, I was able to play on the team. I managed to get in a number of games, and so, I did partake in that, which, I would not have been able to play if it were not for the war, you know.

SI: What was the schedule for that team?

WS: It was a shortened schedule, just five games, and we played Lehigh twice and Lafayette twice and Brooklyn College. We won the first three games and the coach, I remember the coach calling us together before the fourth game, and ... he said, "This isn't the best team Rutgers ever had, but we could be undefeated." So, we lost the last two games.

SI: Were you affected by rationing?

WS: Yes, I can remember rationing, especially the gasoline, because I had this old Ford, but I managed to get all the gas I needed, because my classmates would get rationing tickets from home. That was the biggest thing I remember and I do know there was rationing of sugar and things like that.

SI: Were you aware of any black market activity in the area?

WS: No, no, I wasn't.

SI: Do you remember any Civil Defense activities, such as blackouts and air raid warnings?

WS: Yes, ... well, there were blackouts on the campus. I'm sure there were air raid drills, ... yes, I do remember a couple of those. It didn't really affect me a great deal.

SI: At Rutgers, did they continue mandatory chapel during the war or was it discontinued?

WS: No. I think it continued throughout the war, yes, once a week, yes.

SI: You were Dutch Reformed.

WS: Yes, I grew up in a Dutch Reformed Church.

SI: It was not a big imposition to go to the service.

WS: No, except I didn't really want to, but it was all right.

SI: Do you remember if they had speakers, either at chapel or other places, like lecturers?

WS: About what sort?

SI: Did they ever have different religious leaders speak at chapel?

WS: Yes. I think we had a few speakers like that. I can't say that I always listened to what was going on in chapel.

SI: Do you remember any concerts or anything like that?

WS: No, I don't really remember concerts. If there were some, I probably didn't attend them.

SI: Were you able to find any entertainment opportunities in New Brunswick?

WS: Movie theaters, of course. I didn't go to any clubs or anything, just theaters.

JK: The accelerated engineering program kept you fairly busy?

WS: Actually, that's right. I didn't really have much time for any outside activities.

JK: Do you remember what the hours were like during the week?

WS: School hours?

JK: Yes, during the accelerated period.

WS: We had classes, I think, every day. Maybe we had one day off a week, but it was pretty intense. We didn't have much time off.

JK: I interviewed a woman who had been in an accelerated engineering program during the summer for five weeks and it was an eight to ten-hour day, five days a week, affair. I just wondered how it compared to that.

WS: I don't think it was that bad.

JK: This was a five-week program. It was extremely accelerated.

SI: Did students frequently fail in these courses, due to their intensity?

WS: A lot of people left to go into the service and some weren't doing so good and, of course, the next step was to go into the military, then. So, there was a lot of that. ... I forget how many we had in engineering when we started, but I remember the total class was about 450, but we only ended up with twenty mechanical engineers that graduated in '44. So, many of them left, yes.

JK: You were a mechanical engineer.

WS: Yes, yes.

SI: Was there any recruiting done on campus?

WS: There were some programs. I remember, the Navy had a V-12 program and most of my classmates ended up in that program. I don't know why, but I never got into that. There was a Navy recruiting office in New York, in New York City and I went in there, too. I wanted to get into the Naval Air Force, and so, I went in there and put in whatever applications they wanted and took some physicals, but ... nothing ever came of that.

SI: Before you entered the service, did you ever feel as if you were looked down upon by those in uniform?

WS: It didn't happen to me, no, because most of the people I associated with were in the same boat as I was. So, I didn't really have any problems.

SI: Is there anything we forgot to ask about Rutgers or can we move on to the service?

WS: No, I think that's about enough on Rutgers. I think we can move on.

SI: Can you tell us about the process of entering the Navy?

WS: Yes, well, we graduated in July '44 and I think, within a week, I had my notice from the draft board to report for the draft. It didn't take them very long and I had a date, a scheduled date. ... You had to go to Newark, to an induction center, where you took a physical and, if you passed, you went off, either to the Army or to the Navy. Most everybody went to the Army. So, I had this notice to report one morning and, the night before, I got a telegram from the Navy saying that they would give me a commission, not in the Air Force, but a regular line officer commission. That was great. So, I got on the phone and called the draft board and [they] said, "Oh, gee, I'm sorry, you're lined up. You've got to go tomorrow." So, I went to Newark with five other guys and went through a physical check up and, each time I got a chance to talk to somebody I'd pull out this telegram and say, "Look here," and they'd say, "Well, just move along." So, I finally got to the end and, when I showed him this, "Well, you'd better go home and wait for the Navy to call you." So, I returned home and I was home for another month or so before the Navy called me and said, "Report to Hollywood, Florida." So, I went to

indoctrination school. I pulled this indoctrination school “class book” out, because I want to refresh my memory.

SI: Many men describe the induction and physical process at Newark like a cattle drive.

WS: Yes, it was. One thing I didn’t mention is, ... once in a while, I have a problem with one of my knees, not [that it will] go out of joint, but something had happened. It would swell up and, of course, when I was going, my mother said, “You tell them about that knee, you know.” So, going through this line, I got to one of the doctors, I said, “Oh, I have a problem with this knee.” He said, “Oh, can you bend down?” “Yes.” He said, “Okay, move on.” So, it was like a cattle drive.

SI: Did you ever consider whether you wanted to be in the Navy or the Army?

WS: Yes, ... the Navy, I thought, would be better than being out in the mud. That was the main consideration.

SI: Did you have any inclination towards the Navy? Did you have a great love of the sea?

WS: No, I don’t think I had a great love. I used to go out on a party boat, fishing, once in a while. It was about all I had, the only connection I had with the sea. I wasn’t too good on the boat; I would get a little seasick.

SI: Before entering the service, were you in correspondence with anybody in the service?

WS: No, I don’t think so. I didn’t have any correspondence.

SI: Did you not know what you were getting into?

WS: That’s right. I was unsure where I was going, really. I could have ended up in the Army or most any place. I didn’t really know.

SI: What was the process like of going down to Hollywood, Florida, and reporting for training?

WS: Well, the recruiting office in New York was down there in the Wall Street district. After they said they would take me as an ensign, they gave me a chit to get my uniforms. You’d go out and buy your own uniforms, and so, I think I got three hundred dollars and there was a local uniform store in New York. I went there and bought three hundred dollars worth of uniforms, and so, I was able to wear a uniform ... before I even knew what I was doing and going down to Hollywood.

SI: Was Hollywood, Florida, “ninety-day wonder” training?

WS: Well, no, it’s funny you mentioned that, because everybody had heard about ninety day wonders, the Army officers. That was a pretty well known thing. The Navy did it in sixty days, “sixty-day wonders.”

SI: I imagine that training the must have been even more intense than the accelerated program at Rutgers.

WS: Yes, it was very intense. We had many different courses. Of course, we couldn't go into the courses in depth in two months, but we had a bit of navigation and identification of the ships, the airplanes and a little bit of ordnance and, of course, you always had physical training.

SI: How large was the class at Hollywood?

WS: It must have been about three or four hundred. We were broken up into about a dozen platoons.

SI: We are now looking at Mr. Stalker's class book from Hollywood.

WS: Yes, this is a class book from Hollywood. Yes, there we are, that was my platoon,

SI: Platoon 19 of Company G.

WS: Yes. They were guys from all over the country, of course, just like in any branch of the service and, mostly, they were just young people out of school, like I was.

SI: Were there any men who had been in the Navy and were being sent here for more training?

WS: There were really very few. There were none real old, a few that were in the Navy in their late twenties, you know, but mostly all young guys.

SI: Was this just general officer's training? Was there a specific slant?

WS: No, it's just line officer's training. ... You didn't tell them where you wanted to go afterwards, some were assigned to ships, some were assigned to stations. I was assigned to Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth, Virginia.

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SI: Would you like to continue that thought?

WS: Where were we?

SI: We were discussing training.

WS: Oh, yes.

SI: Did you have a drill instructor?

WS: Yes, we did.

SI: Was he a lieutenant or a sergeant?

WS: No, we had a young officer, a young Naval officer. It was intense. In fact, this hotel was right on the beach. It was very nice. I understood it was probably the only hotel in the area back in the 1920s and the Navy took it over and ... the only problem is, there were six guys in a room. We had three double bunk beds and we didn't have much time between our courses, actually, this little picture here shows that we would make the bed and never sleep under the covers, just sleep on top, so that you didn't have to make the bed again the next day.

SI: Were they strict on spit-and-polish and following the book?

WS: Yes, but I think not as much as the Marines might be, but you had to be pretty careful. I can remember, we did some drill work and this is toward the end of the year, about September, October, and we would come back completely drenched with sweat, shirt, pants, everything and you just take them off and hang them up in the evening and dry them out to use them again the next day.

SI: Was it all Navy there?

WS: Yes, no Marines. They were all Navy.

SI: Was there any sort of hazing?

WS: No, no, except that we had to take a number of inoculation shots and they let us out Saturday afternoon to get out of the hotel for a while and they put a fence around the place so that people couldn't get in or out, but just before letting us out for leave, we'd get our weekly shots and some of them made you feel pretty bad, so that you didn't enjoy the time out too much.

SI: Other than that, were you able to go on any brief leaves?

WS: No, I think we just had Saturday afternoon. ... I remember one Saturday night going down to Miami, but, most of the time, we were confined to the hotel.

SI: Were all of the physical training facilities in that compound?

WS: Well, I think we did go out of the compound for some of the physical training. There was a park-like area nearby where we went for some of the physical activities; we played touch football and things like that.

SI: You mentioned that the men in Platoon 19 were from all over the country, many different backgrounds.

WS: Yes.

SI: What was it like for you? I assume that this was your first trip, really, outside of the New Brunswick Central New Jersey area?

WS: Yes, pretty much. The only trip I had before that was, we drove to Florida for a week or two. I guess I was still in high school when we did that. Other than that, you're right, I had not left [the] New Brunswick area.

SI: You had been to Florida before.

WS: Yes.

SI: Were you shocked by how hot it gets in the South?

WS: Yes. Later on, I can tell you how cold it gets down there, too. I was working down there for a while after getting out of the Navy. I'll tell you about that.

SI: With all of these people from all over the country, were there ever any conflicts?

WS: We didn't have any conflicts. In fact, there was one guy who was right from my area, ... from Highland Park, and I think there were two guys from out around Detroit. We didn't have any problems at all.

SI: Were you the only one from Rutgers?

WS: I don't know. He didn't go to Rutgers. He was out of school for a couple of years. I don't know of any other Rutgers men there, no.

SI: What was the washout rate like?

WS: Actually, I don't know that anybody washed out, at least not in my platoon. We all made it.

SI: Did it seem as though they were making it hard, so that men would washout, or did they want everybody to pass, because they needed people?

WS: I think there is a little of both. They didn't want to lose anybody, but they didn't want to be too easy on them, either. There was a little bit of both.

SI: Were your instructors and drill instructors regular Navy men?

WS: I think they were mostly Naval Reservists, too.

SI: At that point, did you run into any Annapolis men?

WS: Later, when I was out of the school, I did.

SI: At the end of these sixty days at Hollywood, did you receive your commission?

WS: Actually, we had the commission when we went there. We just had to learn how to act.

SI: What did they teach you, in terms of acting as an officer?

WS: Well, of course, we went through Navy regulations, stuff like that.

SI: Were they able to instill any Naval tradition into you in that brief time?

WS: Maybe a little bit, yes. I remember what you're not supposed to talk about in the wardroom on the ship was women and religion and politics. You're not supposed to touch those things, but I'm not sure that everybody did that.

SI: How did you adapt to being in the Navy and going from civilian life to military life?

WS: I don't think I had too much of a problem. At the end of this course I was sent to Norfolk Naval Shipyard and lived in the bachelor officer's quarters, BOQ, for a while, and then, I met another guy, who also was from this area, who had a room in a private home downtown. There was two of them on the third floor of a very nice, I'd say quite a mansion, a brick building on the waterfront and they had room for three, and so, they had a vacancy. So, I joined them and lived off the base for almost all the time I was there. ... I was really very fortunate to have a nice, clean bed every night.

SI: Was there a housing crisis in that area?

WS: I was not aware of it, because I had a place and, ... no, I was really not aware of any. I'm sure there was.

SI: From Hollywood, you were sent to Portsmouth. What were your duties, initially, at Portsmouth or was it always the same duty?

WS: No, for the first month or so, it was just sort of orientation in the Navy yard, visiting various shops, and then, ... the Navy had what they called a ship's superintendent, a Naval officer who was assigned to one of the ships in the yard that came in for repairs or alterations or updating and he was in charge of seeing that things got done on time and done right. They called him a ship's superintendent. I was first working with a more experienced officer as his assistant and I did that for several months, and then, I became a ship's superintendent, where I was assigned, I had my own ships to look after. I didn't have any real large ships. We had LSTs [Landing Ship Tanks] and destroyers. It was sort of an interesting job and sometimes frustrating, because all the workers were civilians, union, and I remember one incident where there was a deck gun to be repaired on a ship and I went down to the ship late in the morning, right near noontime, and there was a guy sitting there by the gun. I said, "How are you doing?" He was an ordnance man and he said, "Well, I'm waiting for the sheet metal man to take this cover off." There was one screw in the cover and I blew my stack. "Now, we are in a war and you're going to sit here waiting?" but that was the union rule.

SI: Was this a regular Navy facility or had the Navy just taken over this facility for the war?

WS: No, it's a Navy facility, but they employ civilians there, but there are Naval officers in overall charge. There were no Navy workers there.

SI: How old were you at this point?

WS: I was twenty, about then, going on twenty-one, yes.

SI: Having just gotten out of college and having had only sixty days of officer training, what was it like to now be in charge of groups of men?

WS: Well, actually, I didn't really have to supervise any men, because I was pretty much on my own. Once in a while, you had the duty or you have to patrol around the yard, break up some of the crap games, but I didn't really have anybody under me.

SI: You were not in direct command.

WS: Not in command of any Navy men.

SI: You were just supervising the work of others. You were not deciding what had to be done.

WS: No. The decisions were made for us by the Navy Department. They would issue orders to do this. Frequently, the captain of the ship would like an extra porthole in his stateroom, you know, which was not authorized, and you can usually make a deal with ... one of the workers to put in a porthole and he would get some steak and butter to take home.

SI: Among the civilian workers, were there women workers there, too?

WS: No. There must have been, but I didn't see any. I really didn't see any. ... I don't think they built many ships there. They did a lot of repair and maintenance, but they did build two carriers and I saw one of the carriers launched, I believe it was the *Shangri-La*. I'm not sure if that's in service anymore or not. No, I didn't really didn't see women there.

SI: Was it a good fit with your background in mechanical engineering?

WS: Yes, it was a good fit, yes. You know, the landing ships, especially the LSTs, which were the big landing ships, to bring in the tanks, constantly had trouble with the bow doors, those big doors that open up. They're always being repaired, and then, there was one LST that had taken a torpedo in the engine room and it was kind of a mess. We had all kinds of activities.

SI: Were most of the ships that you were dealing with battle damaged or did they just have mechanical problems?

WS: I think, no, not most of them. Most of them were just updating and maintenance. There weren't too many battle damage cases.

SI: Did you have to constantly keep abreast of the newest models and the newest modifications?

WS: Didn't really have to, because you were told. The Navy would issue orders and say, "This is to be done," and so, they kept you up-to-date.

SI: Were there any African-American sailors or African-Americans among the civilian workers?

WS: I don't really ... remember many. Of course, we had, in the Navy, the guys who did ... the cooking, there were a lot of black sailors that did that. Those were the only ones I saw. It wasn't till about the end of '45, when I was about to get out that I saw a young black officer, the first one I'd seen, because things were beginning to change a little bit.

SI: Were there any problems between black sailors and white sailors?

WS: No, not that I know of. I'm sure there were.

SI: With the civilian workers, was there ever a strike or the threat of a strike?

WS: Not while I was there, no. I can remember, at the officer's club, we had a package liquor store where you can buy liquor, and then, they decided, once, that they would have to ration the liquor and you can only buy two-fifths a day and I thought that was kind of amusing.

SI: What were the creature comforts of the base? Was it comfortable? You lived off the base.

WS: I lived off the base most of the time.

SI: What about the food?

WS: Yes, well, we had pretty good food. They had an officer's club where they served meals and ... they served drinks there. That's where I learned to play bridge in my spare time.

SI: Was there a lot of drinking and gambling on the base?

WS: There were some, I think. I remember, they had Sunday night cocktail parties at the officer's club where, if I remember right, the drinks were twenty-five cents. I went to see ... one of the Naval dentists one early Monday morning, after the cocktail party, and I decided I'd never go back again on Monday morning. He was a bit shaky.

SI: Were you always able to get the supplies you needed to make the repairs?

WS: Yes, yes, ... I can't remember not getting what we needed. I can remember that, you know, a great deal of asbestos insulation was used on the ships. That was long before it was known that asbestos would cause lung damage. I don't know of anybody who was really

bothered by it. I think, actually, I think the asbestos business has been overdone. As long as it's pretty well confined, it does not bother anybody.

SI: Were there ever any accidents on the site?

WS: Yes, I can remember one sailor being shot accidentally. I don't remember any others, but I'm sure there were at least small accidents, because there was a lot of activities. I would guess there were forty ships or so in there at one time and cranes running all around, you know.

SI: Would the pace of your work pick up before a major operation or after a major operation?

WS: No, I don't think we noticed that there. Of course, across the way, on the other side of the river, in Norfolk itself, is a large Naval operating base and that's where that kind of activity would have taken place.

SI: You were at Portsmouth for the rest of the war.

WS: Yes, yes.

SI: Was going on a ship ever an option? Was that something that you thought you were going to do in the future?

WS: Well, I thought that I might do it, but it wasn't really an option. You had to wait for the Navy to decide. For the last six months or so that I was in the Navy, I became the assistant to the production officer of the Navy yard and my main job was to move ships around the yard. We had a great big map with all the berths and dry docks and scale model cutouts. Each day, I would have to find out what's going on and where the ships had to be moved, and then, make a schedule and, the next day the tugboats would move around. It was sort of interesting job.

SI: Were most of the officers who were in charge of running this facility there for the entire war?

WS: No, most of the ones in charge were Navy, real regular Navy men, and they were all pretty much older. There were a few of us young kids.

SI: Is that where you ran into the Annapolis men?

WS: Yes. Most of them are okay. I can remember one ship that I was assigned to, ... as the superintendent was an LSD, which is a Landing Ship Dock, a ship that you could sink into the water and take in a smaller ship, then, raise it up. The captain, I understood he owned or was president of a very small company, which he ran rather strictly, and he carried the same thing into the Navy. Every time I would come down to the ship and go up the gangplank. The deck officer would immediately pick up the phone, because they had orders to call the captain and tell him, "Here he is," and then, I'd get a wringing out for things he didn't like, but we managed. Most of the ... regular Navy guys, they were okay.

SI: There was no division between Reservists and Annapolis men.

WS: No, not there, anyway.

SI: How strictly was protocol followed at this base?

WS: It wasn't really too strict, but it wasn't lax, either. Of course, they had Marine guards at all the gates, but it wasn't real strict.

SI: Were there any other services there?

WS: Just the Navy and Marines.

SI: What do you remember about Portsmouth? Was there any kind of social life?

WS: Yes, we lived on the third floor of a very nice home, which was right on the waterfront in downtown Portsmouth, ... just near the old part of town, and it was quite nice. You could look out the window and see the Elizabeth River, which divided Portsmouth from Norfolk, and you could see ships coming and going.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: I think we were talking about living in Portsmouth.

WS: Yes, it was a very nice house that I lived in on the third floor and comfortable quarters.

SI: Was that common for Naval officers?

WS: Quite a few lived off the base, yes. Yes, we were quite comfortable there. Leaving my room and going back to the Naval base, we walked through the old part of town, which didn't make a great impression on me then, but, now, when we went back there about ten years ago, they called this the old town district now, you know, and they kind of fixed it up a little bit.

SI: Were there USOs [United Service Organization] there and that sort of thing?

WS: Yes, yes, particularly over in Norfolk, across the river. There was, I forget what it was, a place where they would have a dance on Friday night and we used to go over there. I remember, my roommate and I heard of a dance right in Portsmouth, at an armory or something. So, we decided we would go. We arrived and ... there must have been a hundred girls all dressed up there and no boys. The sailors that were supposed to come didn't make it, so we had an evening all to ourselves. Anyway, oh, yes, ... once, we went out to the countryside, nearby. There was a local social gathering and dancing and we were there for a while when we heard some shots ring out, so, we decided to get out of that place. I don't know what was going on. It was out in the country.

SI: What else were you able to do when you were on leave or in your off time? Were you given any extended leaves during that time?

WS: I think I had a week off before I went, in between the training, and I came back to New Brunswick, but, after the war, we got Sundays off and Virginia Beach was twenty miles away, so, we spent some time at Virginia Beach. That was tough duty.

SI: How did you react to the news about the atom bomb and the events towards the end of the war like V-E Day and V-J Day?

WS: Well, of course, the atom bomb was a surprise to most everybody and we, of course, were pleased to hear about it. I think we knew the end was near.

SI: Did you have any conception of what that meant?

WS: Not really, although one of our later roommates, who came into our apartment. When he came in, we asked him where he'd been. He said, "I'm sorry, I can't tell you," until after they dropped the bomb. Then, he said he was free to tell us that he had been working someplace on the bomb and doing something connected with it, anyway.

SI: Where were you when V-J Day was announced?

WS: You know what? I don't even remember where I was on V-J Day. I was someplace on the base, but that's pretty vague in my memory.

SI: I get the impression it was all rather sudden.

WS: Yes, it was quite sudden. I can remember the day that President Roosevelt died. We were out playing touch football or something when we heard that. V-J Day is kind of vague.

SI: How did people react to Roosevelt's death?

WS: I think most people were quite upset about that, very upset.

SI: Was there any kind of doubt, since he had been the President for so long and, now, this new guy was coming in?

WS: Yes, I think there were some doubts about Harry Truman, but he did okay.

SI: After the war, the pace kind of slowed down at the base.

WS: Yes. We had more time off.

SI: How long were you stationed at Portsmouth after the war?

WS: Well, let's see, I was let out in '46. So, I was there about a year after the war was over. Most of the Reservists had left by then.

SI: Did they have any kind of point system?

WS: I'm not aware of any kind of a point system. You just kind of waited until you heard from the Navy. Oh, I can remember when I had duty, ... I guess it was toward the end of my tour, I had Sunday duty with another officer who claimed to be the oldest lieutenant, junior grade, in the Navy. He'd been a chief boatswain's mate and he and I were sitting there in an office and a ship was coming in and he said, "Well, Stalker, why don't you get down there and show them where to tie up that ship," and I said, "Okay," and he said, "Don't tell them how to tie it up, just show them where," because he knew that I wouldn't know how to tie the ship.

JK: Were you thinking about a career at that point?

WS: Well, yes.

JK: Maybe the Navy as a career?

WS: That thought occurred to me, but not too much. No, my thoughts were, "Well, if you stay in the Navy and you're a good sailor, you'll get promotions at periods," and all that, pretty much regulated, and I was thinking, "I should go out and see what I can do on my own." So, I didn't stay.

SI: Why did you decide to join the Naval Reserve?

WS: Well, when you went into the Navy then, you were automatically in the Reserve. You're automatically a Naval Reservist. That was during the war. You were not in the regular Navy. So, it just came automatically.

SI: After the war, did you have to go to any meetings?

WS: Well, you could and I think I took a correspondence course. You could be in the Reserves and you could get credits towards retirement if you did it for twenty years or so. I did it for a year or two, and then, I dropped it. It wasn't compulsory. Before I got out, I took flying lessons when we had more time. It was at a local airfield outside of Portsmouth, so, I learned how to fly a Piper Cub and, after I'd got out, there was a program for veterans that they would pay for training. I forgot the name of the program.

SI: The GI Bill?

WS: The GI Bill, I guess it was, yes, and I applied ... to take some more aviation lessons under the GI Bill and the Veteran's Administration said, "Well, I think you need some counseling. You're kind of mixed up. You want to be an aviator or an engineer." I think I just dropped it then.

SI: Had you always been interested in aviation?

WS: Yes, yes, just like every kid. So, I did learn to fly a Cub and I think I got a total of a hundred hours or so flying by myself.

SI: Did you train at a Navy Air Force base?

WS: No, no. This was a little private thing that two guys started in the farmland. They started this small airfield. I don't know how they ever made out, used to have cows running around on the runways. I can remember, when you got to get a license back then, you had to spin the airplane. I think that's not a requirement anymore. I don't know if most planes will spin anymore, but I took it up and I was going to do the spin, got up enough courage and put on a parachute, which I didn't know how to use, but I took it up and stalled it out and got it spinning, like you're supposed to do, and one inside window blew out and, of course, that scared the hell out of me. So, I got the thing down as quickly as I could, but I had fun flying. I rented planes here in North Brunswick. There was an airport in North Brunswick. We could rent a plane for six bucks an hour back after the war.

SI: Were you seriously considering any kind of an aviation career?

WS: No, it was just a hobby.

JK: Have you done it since?

WS: No, actually. ... When I got married, which was in '48, in order to get some insurance, life insurance, I had to discontinue the license. So, I haven't flown since, except I did my flying with a company airplane, where the pilot let me take the controls once. ... Well, this is one of my later jobs, we had a company airplane, but that was just a hobby.

SI: You had to give up their pilot's license to get insurance.

WS: I don't know that you have to do that anymore.

SI: Did you have any trouble adjusting from military life back to civilian life?

WS: No, not really. I came home and went back to my parent's place there in New Brunswick and started to look around for a job. I came over to the Rutgers Placement Office, I guess they called it, and looked up some jobs and I found one that said, "Travel," and sounded pretty good. It was over in Bound Brook and it was a company that was in the air pollution control business, built air pollution control equipment for large power plants, things like that. So, I went over there and applied for a job and I remember the interview. Of course, they knew I had been in the Navy yard. I had some kind of construction experience. I remember the interview; the guy wanted to know what I knew about rigging, you know. I said, "Not really a great deal," and welding. I said, "Well, yes, I've seen it, but I'm not really up on welding." So, I figured that I'm not going to get this job. So, at the end of the interview, he said, "Here, we have a manual. Take this home and read it and come back to work next week." So, I got a job doing field construction

of the electrostatic precipitators. They were doing work all over the world, actually, and so, I was with them for a couple of years.

SI: Was it difficult to find a job at that time?

WS: I didn't seem to have too much trouble. Perhaps I was just lucky to find this job, yes.

SI: What did you do after working for that company?

WS: I worked for them for two years and I was away most all the time, and then, I met my wife there and, when we decided to get married, we decided that this job is not so good.

SI: Was she working there?

WS: Yes, she was working there. She was working in the accounting department. I thought maybe that would be a good connection. Anyway, I decided that I didn't want to be away all the time, so, I left the job and I took a job at a tank fabricator shop, ... it was up in Dunellen, called Buffalo Tank Corporation. I did some drafting work for them, and then, ran their drafting room. It was not a job that I wanted, but it was local, and then, I heard that Research-Cottrell (the company that I traveled for) was looking for some help and I went up there and it turned out that some of the work I had done with the tank fabricator got into pressure vessels and they were interested in that, and so, they hired me to work in the design department. I went back to work at the same company, and then, I worked with them for many years, about fifteen years, I guess.

SI: Did you prefer doing traditional engineering work, the drafting and so forth, or working with people?

WS: No, I really did not do too much traditional engineering. In fact, I never did, really. I did not do mechanical engineering, I did general engineering. I enjoyed the general work and, now, I did field service work, too, on electrostatic precipitators, which were big. They were big things. One installation we did was as tall as about a sixteen-story building. They're not little things.

SI: Was air pollution a big concern back then?

WS: Well, it was beginning to be a concern and, actually, the only concern then, really, was the particulate, the dust, the coal fly ash. They weren't worried about anything else, and so, the equipment was designed just to collect particulate. It was beginning to be a worry.

SI: This final job, was that part of your work at Belco Pollution Control Corporation?

WS: Yes, well, I went from Research Corporation (they changed the name to Research-Cottrell) to Belco. ... As a matter-of-fact, I got downsized or laid off when they had a management change, and then, I became a manufacturer's representative, selling the same equipment for another company, and I did that for about seven years. As a manufacturer's rep, when you do too good, why, the company you represent decides to put in their people, instead of paying you a

large commission. So, we lost that, and then, I went to work for a company called Belco, which was a new company in the same field. I did engineering work there. I knew the president from a previous job. I did most of the design work.

SI: When the Korean War came along, were you still in the Reserve?

WS: No. I was out of the Reserves by then.

SI: Did you have any concerns about being called up?

WS: No, it didn't bother me.

SI: Did you make any other use of the GI Bill?

WS: I may have taken a correspondence course, which I have forgotten now. I really didn't make much use of it. I did study some chemical engineering at Newark College of Engineering, nights, for a while.

JK: That was under the GI Bill.

WS: I don't think so. I think I paid for that myself.

SI: Why did you do that?

WS: ... Well, it was a few years after I was out of the service.

SI: Was it related to your career?

WS: Yes, because a lot of the work that we did with electrostatic precipitators got into chemical areas.

-----END OF TAPE ONE, SIDE TWO-----

SI: This continues an interview with Mr. William R. Stalker on July 24, 2003, in New Brunswick, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth and Jared Kosch. We were talking about how you went to Newark College of Engineering for chemical engineering.

WS: Yes, I went down there evenings for a couple of years. I was working on a Master's degree, but I did most of the work, but never finished it. It was useful in my work.

SI: Did you work with air pollution or something similar for the rest of your career?

WS: I stayed in air pollution control throughout my career, some forty years, and it, of course, was changing over the years. It went from just collecting dust particulates to gaseous stuff and the last job I had, before I retired, was with a small company called Reeco, up in Morristown. It was started by a guy that I knew from my previous work and he developed a piece of equipment

that would burn hydrocarbons, which they called VOCs, volatile organic compounds, such as when painting automobiles. The fumes from the paint ... had organic compounds and would burn off. So, he devised this thing where he would take those fumes and burn them, and then, recover the heat and used that to preheat incoming fumes and the result of the burning would be the carbon dioxide and water. So, that was still air pollution. I did air pollution control for a long, long time.

JK: That has to be a field that has changed quite a bit.

WS: Oh, yes, yes, yes, I'm obsolete now. I've been out of it for ten or twelve years, I guess. They ... have fabric filters, like big vacuum cleaners, they have scrubbers and they have this equipment for burning fumes. It's a, you know, pretty varied field now. Strangely enough, most companies didn't make any money in the field, but the last company that I worked for, he did make a lot of money and he is, of course, ... retired now, too.

JK: Was the discipline and the actual training that you gained in the Navy useful in your later career?

WS: I think just the experience itself was good. That's where I got to work with a number of people. Actually, I guess, my last work I did was in sales and, of course, working with people. I did travel quite a bit. I've been to Europe; this is in connection with my later years. I've been to South America and had to deal with a lot of people. I think just the general experience is good.

SI: Did you enjoy traveling?

WS: Yes, because, in most cases, they were short trips, you know, a week at the most, maybe. I went down to Brazil to talk with a company that we thought maybe we would make some deals with. After it was scheduled, my boss said, "Oh, well, you know, this is going to be *Carnival* week down there. So, you should be able to get a lot done, because that was going on," and of course, when I arrived, the young man I met said, "This is *Carnival* week. We're going to the beach for a week." So, I was accused of going at the wrong time.

SI: Do you have anything that you want to add to the tape, anything we missed?

WS: I get a chance to add some stuff when you edit this?

SI: Yes. Is there anything else you would like to mention?

WS: I'll probably think of something. It's going to be a while before you [get it back].

SI: It could be. We will do our best. This concludes our interview with Mr. William Stalker. Thank you very much.

WS: Thank you.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Reviewed by Kenny Karnas 11/17/04
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 11/22/04
Reviewed by William Stalker 3/13/05