RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER STEPANIAK

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH
and
LORRAINE CLARK

HIGHTSTOWN, NEW JERSEY
NOVEMBER 23, 2021

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history with Mr. Walter Stepaniak on November 23, 2021, with Shaun Illingworth. Lorraine, just say your name for us on the record.

Lorraine Clark: Lorraine Clark.

SI: All right, thank you. To begin, can you please tell us where and when you were born?

Walter Stepaniak: I was born in 1945, February 10th, in the City of Bratislava, country of Czechoslovakia.

SI: Okay. Your family had been forced to go to Bratislava from their homeland of Ukraine. Can you talk about the family background and how World War II changed their lives?

WS: Basically, being Ukrainian and very anti-Communist, anti-Russian, my family was forced to leave Ukraine because the Russians were coming in and the Germans were moving out. What happened, my mother and father, brother and sister, went to visit in-laws. My grandparents and my oldest sister stayed home. The oldest sister, Lydia, she took care of the grandparents.

In the meantime, the Russians came in, arrested the family and sent them to the *gulags*. Luckily, for me, we were not at home on that day. When my parents were returning home, they were told, "Don't bother, the Russians are waiting for you." So, we took off at that time.

Again, I was born along the way; I wasn't there for that day. I was born shortly thereafter, along the way. Slowly, we worked our way, trying not to get captured by the Germans or the Russians, made our way over to the American sector in Bavaria. We lived there for five years until we got our papers to come to America in 1950.

[Editor's Note: Ukraine briefly earned its independence from the Russian Empire in 1917 during the Russian Revolution. In 1922, Ukraine became part of the Soviet Union and remained a Communist nation until 1991. During World War II, Ukraine was occupied by German forces from early on in the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 until the Russians drove them out in 1944. The *gulags* were a system of prison labor camps within the Soviet Union.]

SI: Where was the displaced persons camp where you lived during that period?

WS: In a town called Mittenwald, and don't ask me how to spell it. [laughter] It's in Bavaria, in the mountains, in the Alps.

LC: Walter, weren't you injured along the way, while your family was fleeing the Russians?

WS: Yes, I was. I laugh at it, saying that I got hit by a Chevy, but, as you know, all metal was used to make bombs. The train I was on was bombed (I'm not sure if it was by the Russians or the Americans) and I got injured.

I got a piece of scrap metal in the back of my head. They proclaimed that I'm not going to make it, I'm going to die, but my mother said, "No, he's not." She took care of me, bandaged me up and here I am, with a scar on the back of my head but alive.

SI: Wow. Do you have any memories of the displaced persons camp?

WS: A little bit. I mean, I was just four or five years old. I'm starting to remember things, as someone of mischief, things we used to do as kids.

We rolled down a big, big snowball. I don't know if it was me being small or the snowball being that big, but we rolled it from the top of the mountain there and left it in the middle of the highway. During the middle of the night, the United States' convoy, driving through, the first jeep hit it. So, I mean, it just stopped the whole convoy.

So, all the boys ten years or older, I don't want to use the word "got arrested," but got picked up and spent about an hour in jail and [were] released to their parents. It was more of a joke than anything. It was a big snowball. Other than that, yes, I remember running around, making trouble, whatever, misbehaving.

I do remember the boat ride from Germany, Bremerhaven, to New York. It took about a week. They had us separated. They had the mother and children in one area of the boat and the men on the other side. It was a converted minesweeper, into a refugee boat. My mother got really sick on the boat. She really couldn't do anything, but, when we came to New York Harbor, we came in at night. The Statue of Liberty was lit up. Mom got out of bed and she made it to the top, outside, just to see the Statue of Liberty.

We were one of the last, or they were getting ready to, I'm going to say close down, the immigration--I'm trying to think of the island right next to the Statue of Liberty that all the immigrants went through.

SI: Ellis Island? [Editor's Note: Ellis Island in New York Harbor was home to an immigration center that operated from 1892 to 1954. In 1965, it became a museum operated by the National Park Service as part of the Statue of Liberty National Monument.]

WS: Ellis Island, yes, Ellis Island. So, we only spent a day there. Usually, you have to spend about a week to get in, but they were down to a system of one day. We landed at Ellis Island and we were on the ferry into New York, where some Ukrainians met us and helped us out. We came across on a minesweeper that was converted to a refugee transport. That was not a luxury cruise, but we made it. So, here we are in the States.

SI: Just one question about the displaced persons camp.

WS: Okay.

SI: Do you remember the conditions? Did you live in tents or barracks?

WS: Okay, as a matter of fact, when my brother was stationed in Germany and I was stationed in France (both in the Army), we took a leave. We went to Mittenwald and the DP camp was still there. It's a German Army base. We had barracks. It was not like you see on TV now, people in tents and no water, no food. We were in one room for the whole family, but it was a nice barracks. Considering, if you look at the refugee camps now and what we had, we had luxury. We had a building, heating and all that good stuff.

As a matter of fact, when my brother and I went there, he tried to take a picture of the room. He goes to me, he says, "You see the bottom floor, fifth window? That's our room." So, he's trying to take a picture of a German Army base and here come the military police. We had to explain to them what was going on and, since we were US military, they let us take that one picture of the building, that's it.

We kind of went around, up into the mountains again, together, just to remember what we did, where we were. We were stationed in Europe and it brought back some memories. That's about it, I mean, typical growing up. I mean, no school, you just got fed. That was it.

SI: Did you get a chance to learn any English before you came?

WS: No. My father was a scholar and he knew about seven, eight different languages. German was one of them. So, when we hung around my father, we were fine. He spoke German, French, Latin, not English. English was not one of them, but we had to learn it quickly when we got here.

School started pretty rough for us, because, if you didn't know the English language, you were sent back a year, automatically. I don't care what your grades were in the previous school or whatever, you were sent back a grade, so [that] you could learn English. It's not like now--they have Spanish, they have English, they have the different languages. We didn't have that. You had to have English and it took us a while.

The kids, we learned it quick. Mom and Dad, Mom sounded, God rest her soul, but she sounded like she got off "the banana boat" yesterday. She hardly spoke English, but, thanks to that, we still speak Ukrainian, because she was insistent on us speaking Ukrainian. So, I could still speak that language.

LC: Why did your dad speak seven or eight languages? What did he do? How did he learn that many languages?

WS: Well, in Europe, if you take a look at the geography, there are a lot of countries. Like, the United States is basically one country. You could go from state to state without nothing. There, every country has its own language, every country has its own borders. So, if you want to survive in Europe, you have to learn.

For instance, we crossed from Ukraine to Poland, Czechoslovakia--all different languages. So, luckily, my father knew those languages. He either got a job as a translator or organizer of the Ukrainian people, whatever, to help them out in the language area. He spoke German, French,

Latin, Ukrainian, Polish, Russian and, eventually, English, okay. Does that answer your question? Okay.

SI: What did your parents do when they came to the United States?

WS: My father was an architect and he got a job. My mom bought a farm. So, that's her job, the farm and the family. We lived in a town called Dorothy, New Jersey, [within Weymouth Township], which is just outside of Vineland. It's in South Jersey.

My father got a job at Wheaton's Plastic Company. If you look in your drug store, you see bottles with soap or baby food or something like that, they look like a teddy bear or an animal? That was my father's design, in, I'm going to say, 1960, '59, '60, when he worked for Wheaton's. He couldn't get a patent because he worked for a company. He didn't do it at home. So, Wheaton's took over the patent, but it was my father's design.

Then, he worked at JC Penney. He designed and helped build the auto parts department, which was in a separate building. My father designed the building.

SI: Your family moved out to New Jersey relatively soon, but do you remember anything about living in New York?

WS: Other than getting in trouble on the streets, no. [laughter] Well, New York has a very large Ukrainian community in [the] East Village. The church is on Seventh Street, between Second and Third Avenue, a very large Ukrainian community. So, we hung around with them, of course, belonged to the Ukrainian Scouts, going to camp.

Other than that, not very much, I mean, roller skating, playing stickball in the streets. Going ice skating in Central Park, it cost ten cents, not what it costs now. The subway was ten cents to Central Park, to rent skates was fifty cents. So, I mean, it was affordable. Now, it's different.

SI: It must have been quite a change to move to a farm in South Jersey. What was that experience like?

WS: Well, we lived in a small village in Ukraine, or my family did, I didn't (I keep saying "We" as my family, not particularly me). So, it was pretty easy. My mother lived on a farm. We'd milk the cow and had chickens. My brother was a phenomenal [gardener]. He had a green thumb. He could grow anything.

Actually, the only thing we bought from a store was sugar and salt. Everything else, we made ourselves. We made butter from the milk (my mother) from the cow we had, eggs from the chickens we had. You name it, we had it. My brother grew all the vegetables and stuff like that. Basically, my mother did the farm, my sister did the household cooking (and she was a phenomenal cook), my brother and I helped out on the farm, whatever needed to be done.

SI: Did you have a cash crop or was it just stuff to support the family on the farm?

WS: Well, it was basically a chicken farm. We had thousands of chickens. Then, my mother needed the milk and butter, so she got a cow. We had three acres. One area had strawberries, the next area had potatoes, corn--you name it, we had it. Chickens, we'd get chicken meat. Every time the chicken stops laying eggs, it gets turned into chicken soup. [laughter]

SI: Did your family find this property through Ukrainian community connections?

WS: Yes. Philadelphia had a large Ukrainian center. It turned out that Vineland had a pretty good-size [Ukrainian population]. As a matter of fact, the Ukrainian church is in Millville, the next town to Vineland. So, yes, we had contacts.

Plus, my father was a conductor, classical music. So, he conducted the church choir in New York. When my brother and I went into the service, the farm was too much for my parents, so they moved back to New York. My father organized a girls' choir. He never said no to a child, so if you wanted to sing, he'd put you into the choir somewhere. I'll tell you, the choir was phenomenal. We have a record of the choir and pictures. He also wrote music.

As a matter of fact, he composed my wedding waltz that I danced to with my wife. He had four girls from the choir come to the wedding to sing it while my wife and I danced. Once we start talking about Vietnam, I will mention how I met my wife.

SI: Sure.

WS: Go ahead.

SI: I would imagine your family tried to keep up a lot of traditions and practices from the old country. Is that correct?

WS: That's correct. As a matter of fact, we still try to do it now, mainly Christmas, which was January 6th, not December 25th, consists of a twelve-course meal without meats. So, my father always said, even though we cannot be with our sister who's in the *gulags* physically, at least we were there mentally on January 6th. So, my father made sure we all celebrated that day together.

Different customs--well, Christmas is Christmas. Now, Ukrainian Christmas does not give out gifts. The gifts are given out on St. Nicholas Day. Christmas is strictly a religious holiday. Being Catholic, we had to go to Midnight Mass and participate in that. Now, my brother sang in a church choir, my sister sang in a church choir. Me, I am the black--what do you call it?

LC: Black sheep?

WS: Yes, whatever--I can't sing to save my life, I can't draw a straight line without a ruler. So, I did not go after my father, I did not go after my brother. So, my claim to fame was Vietnam, nothing to do about singing--and I think Rainey will attest to that. I can't sing to save my life.

LC: Now, you still do sing and that is what counts. [laughter]

WS: Yes, even though my father put me in the choir, like he always did to little kids, but he'd put me in the middle of the choir. So, any way I drifted out of tone, I matched somebody and it worked out pretty good. I couldn't do any solos. I was real bad, all right.

SI: You mentioned, in New York, there were the Ukrainian Scouts. Did they have that in South Jersey as well?

WS: Yes, they do. As a matter of fact, this past weekend, the Ukrainian Scouts here in [the] Washington area went to Arlington Cemetery, where my brother is buried, and looked up about twenty Ukrainian veterans who are buried in Arlington. We, as a group, laid flowers on their graves.

SI: Tell us a little bit about your early education up through high school, where you went and what interested you.

WS: Well, we started school in New York, where the Ukrainian Catholic school is (St. George Academy) run by the priests and nuns from the St. George Cathedral. I was never a good student. I was a troublemaker. My brother could read a book and memorize it. I could not. I had to read it three times before I remembered the first chapter.

[Editor's Note: St. George Ukrainian Catholic Church, a Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the East Village, was established in 1905 and the St. George Academy is a private Ukrainian Catholic high school that opened in 1947.]

We went to school, which was a Ukrainian school. We learned the Ukrainian language. By the time they got to reading and writing, we were in South Jersey already, so I never went to Ukrainian school to learn how to read and write. What little I do know is basically on my own; I would pick up a book and read.

The easy part about the Ukrainian language, learning, is every letter is used, not like in the English language, where you have "K" in "knife." It's a "K-nife," if you want to spell it, or "fight," why have a "G?" The only way you could misspell a Ukrainian word is if you mispronounce it. So, it was more important to learn how to speak and learn how to read and write later on, because if you learned how to pronounce it incorrectly, you misspelled it incorrectly automatically. As I said before, my mother was very strict about learning how to speak it.

Then, when we moved to New Jersey, there was a Ukrainian school at the church, but we had to pay extra for it and they ran out of money for me. Being the last child, they really didn't have any money to send me to school. So, I had to do it on my own. I don't want to blow my own horn, but, to my credit, I know the language fluently. Reading and writing, I read a little slower, have to go by letter, every letter, got to pronounce it and the word comes together then.

Basically, American schooling was grade school in Dorothy, New Jersey, which only had first to fourth grade. Belcoville, which was about seven miles away [also within Weymouth Township], had five through eight, two classrooms each. You kind of had first and second in one classroom,

one teacher, third and fourth in the other classroom. Then, from there, we went to Vineland High School, which was about eighteen miles away, by school bus, of course.

I personally did not like school. I was, as I said, a troublemaker--nothing serious enough to go to jail, but a pain in the backside to everybody. So, I quit high school. I just couldn't take it anymore and I joined the Army. Luckily, the commanding officers I had in my military career were exceptional, West Point graduates or whatever. They made me get my GED. So, I got that, and then, when I got discharged, I took the GI Bill and went to college. I finally grew up and I went to college. That's my education.

SI: That was in 1963 when you joined the Army.

WS: Correct, it's 1963 to '66, three years.

SI: Before we get into your Army service, one of the things we talked about a lot in class was the impact of the Cold War and the Soviet threat. Was that something that was talked about by your family or something that you thought about before going into the service?

WS: Well, we had my sister in the *gulags*. So, that never left, the reason or understanding of the Cold War, which we were praying and hoping for that it would turn into a hot war and throw the Russians out, but it never did.

When President Gorbachev instituted the *Glasnost* (I don't know how to pronounce that exactly; it's a freedom, a little freedom there), when my grandfather passed away in the *gulags*, my family was released. My grandmother and my sister were released and they came back to Ukraine. So, that was always on our mind. So, we knew about the Cold War. Plus, the Ukrainian Scouts, we had discussions about it all the time, yes.

[Editor's Note: Mikhail Gorbachev served as General Secretary of the Communist Party, the supreme leader of the Soviet Union, from 1985 to 1991. His policies of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* allowed more civil and economic freedoms in the country. He later oversaw the dismantling of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of its Communist government.]

SI: After your family was released--that was in the 1980s--were you able to re-establish contact with them?

WS: All the phone calls were monitored and we had to be careful in what we'd say, other than, "Hello, is everybody okay?" After I got out of the military, one of my jobs was, I worked for the airlines, Pan-American World Airlines. When Poland declared independence [in 1989], my sister happened to be in a city called Lviv, which is almost on the Polish border.

She contacted us and asked to make arrangements if we could send my mother to Poland. She could not go to Ukraine, but she could go to Poland, so [that] they could meet. We did that. I flew for nothing (I was the employee), my mother had a ninety percent discount. We got her to go to Poland. I went with her and, yes, that's the first time I got to meet my sister, was in Poland. I could not go to Ukraine.

We had to be careful because, being born behind the Soviet Union, we were eligible for draft. Since we ran away, we were considered deserters. So, we'd have to be careful where we went, so [that] we would not be [detained], because I have friends who did go to Ukraine and never came back, tried not to get drafted in the Soviet Army.

So, yes, my mother went to Poland, met her daughter, who already had a child. So, Grandma was there and we started reacquainting ourselves with each other. We got my sister to come here, to the United States, a couple of times and we still stay in contact, yes.

SI: Lorraine, do you have any questions before we get into the Army?

LC: No. I know you said that (you told me) you didn't attend your college graduation, right, and then, that caused problems later, but I think that is after you were in the military, right?

WS: Correct.

LC: Okay, so, no.

WS: Okay.

SI: Tell us about the process of getting into the Army, where you took basic, that sort of thing.

WS: Well, the Army had two things. If you're drafted, it's for two years and you really didn't have a choice on where you were stationed. If you enlisted, it's three years and you get a choice, if possible, to go to Europe, for instance, or wherever, or stay in the States. When I quit high school, I had to do something. First of all, if I would've come home, my father would have beat me to death for quitting high school, but I figured, "If I join the Army, I'll survive."

So, I joined, went to Fort Dix, New Jersey, for basic training, which took eight weeks of infantry training. Then, from there, after the eight weeks, I went to radio school, which was also at Fort Dix, another eight weeks, learning Morse code, maintenance on the radio equipment, and so forth. I got orders to go to Germany, which I really [wanted]--I asked for Europe, unassigned. I didn't care where in Europe they sent me.

So, I had orders for Germany. My mother got very, very sick. The Red Cross called my unit and said, "Don't send him to Germany or anywhere, because his mother may not make it. You're going to have to send him right back for emergency leave--so, just keep him here for a little bit."

Now, in the Army, you can't just sit there and do nothing. So, they said, "You've got to go to another school in Fort Dix." So, "What's available?" They said, "Truck driving." I said, "Well, I know how to drive a truck, okay." They said, "A cook school." "Hey, learn how to cook, nothing wrong with that." So, I went to cook school at Fort Dix.

That changed my orders from Germany to Verdun, France. I got on a boat, went across to Europe, trained from Germany to France. I get there (and I never did really want to be a cook),

they needed a radio operator. So, I said, "Hey, I could do both." I went right back into communications, which was the best thing I ever did.

My brother was stationed near Frankfurt. I was in Verdun, France. We'd get together. I'd go visit him, he'd visit me, go to Paris and whatever. Now, my brother and I, I'm a beer drinker, my brother's a wine drinker. So, the French make fantastic wine, but the lousiest beer in the world. The Germans make a good beer, but the lousiest wine in the world. So, whenever my brother came to France, he'd bring a carload of beer; whenever I went to Germany, I brought the wine.

The funny story about that is, my brother had a Volkswagen, a little Beetle. The trunk is upfront. He would stack the trunk--a blanket, bottles of beer, blanket, bottles of beer. The whole trunk was full of beer. So, the Volkswagen was tilted at an angle, forward.

When he came across the border, the security guard, "*Was ist los*?" Car's crooked. He opened it up, goes, "Oh, I understand, I understand." They let my brother go through, no problem. We'd try to drink all that stuff that weekend together.

We did tour Europe quite a lot. We went to Luxembourg, where General Patton is buried. He's the only general that never came to America after the war. He died in Germany and was buried in Luxembourg. We went to the World War I battlefields, Verdun and others.

[Editor's Note: US Army General George S. Patton, well-known for commanding the Third Army in Europe, died on December 21, 1945, weeks after a car accident left him paralyzed. He is buried in Luxembourg American Cemetery.]

So, as a matter of fact, one situation, we're looking out in the field and see an Army tank, a US tank. So, we go out there in the Volkswagen, take off, start crawling on the side of this tank. All of a sudden, here come the military police, "What are you doing? *Qu'est-ce que c'est*? What are you doing?" We told them.

That was an aiming point for the French artillery training site. So, the police, luckily, they were looking before they started shooting and saw a couple of heads bobbing in and out of a tank. So, they threw us out of there, but we did go to quite a few cemeteries and battlefields. We enjoyed them. My brother's a historian, or was--he passed away.

So, we kind of enjoyed that. Of course, Paris had a big Ukrainian community. We met all the Ukrainians there, went to church. That was Europe, basically, and went to Berlin, saw Checkpoint Charlie [at the Berlin Wall].

They had a train which was sealed in Frankfurt to go to Berlin. They had--I'm going to say "good guys," "bad guys," okay? The "good" Germans from Frankfurt towed the train to the border. They'd change locomotives and drivers to the "bad guys," driving us until we get to Berlin. Then, in the City of Berlin, they would change locomotives again to go through the city.

Every time they did that, the Russian Army surrounded the train. We were told, "Do not talk to the soldiers," who walked around the train. They were armed. The commander of the train (was

an officer) and an MP sergeant would get off the train, show all the passports and our ID cards to the Russians. They would let us back on and re-seal the train and off we go.

So, me being a little wise guy, I lowered my window against regulations. Russians come walking by and the Russian goes to me, "*Wie gehts*." That's "hello" in German. I looked at him and I do know a little bit of Russian (as I said, I'm fluent in Ukrainian), I go, "If you want to talk to me, you've got to talk either English, Russian or Ukrainian." He just took off running, because he didn't want to talk to me. [laughter]

I said, "Okay," and I closed my window. I kind of scared him half to death, but the train was surrounded. A truck with loudspeakers had come in, played parade music for the Communist Party, which we had to listen to for about an hour. Every time we stopped, the truck would pull in and play music for us.

So, that was interesting, Berlin. Other places we went to, Frankfurt, Munich--we saw the Hofbräuhaus where Hitler started his career. It's still open. You could have a nice beer there, places like that. We enjoyed Europe tremendously, being that we came from there. That's about it. [Editor's Note: In February 1920, Adolf Hitler made his first speech to the Nazi Party in the Hofbräuhaus am Platzl in Munich.]

I mean, Army-wise, France and Germany were different. Germany was combat units. France, US troops in France were logistics, like I was an engineer battalion. We built bridges, then, we blew them up. When Kennedy got assassinated, I was there. We got put on alert. This was no drill, as we were told. [Editor's Note: President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, in Dallas, Texas, by Lee Harvey Oswald.]

We lined up, we're on our way to Germany, across the border. We stopped at the border, ready to go in if we had to. I remember, it was snowing; this was winter. Yes, when Kennedy was killed, we were ready to go, all the Army units in France and Germany.

I was there until President De Gaulle threw us out and pulled France out of NATO. De Gaulle threw the US Army out. The funny thing there is, the contract was, if the US Army leaves, we have to leave all of our equipment behind. So, the commanding general said, "We're not going to do that. They're throwing us out," but we had the right to go into Germany in case there was issues.

So, the Army threw an alert. We took all of our equipment across the border into Germany and left it to the German Army. So, the French were very upset. [laughter] The only thing they got was an empty building. All the gear, trucks and everything went across the border. So, after that, I came home, was discharged.

[Editor's Note: Charles De Gaulle served as President of France from 1959 to 1969. In 1966, he ordered the removal of American nuclear weapons, expelled American military personnel and withdrew France from several NATO commitments.]

SI: You were over there for a few years.

WS: Well, basic training and radio school, let's say it's six months. So, I was there for two-and-a-half years. Army is three years, yes, two-and-a-half years.

SI: Was there ever any talk that you might be sent to another place, such as Southeast Asia, while that theater was building up?

WS: Well, the rule is, when you enlist, you have a choice. They sign a contract to send you to Europe--but, once you're there twenty-four hours, the contract is fulfilled and then they could send you anywhere they want. Yes, there was talk about going to Vietnam, there was talk about going to Korea, but we were so shorthanded that not that many people were transferred out until the tour was up. I ended my tour in Europe, came home, got discharged, but, then, I got recalled. So, that's another story.

SI: How much time was between when you came home and when you went back into the service in the Air Force?

WS: Let's see, from April to June of 1966, I was a civilian. Well, in the Army, at that time, if you were drafted for the two years, you get discharged, you are assigned to an Active Reserve unit in your state, National Guard or Reserve. If you enlisted for three years, you were put on Inactive Reserve. You were still assigned to a Reserve unit.

That's so they could call you back. They could activate your Reserve unit and call you back. That's what happened to me, basically. They activated the Reserve unit (or put it on alert; nobody was active) and I missed two meetings. You miss two meetings, you get called up. So, that was a dirty trick, but they called me up.

I was a counselor at the Ukrainian camp with the kids. My mother calls me up, says, "I've got a letter from the government here. You want me to open it?" because we didn't open each other's mail. I said, "Yes, sounds important--open it up." So, she opened it up and there's my recall notice. I said, "I don't want to go in." So, that day, I joined the Air Force.

Again, being that I joined, I had a choice of, "What schooling did I want?" I said, "I want to be an air traffic controller." Again, the rule in the Army is that (or the military) if the Army or the Air Force signs a contract to send you to a special school, they have to do it. If you fail that school, dropout, they could send you anywhere they want, any school they want.

Okay, so, the idea was, "If you want to be an air traffic controller, don't fail, because you may end up being a mechanic, okay." So, I joined the Air Force. I got California, McClellan Air Force Base [near Sacramento], four years, Air Traffic Control School.

I never worked in the tower. I worked in--what'd they call it? I've forgot already--basically, "en routes." We had radar and, between LA and Hawaii, I was responsible for all aircraft and their route, make sure they didn't collide or nothing. Once they get close to a city or tower, they'd change frequencies and the tower handles them.

I was strictly en routes. I worked Air Force One one time, which was quite interesting, but, once I got done with that, then, I got orders for Vietnam. Again, that's the only place I could kill Russians legally, so, I didn't mind.

LC: Why did you want to be an air traffic controller?

WS: I don't know. I just can't drive past an airport without looking up at the airplanes. So, my wife always drives when we go by an airport, because I'm looking up into the sky, not the road. I don't know why; I just wanted to be an air traffic controller, yes.

The bad thing about air traffic controller is, it's a critical job--it's stressful, it's seven days a week. Now, it's not twenty-four hours. Only some airports have twenty-four-hour air traffic control. A lot of them close down, I'd say midnight or whatever, but the others have one person online just in case of an emergency landing. They could open up the tower, but, basically, not everybody was there at night. So, that was good, okay. [laughter]

SI: When you joined the Air Force, did you have to go through another basic training course or did they send you right to California?

WS: No, as long as you're under a year, which I was, I had no basic training for the Air Force. What are they going to teach me, how to march? I already know that, okay. How to salute? I know that--and I kept my rank. If I was under a year, I kept my rank.

I was a sergeant and I joined the Air Force as a sergeant. So, I did pretty good. The only thing I lost out [on] was money, because if you reenlist in the military, you get a bonus. Since I was discharged, and then, went back in, I lost a bonus--but I didn't go in for the money. I just felt I had to go.

SI: How long were you stationed in California before you went to Vietnam?

WS: Approximately six months, I'd say six to eight months. Let's see, I spent three years in Vietnam, so, I had to kill a year. I'll say six months, because I did six months after I got wounded in Sacramento, California.

There, in the Air Force, since my security clearance, top-secret clearance, expired when I left the Army, the FBI was running another security check on me. I could not work as an air traffic controller until I got my clearance, because the aircraft en route are classified and you just can't do that. So, the Air Force has what they called the MARS radio system, Military Affiliated, M-A--I forgot the name, I'll think of it [Military Auxiliary Radio System].

SI: Relay System or something?

WS: Basically, a Western Union, so-to-speak. You, as a soldier, if you're stationed overseas, you want to talk to your parents, you go to the MARS station. It's supported by civilian HAM [radio] operators.

We set up phone patching, phone relay, radio to the telephone. Like, you would call me here in DC, I'd call your family and say, "Look, I have your son on the radio. They want to talk to you." We explain the procedure, and then, you could start talking to them. It wouldn't be visual, but you could at least talk to them. So, we did that, or, if you want to send a telegram message, just a Western Union message, we would do that.

That's basically a hot standby for the military. If the military radios go down, they have a network up of HAM operators that would kick in and support the Air Force. So, I ran that until I got my clearance. Once I got my clearance, I was in Vietnam.

SI: What was it like going over to Vietnam? What was the process and the route like?

WS: Well, the Army, if they moved the large units, like my brother's First Division, they went by boat and that took a couple of weeks, to go by boat. You stopped off in Hawaii for a day or two, then, the different islands. You've got to refuel the ships. My brother took a ship.

Air Force is all planes. I got my orders. From McClellan Air Force Base, Sacramento, I went to Travis, which was in San Francisco, Travis Air Force Base. I had my orders, got on a plane. Within twenty-four hours, you're in Vietnam. As a matter of fact, we took off from Travis, developed engine problems and we emergency landed at Norton Air Force Base [near San Bernardino, California], which is a SAC [Strategic Air Command] base.

It's a secure base--everything's closed. So, we were kind of shuttled by buses into one barracks, not allowed to leave. You would think they'd bring another plane in. No, they fixed the one that was having engine trouble. So, we just sat there and waited. That's a lucky point I'm going to get to in a minute.

Then, we took off again. Everybody's kind of just waiting for something to happen, but we took off no problem, landed at (Kadena?) Island, was a little island. It was a weather station for the Navy. We had one sailor onboard, had to drop him off and pick one up.

The (Kadena?) Island strip was so small that when the plane touched the ground, if you're on the correct side, you were over water. You could see water right up to the edge of the runway. There's no taxiway. The plane would stop, turn around (an active turn), go to the building and want to drop the person off.

So, basically, we landed at (Kadena?) a day late because of an engine problem. Then, when we took off again, the plane is taking off, you look out the window, all you see is water and you're still on the ground. The edge of the water is right there. We take off, going for Da Nang Air Force Base, the northern corps in Vietnam.

That base got hit that night. When we landed, some buildings were still on fire. So, if we would've been there on time, we would've been in that attack. So, what they did was, they had a system where you only get up when you're told, because [if] everybody gets up, you get jammed up at the front door--everybody's standing still in a big line.

From the back of the aircraft, a sergeant would walk in and say, "Go, go, go." As those guys ran forward to get out, troops getting on would come in the back door and sit down in those empty seats. So, you've got people leaving, people getting on at the same time.

We come down the stairs--they give you a flak jacket and a helmet and show you where the bunker is. The fight was not over yet. So, that was quite a, "Hello, Vietnam, [laughter] you're here, okay," spent a day there, a day or two at Da Nang.

Then, I got my orders to go [as] forward air control for the Vietnamese First Infantry Division at Tam Ky. I said, "All right." I go there and it's a small base, MACV, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, MACV. I was there for a few months.

My brother and I got a hold of each other. He was a career soldier. So, when he reenlisted, they sent him to Vietnam. We used "the Sullivan Law." I said, "Both of us don't have to be here."

[Editor's Note: On November 13, 1942, the five Sullivan brothers perished when the Japanese sunk their ship, the USS *Juneau* (CL-52). The US Armed Forces later adopted as series of "sole survivor" policies regarding theater deployments and combat zone service aimed at limiting the potential loss to a family.]

So, I go to him, I said, "You're infantry--get out of here, all right." He says, "No, I'm a radio repairman--I'm fine, I'm in the back here." He said, "You're up north, where they're bombing you every day--you get out of here." I said, "No, I'm here to kill Communists. I don't want to go home." So, he says, "Let's put in for a transfer."

In the Air Force, I could get a transfer a lot easier, because the Army never went that far north. That was strictly the Marine Corps (I Corps.) Vietnam was split up into four groups--I Corps was one corps, II Corps, III and IV Corps. So, the Marines had I Corps, okay. So, the Army could not go north on transfer unless you were a MACV advisor. George was a radio repairman, so, he was not an advisor. So, I put in for a transfer and, luckily, I got it.

I ended up at Bien Hoa Air Force Base, just outside of Saigon. I told them, I said, "Hey, I want to go to the base called (Wha Kay?)." The sergeant asks, "Why?" I said, "My brother's there." "Oh, no, whoa, bad enough you're both in-country. We're not going to put you on the same base, okay, because you're the only two brothers, but you're going to Saigon." I said, "Saigon? Civilian clothes, big city, piece of cake--I'll work the tower, no problem."

When I hit Saigon, they go, "Oh, no, you've got to go to the back gate and report to the building there." So, as I'm walking past the tower, I said, "Where am I going?" "We've got a job for you." I said, "All right." I go there, the Vietnamese Airborne Division, paratroopers. I'm, again, ex-Army, Airborne-qualified, air traffic controller. I go there.

Now, the Vietnamese Airborne was the reaction force for all of Vietnam. The US has the 82nd Airborne. They've got one brigade on combat standby right now, they've got one brigade in training, on base. One brigade--hold on a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

WS: The third brigade is in, like, stand-down. They're on leave, training, school training, whatever. The Vietnamese had the same thing. One brigade was the palace guard in Saigon, another brigade out in the field in combat, third brigade was being replenished.

So, I got sent to the Airborne. The Air Force, we were not assigned to any particular brigade; we were assigned to the division. Whenever there was an issue somewhere, either a major problem where the local Vietnamese can't handle [it], we would send in a brigade to do that. If there was a major operation run by either the Vietnamese or the US, we would send a brigade with them, like we'd go as a blocking force for the infantry going forward.

Our pilots flew O-1 Bird Dogs, prop-engine, slow-moving [Cessna O-1 Bird Dog, a propeller observation aircraft in service from 1950 to 1974]. They had no weapons. They only carried smoke grenades, rockets. They would fly in low, mark the target, call in the airstrikes to bomb their smoke.

I was the ground radio operator. My radio jeep, like I'm sitting in my chair now, the whole back was nothing but radios. I had HF [high frequency]; I could talk to the States from my jeep. I had FM, [with] which I could talk to the ground troops. I had UHF [ultra-high frequency], VHF [very-high frequency]; I could talk to flying jets, aircraft and helicopters, all in my jeep.

If the pilot went back to refuel and something happened, I had to call in airstrikes, I would do that. On my HF radio, I would call the nearest large base, like Da Nang if we were up north or Bien Hoa if we were down south. "I need air support," I would tell them what type of ordnance I required, "Troops in contact. I need this and this type of ordnance," or, "Bunker complex, I need heavy area ordnance." They would scramble jet fighters. They would come online, on the radio. I would call them in. I would mark my position with smoke.

We had smoke grenades, different colors. When you throw the grenade, it puts out a lot of smoke very quickly, but you never tell the pilot what color you're throwing. He would have to identify it, "I see yellow smoke."

If I threw green smoke or red smoke, he's coming in hot on to that yellow smoke because the Vietcong listened to our radios. They would take a chance and pop a smoke grenade. If theirs was the same color, they'd probably have to tell me that. He said, "Oh, I see two yellow smokes." "I only threw one grenade. Back up, I'm going to throw another one." I'd either throw another yellow one or a different color, and that was my job.

If you saw the movie *We Were Soldiers* with Mel Gibson, that movie showed my job. The guy yelling, "Broken arrow," on the radio, he called in and they bombed the local troops, their own troops. Luckily, I never bombed my own troops--came awful close, but I never bombed them.

[Editor's Note: *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young,* a 1992 book by US Army Lieutenant General Harold Moore and journalist Joseph Galloway that chronicles the US Seventh Cavalry in the Battle of the Ia Drang Valley, was adapted to film as *We Were Soldiers* in 2002.]

That was my job, forward air control, a little more advanced. I had a radio jeep. If I couldn't drive that jeep to where we're going, I backed it into a Chinook (double-bladed chopper), they would fly me in. They'd land, I'd drive out, dig a hole, bury the jeep. I think Rainey saw the pictures of my jeep buried; dug a trench, drove my jeep into that trench, pitched my tent next to the jeep. That was my job, providing air support and/or logistics.

Whenever possible, we took one US Army or Air Force person, if possible, back to the nearest Army MACV compound to take a shower, shave, get a hot meal. On the way back, it was the job of that trooper to bring back a case of beer or a case of soda, some refreshments for the advisors that are out in the field.

One time, it was my turn. I had a radio operator relief came out. So, I was able to go into the MACV compound, have a hot meal. The helicopter I had to fly back, going forward, was one of those, we'd call them "bubbles," if you saw the Korean *M*A*S*H* helicopter units, one of those bubbles, glass front, no backseat, only carried two or three people.

[Editor's Note: The TV series *M*A*S*H,* which aired from 1972 to 1983, covered the experiences of a fictional US Army Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) during the Korean War and featured the H-13 Sioux in the opening credits.]

I'm sitting there with these three or four cases of beer and soda on my lap and buckled in. We start taking fire and the chopper's going down. The pilot could not reach the radio to change to guard. Guard frequency is one all aircraft listen to. Anyone going down, they declare "mayday;" everybody responds to that area.

So, the pilot could not reach that button because he's controlling the chopper. It's going down. He asked me to do it. I unbuckle, I lean over, I turn the radio onto guard, one click. To re-buckle, it takes two hands. I'm not letting go of the beer, okay. So, trying to re-buckle with one hand, I can't do it, but we're going down.

As we hit a rice paddy--on skids, we slid into a rice paddy--we all fall out of it. Another chopper comes in to pick us up. I said, "Wait a minute, I've got my beer." I went diving in a poop-infested rice paddy trying to find my beer. The chopper's yelling at me, "Let's go, we're taking fire." I found a case or two of beer, threw it in the chopper, off we went. I got a medal for that from the Army, for being stupid. It's my "stupid medal," but that was one of my episodes.

SI: Wow.

LC: What medal did you get?

WS: For that? It's called my "stupid medal;" let's leave it at that.

LC: That's what they called it?

WS: Yes, that's what I call it. My medals, I have Purple Hearts, I have two Bronze Stars with "V" for Valor, I have two from the Vietnamese government, two Crosses of Gallantry from the Vietnamese government. Those other "Bad Conduct," Good Conduct, whatever, commendation medals, whatever, but the important ones are the two Bronze Starts, Purple Hearts and the Vietnamese commendation medals. I got those. That was my "stupid medal," for that one.

SI: When you were up in I Corps, were you also doing this job, forward observing?

WS: Yes. I Corps, out of Tam Ky, was for the First Vietnamese Division. Later on, in III Corps, which is Saigon, was with the Vietnamese Airborne, but we went all over Vietnam because we were the reaction force. I was up in Khe Sanh during Tet, I was up at the [DMV]. The US was not allowed to go to North Vietnam--we crossed the border a few times. I was in Laos, Cambodia, with the Vietnamese Airborne.

[Editor's Note: On January 30, 1968, over one hundred South Vietnamese cities were surprise-attacked by the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army in what became known as the Tet Offensive. Initially caught off guard, American and South Vietnamese forces eventually defeated the enemy and proclaimed victory. Yet, news of the attacks shifted American public opinion against the war. On January 21, the Marines at Khe Sanh Combat Base near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) that separated North and South Vietnam were attacked by the North Vietnamese Army. The battle continued until July 11th.]

Again, they're a quick reaction, mobile unit, which [meant] we went all over the place, but I was always with a brigade. There was always a battalion protecting me. Battalions are two hundred guys--it's not much--but the senior advisor in the Army Command (staff command group) and the Air Force detachment, the pilots flew out of the nearest airfield. It could be a dirt field, was a secure field. You've got fuel there, more rockets, whatever. The radio operators went forward with the Army. So, I was on the ground with the Army.

SI: You had a lot of interaction with the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] forces.

WS: Yes, I did, but it was their job to know my language. I did not have to know the Vietnamese language.

SI: Okay. In general, what were your impressions of the ARVN forces you served with?

WS: I could give you a comparison, because I served with both, the Vietnamese First Infantry Division and the Vietnamese Airborne. Airborne is strictly voluntary, even in the US. In the Airborne unit in Vietnam, everyone assigned to the Airborne unit, except the Air Force pilots, had to be Airborne-qualified. If you were a nurse, a secretary, whatever, you had to be Airborne-qualified.

The issue we had with that, for the Vietnamese, they were using our parachutes, which were designed for a two-hundred-pound male. Well, a Vietnamese girl does not weigh fifty pounds soaking wet. She's little. So, we had to weigh them down with sandbags, make her put a backpack on, weigh them down, or they just stood there.

It's hot air going up. They had trouble landing once they stepped out. So, they were weighed down a little bit. It was their choice; they didn't have to be. Most of them didn't, but some did. It was strictly their (thrust?) on the way down. It took them a long time to glide down if they didn't, but, eventually, they did.

To compare the two units, there really is no comparison. The First Division was not a heavy fighting division, where the Airborne was. I mean, whenever the US called for an infantry unit to support them, they had issues with that, because their command structure was political. They were appointed as officers. The US did start a mock-up of West Point in Vietnam and started improving their command structure, but, generally speaking, it was very weak, where the Airborne was, you ask them to do something, they did.

They lost, just that one division, more troops than all of the US troops. Over fifty thousand South Vietnamese paratroopers were lost, killed, not wounded--I'm not even counting the wounded. I'm talking about lost. So, I was very proud to be in that unit. It was a strike unit. It was something. We have a reunion every two years. We get together. The Vietnamese come to our reunion, we come to theirs. We still have a good time together.

SI: You were there for a very long time. Would you have to reenlist every year?

WS: No, a tour of duty was four years in the Air Force.

SI: Okay.

WS: So, within those four years, I spent three years in Vietnam.

SI: Okay.

WS: I see what you're asking; a Vietnam tour was one year. If you extended another six months, you got a thirty-day vacation in the States. They actually flew you to the States for thirty days. That did not count toward your six months in Vietnam, so, basically, you're extending your military time for seven months.

You get the thirty-day vacation plus six months' duty. I went to Vietnam, finished my year. I extended for six months, came home, went back to Vietnam. In the first six months, I got wounded. We were overrun, going hand-to-hand combat. I got wounded in the leg and I was sent stateside.

Then, when I got stationed in Westover Air Force Base, Massachusetts, in the SAC base, it was too strict for me, spit-and-polish. I was saluting everybody. I said, "No, send me back to Vietnam." So, they did, for my second year-and-a-half tour. That totaled three years, but I got wounded, they patched me up, came back to Vietnam, I'm fine.

It was basically, after one year, you have a choice--extend for six months or not. A lot of people did. You'd be surprised how many did. All these stories you see on TV about the Vietnam

soldier (drug use, the misbehaving and all that), I could only speak for my unit, this did not exist in my unit.

As a matter of fact, in the US Army side of Team 162, I believe, [as] I understand it, you could only join the Army detachment by invitation. Someone from the unit had to invite you. Air Force was not part of that. They just gave the Army what they had, preferably Airborne. There was only three of us Airborne-qualified. Everyone else was not. Most everyone else were pilots. Because of our mission as a reaction force for all of Vietnam, we had the largest advisory detachment that was assigned to any Vietnamese Army Division. Because of this, we had the highest casualty rate for an advisory team and the most decorated team.

[Editor's Note: The Republic of Vietnam Airborne Division was supported by the US Armed Forces' Airborne Brigade Advisory Detachment, which became the 162nd Airborne Advisory Detachment and US Airborne Advisory Team 162.]

SI: You originally got to Vietnam in--was it mid-1967?

WS: I was in Vietnam, someplace, from '67 to '70, three years.

SI: Okay. You were there before Tet. What do you recall about that period before the Tet Offensive? Did the Tet Offensive change what you were doing?

WS: Well, I got caught up in a MACV compound in the city of Hue during the Tet Offensive, which was the bloodiest battle of the war. Again, because we were the reaction force of [South Vietnam], we happened to be in that area just before Tet. The Airborne was right on the DMZ, Quang Tri Province.

Well, Quang Tri had a MACV compound; it was very small. The MACV compound at Hue was a good-size detachment. Quang Tri was a sub attachment of Hue. So, it was my turn to go to the city, but the difference is, we went into every hotspot. So, going up to Hue was no big deal, like I was up in Dong Ha, which was south of Hue, I was up in Khe Sanh. During the relief of Khe Sanh, I drove up Highway 9.

[Editor's Note: On January 30, 1968, the beginning of the Tet Offensive, the City of Hue was attacked by Vietcong and North Vietnamese forces. Initially surprised, American and South Vietnamese forces were surrounded and almost lost the city. However, they were able to defeat the enemy and claim victory on March 2, 1968. The MACV Compound was a focal point during the battle. National Route 9, a Vietnamese highway, runs almost parallel to the DMZ.]

It's hard to compare battles. Every one has its own unique point about it and the reaction that you take to it. So, it's very hard to compare it. As far as comparing units, which I said the First Infantry Vietnamese was weak, the Airborne had to support it quite a few times. I was up north more with the Airborne than I was when I was stationed up north. I was always going up there.

Being ex-Army, I actually enjoyed the company of the Army advisors and I hope they enjoyed my company more so than the Air Force. I know very few Air Force personnel; I don't

remember them. Army guys, I do. I just got attached to them--like, for instance, the advisor calls for air support. He has to tell me the weather, type of ordnance they want, what's going on, little tidbits I need to know to pass on to the dispatch guy to give me the Air Force.

With me, they didn't have to tell me. I learned, "You are the senior advisor in Third Brigade. You call for air support, I know you like 'snake-and-nape,' I know you like forty-millimeter cannon." [Editor's Note: "Snake and nape" refers to the use of Mark 81 Snakeye bombs and M-47 napalm canisters.]

I look up at the weather, I could tell you what the weather is; I don't need you to tell me. I know you, okay--where, in the other units, "Well, who is this? What's the weather like there? What's going on? How far is the enemy?" Hey, I never asked that question. I didn't have to; I knew what the Army was doing. So, in that respect, I was very lucky to be in that unit.

SI: It sounds like you had a good relationship with the officers you were with.

WS: Officers and enlisted men. Every officer had a radio operator. I'd talk to him, I'd fix his radios, he helped me out--yes, we had a very good relationship with the US and some of the Vietnamese. I don't know if Rainey is going to send you (or I could send to her) three or four pictures, like one of my jeep, one of me, the Battle of Hue, I got a couple pictures from that.

It kind of puts everything into perspective, what we did versus what the regular Army did.

LC: Yes. There is a whole section of a book about you, right? It's all pictures that you gave them.

WS: There were two books written about my unit, one by the Army, one by the Air Force. The Army has pictures in it--General Schwarzkopf, General McCaffrey, Captain Kinzer. The picture of me in that magazine, basically, in that book, the Army book, you can't tell it's me. It's a trooper jumping out of an airplane with the parachute open. I said, "That's me. You prove to me that it's not." Okay, yes, the Air Force book has a few pictures of me.

[Editor's Note: US Army Generals Norman Schwarzkopf, Barry McCaffrey and Joseph W. Kinzer (a captain at the time) completed tours of duty during the Vietnam War as military advisors with the Republic of Vietnam Airborne Division.]

LC: Yes, you did, you did.

SI: We can put the titles in the transcript. When Tet started, you were at Hue. Where were you?

WS: Tet, we just came up north, I don't know, I want to say a week before Tet. I was on the flight line in the City of Hue when a chopper came in and blew up some serious dust and (I'm going to use the word) "injured" my eyes. It was full of dirt; I was in pain.

So, my pilot flew up another radio operator, who was a "short-timer," we call it. You have less than a month to do in Vietnam, we try not to send you in the field because you're getting ready to

go home. This case, he came up to relieve me. I got flown into Da Nang to get my eyes checked. The doctor cleaned me out. The transit barracks was a hotel, downtown Da Nang. So, I stayed there overnight.

In Da Nang, the Tet [attacks] started a day early by mistake. They were spotted. So, the battle started in Da Nang. Now, here I am--my pilot is at the field waiting for me, I'm downtown in a hotel. We got a pickup truck, about three or four of us with weapons jumped on, saying, "Let's go." We're going to drive from downtown, under fire, to the Air Force base. Luckily, nobody shot at us. We just drove real fast.

So, I get to the field, get in the plane. Because I was delayed, it's getting to be evening. We landed at Hue City. I'll tell you, did you ever have your ears stand up on end because something is wrong? You don't know what's going on--nobody walking in the streets. Usually, Hue had a very large college, so, there was a lot of young people still walking around, whatever--nobody.

We had to drive from one side of the city across the river to the compound. It was the crew chief for the plane, the pilot and myself. All three of us are armed. Normally, we just threw our weapon in the back and drove. This time, lock and load, something's wrong, something's fishy. So, we didn't stop. We drove like a bat out of hell; got to the compound with no problem.

That night, all hell broke loose. They mortared us. I jumped out of my cot into the bunker. They actually broke through our defenses, but, luckily, they didn't follow through. We liquidated them pretty quickly and they did not follow through. Otherwise, we would've been overrun, because if we had a hundred people there, I'd be surprised, a hundred, two hundred, let's say 150 to be safe. That's it.

The funny part about this story (as I think I told Rainey), my mother always had this thing, "Whatever you do, do not embarrass the family," behave, in other words, or, if you don't, "What will people say?" My mother has this fear, "What will people say about her boys?"

Well, Rainey, you could close your ears. Sleeping in the hot tropics, you don't wear much clothes. I just had my underwear on. I jumped out of the bunk, crawled to the bunker. As I'm there, I realize I'm not dressed. "What will people say?" If I get killed or wounded, the story will be, "He got shot in his skivvies."

So, I crawled out of the bunker, under fire, to where my gear was, got dressed properly to die and crawled back under fire, because [of] my mother's, "What will people say?" Like, really, if you're wounded or killed, they cut the clothes off anyway and put you in new clothes, but I was raised that [you] don't give them a chance to say that he died with his skivvies on. [laughter]

Anyway, we fought them back. The Marines came up the next day. My radio jeep took a direct hit (well, close hit) and put a big hole in my radios. I was useless, out of a job. Before that, I was working the radios under fire. I couldn't sit in the jeep, because I was up high. So, I was on the ground, working the radios.

If you see the picture, you've got a jeep and a generator trailer with a long cable, put it off to the side. I'm running [my radios]--all of a sudden, the generator dies, basically run out of gas. I crawl back to the generator, refuel it, get it started. Crawling back to my jeep, "Boom," the generator's gone, took a direct hit, wiped it out. That kind of destroyed my radio also. Luckily, I was on the ground. So, I'm out of a job, nothing to do.

Here come the Marines--this major comes screaming in that his troops are under heavy fire just inside the city. They need help, resupply, ammunition and medical. So, I'm out of a job--okay, I got me a jeep and a deuce-and-a-half and some other transit people, "Let's go." We loaded up and fought our way out of the city to help the Marines. All of a sudden, someone jumped in my jeep and it's gone. I'm stuck with the Marine Corps outside the city. So, I walked back to Hue with the Marines under fire. I got to know some Marines.

When we got back to Hue, I organized--well, I don't know if I ought to mention this one, but, walking back to the city, the Marines have signals. If the gunnery officer whistles or yells some profanity, they know to shift right, shift left, go forward, whatever. Well, I don't know these signals. So, when they shifted, I'm still behind a tree, shooting, thinking everyone's with me. All of a sudden, I look--I'm the only one there.

Luckily, one Marine saw me and he stopped whatever they were doing. He covered me and I made it back. On our way back, I picked up a wounded Marine, carried him to safety. That's where I got my Bronze Star with a "V" from the Marine Corps. That Marine, he's red-haired, I could see his face. I don't know his name, I don't know what unit he was with, but he said, "You stick with me. I move, you move. I stop, you stop." We walked back together that way.

Well, once we got back, I organized a medical pick-up of Marines, bringing them back to MACV compound for medical treatment. We had a doctor there. I made a few trips into the city to pick up the Marines and whatever. That was my second Bronze Star.

At one point, the major (it was a Marine major) goes, "Come on, guys, we've got to take this bridge right across the river." Off they go--you know Marines take the order, off they go. On a bridge, where you going to hide? They got chewed up pretty good. So, I jumped on my deuce-and-a-half, got a fifty-caliber machine-gun on the roof. We're going on this bridge, firing this fifty-caliber right over the driver, going straight.

In the meantime, the Marines are laying on the bridge left and right. I'm dropping off medical supplies, because I was in the back, medical supplies and ammunition. I saw the red-haired guy on the bridge. I waved at him, he gave me a thumbs-up. We kept going. That's the last time I saw him. Again, I don't know who he is or whatever, but we got across the bridge.

We turned--there's a circle there--we turned around and [were] coming back. So, now, the fifty-caliber machine-gun turned around and he started over my head, towards the back of the truck. We're picking up the wounded. We stop, pick up wounded and brought them back for medical evacuation. That's the last time I saw the redhead kid. I don't know who he was; I wish I did. I don't remember his name.

After that, I did a few more runs. Then, I got pulled back. We got ordered to go back to my division, which I did, all the way back. I hitchhiked all the way back to Saigon--hitchhiking on planes, not on trucks. One plane was full of coffins, Vietnamese paratroopers. I flew in with them, back to Saigon.

Other than that, that was my Hue experience. About a month or two after Tet, I went back up there to clean up my gear and stuff and go to Khe Sanh. So, there's another story. I don't want to tell you war stories, I mean, but, anyway, that was that.

LC: When you initially left your division to go to the Marines (I do not really know military hierarchy), did you have to tell someone or ask someone or did they ask you to go to the Marines? How did that work, once you were out of a job because your radio blew up?

WS: Basically, we were in a different unit's compound, so, I did not report to them. I suggested and I volunteered for things, but I did not have to ask them anything. My authority was the senior advisor, which was not in the compound. He was out in the field.

So, I would let him know on the radio what I'm doing, to the point of not divulging what I'm doing, because the enemy's listening to the radios. So, I couldn't tell them, "I'm going to this place to take care of something." I just kept quiet about that. So, other than that, my boss was not there, I did what I had to--see, like always. [laughter] All right, anything else?

SI: Before that, had you been in any engagements where you had to fire your own weapon or anything as intense as that?

WS: Yes, we got overrun one time. We were hand-to-hand for a while. Yes, I fired at the guy that bayoneted me. You ought to see, I put twenty rounds in his stomach and his forehead, emptied out my clip.

All right, after Tet, they had to relieve Khe Sanh. So, I was sent back up north and we're going to do over the land, basically a convoy. So, my pilot says, "I'll be flying overhead, watching for you, but," opens up a map, he goes, "between this point and that point is enemy held--don't stop. If you do get hit and you get disabled," he says, "just hang loose. The vehicles aren't going to stop. The last couple of vehicles are either tanks or APCs [armored personnel carriers]. They will stop and pick you up."

So, when we were on the highway, I got my jeep. It's full of radios--it's quite heavy with the trailer, it's got a generator, a fifty-five-gallon drum of gas, other stuff. It's heavy. So, I floored my jeep and I'm still doing three miles an hour. Everyone behind me, beeping the horn, they wanted to do ten miles. We're taking fire.

I did tell my boss, I said, "Look, I'm all alone. I need someone in my jeep to cover one side. I'll cover the other." So, he got a Vietnamese paratrooper assigned to me, to sit in my jeep. I offered to him, I said, "You could drive. I will work the radios and cover you." He says, no, he'll cover me. I said, "Okay." So, I drove and he protected me.

Basically, we came across a huge hole in the ground, a crater from a large bomb explosion, where they put this temporary portable bridge, a couple of tracks, right over it. I've got a picture of me driving over that while taking fire. Yes, so, I did use my weapon quite a lot.

SI: How long were you at Khe Sanh?

WS: I never made it to Khe Sanh itself. We were just on the outside of it. They set up a landing zone, because the Khe Sanh runway was destroyed. They set up a protected landing zone for helicopters. It's called LZ (Landing Zone) Stud.

If I climbed a tree, I could probably see Khe Sanh. We were just outside of it. My pilot went there. Actually, a small plane, he could land on their runway, even though it was damaged, but I was set up outside of Khe Sanh on Highway 9.

SI: You were there, again, for a long time cumulatively. Did you see the war change much over the three years that you were there?

WS: Yes, I did, big time, because when Nixon became President, he tried to "Vietnamize" that war by having the Vietnamese Army do most of the fighting (versus the US). So, yes, that put us in a situation of not only reacting to hot zones, we would make our own missions sometimes, like, we went to Cambodia. There was a big Army push, US, so, of course, we went with them.

[Editor's Note: President Richard M. Nixon introduced his policy of Vietnamization, turning the prosecution of the war over to the South Vietnamese, in 1969. From April to July 1970, American and ARVN forces conducted the Cambodian Campaign (or Incursion) to eliminate Communist forces in eastern Cambodia.]

I was in Cambodia. Laos, we were there. I know North Vietnam, they went there once. So, yes, we were a lot more involved in planning and executing operations versus reacting to an existing situation. So, yes, we saw a big change in my unit.

LC: Were you aware of the political and social unrest in the US surrounding the war, the protests, while you were in Vietnam?

WS: Well, we didn't pay that much attention to it, because that didn't change our job one way or the other, but, yes, if you're educated, you read newspapers. We had the Army--what was their newspaper called?--*Stars and Stripes* newspaper. We would get that. All that would be in there. So, yes, we're kind of aware that the people here didn't support us as they should have.

They mistreated us when we came home from Vietnam, like, perfect examples are VFWs and American Legion. They did not want us to join. We weren't invited to join, because we were not in "a real war." Now, they are asking us, because they're out of members. Their members are dying out, all the young troopers are not coming in. So, now, they're asking us to join and I'm saying, "No, you didn't want me then, I don't want you now." That's me personally.

I belong to the Ukrainian American Veterans. That's fine with me. They wanted us. When I came back from Vietnam, the Ukrainian community treated me as a hero, welcomed me home. No one spit on me. So, the heck with the American organizations, I stuck with the Ukrainians.

SI: Was it difficult to go back after you had been in the States for a while? Were you maybe looking forward to it? How did you feel going back for your second tour?

WS: The only thing I felt was afraid of that I would not be assigned to my unit again. When I came back from being wounded, I was sent back to Vietnam. Again, I volunteered. I saw on a board a letter looking for a volunteer, communications. I sign in immediately.

So, within forty-eight hours, I was on my way, but, as luck would have it, I got assigned back to the same unit. Most of my life, I could attribute to luck, right time, right place, right situation, like getting my GED--company commander made us do it. That was dumb luck. I could've been with one that didn't care. In Vietnam, I got assigned to the best unit I could think of, where the officers took care of their men. Again, Army did a little more than the Air Force, but I didn't care because I kind of hung out with the Army anyway.

No, I wasn't afraid of the war itself; I was just afraid that I wouldn't be assigned to that unit, because some other guys did come back for a second tour, got assigned to other units, regular Air Force, which I didn't want. My mother was afraid. When she dropped me off at LaGuardia to fly out, she started crying. She, again, [said], "Don't do anything to embarrass the family."

LC: Walter, when did you go to Australia? Do you want to talk a little bit about that and meeting your wife?

WS: Well, I don't know if I want to--my wife just walked in and she may not appreciate it. [laughter] No, every year you're in Vietnam, you're allowed what they call an R&R, rest-and-relaxation. The first year we were there, Hawaii and the Philippines were kind of left for the married people, because the wives could travel from the States to those places. They couldn't afford Australia, but they could afford Hawaii. So, all the single guys would go to Bangkok, Australia, and other places where families were not allowed.

So, when my brother and I tried to put in for Australia together, we couldn't go. So, we put in [for], only because we could go together, Bangkok. That was my first R&R. My second R&R, in my second year was--again, the first year was year-and-a-half, then, the second year was a year-and-a-half, so, they combined the two halves, made one. That was my second R&R. I went to Australia.

Anywhere I travelled in the military, in France, in Germany, I couldn't speak the language. So, I would locate the Ukrainian Catholic church. Once you locate a church, there usually is a community center, usually is a friendship [club]. I did that in France, I did that in Germany. Australia, I had no problem with the language, but it worked before, let me try it again.

So, I found in a phonebook the Ukrainian Catholic church, I called. They said, "Yes, there's a club here." This little, old lady who was on the phone, she's just like my mother, correcting my

Ukrainian. Since I hadn't spoken it in a couple of years, I was a little rusty, but she was correcting me all the time. Anyway, she told me where the club was. I went to the club. I had a dinner, a couple drinks.

Now, in Australia, the clubs are private clubs. You've got to be a member and, of course, I was challenged, "Who are you? Where's your membership?" I told them who I am--I didn't need a membership. They started buying me drinks, bought me dinner, very nice. The initial [contact], the lady, in the meantime, called another family in Australia, told them about me. They called me at the club, said, "We'll be there to pick you up. We're taking you home."

Now, keeping in mind I've been drinking and eating a lot, I come home to this house, there's a full dinner on the table. I had a second dinner. I was stuffed. They were very nice, put me up for the night, because the trains stopped running at night. So, we stayed too late, I was stuck at their house overnight.

The next day, the owner of the house and his wife, Irene, said, "We're going to throw a party for you. Could you come back?" I said, "Okay." So, I went to the hotel, showered, cleaned up; in the evening, caught a train back to the hotel. Here come all these people. You know if you meet a lot of people in one night, you don't remember names. Anyway, here comes this gorgeous blonde, long blonde hair, with an escort. I said, "All right." I'm talking.

So, all of a sudden, I see her sitting there with an empty glass in her hand. I don't know what she was drinking. I think it was wine; she says, no, it was soda. So, I'm not going to argue that point. So, I get up (being a perfect gentleman that you know I am), I got up and offered to get her a drink, "Or, is your escort getting you one?" and what did she say? You know the story.

LC: I don't remember what she said; I do know the story.

WS: I said, "Your escort getting you one?" She goes, "My brother?" She came in with her younger brother. So, I sat down right next to her. I don't know if I told you that or not, but we met, went out a couple of times. My third R&R, I went back to Australia. We re-met and the history is, we're still married. Actually, this year, it's fifty years.

LC: Oh, wow, congratulations.

SI: Yes, congratulations.

WS: She came to America, got a job with the Australian Consulate, where she didn't need a passport or visa. From there, once we got married, she got her green card and she's still here. She's my "war bride."

It's funny, I tell my parents that I'm coming home engaged. They thought I'm bringing home a Vietnamese girl. Once she arrived, "Oh, she's Ukrainian?" They were happy, yes.

SI: Wow, that is pretty incredible. What stands out as some of your most vivid memories or memorable times (other than what we spoke about) from other parts of your tour, not necessarily combat, but experiences, things about everyday life, that sort of thing?

WS: Well, again, as I said, everything I've done, from surviving World War II to surviving being married fifty years, has been luck, okay.

One battle, which I forgot to mention, which involves my brother, we were in a battle near his base. The nearest hospital was on his base--you know those MASH units, the tents and whatever? So, we were hammered pretty good and all these Vietnamese wounded are coming in. We had so many that they called up non-medical personnel to help unload helicopters and carry the wounded. My brother was one of the sergeants that was activated.

He noticed the insignia, which he knew my insignia--I'll tell you that in a minute, about the insignia. He noticed my insignia. He started asking, am I there? He didn't know. Am I there? They said, "Yes, he is." So, he never left the helicopter port. He just waited. Every chopper coming in, he would check.

Eventually, I was slightly wounded, a little scrap metal, so, I was on the last helicopter out, because my wound was not life-threatening. So, I'm coming in. I fell asleep in the helicopter. My brother and a nurse come running out. My brother recognized me right away. I was sitting in the chopper, trying to sleep.

That's the first time I saw him with tears in his eyes, "What am I going to tell Mom?" He didn't know how bad I was wounded. It was--I had a Band-Aid, I was fine. He dragged me off the helicopter. Before he even landed, he had me, was pulling me off this helicopter. Him and a nurse took me to the hospital, put a Band-Aid on me and I was fine.

For some stupid reason, being the pain in the butt that I am, when they were trying to take me out of the helicopter, I start cursing at him, "Well, what do you mean? Let me sleep," blankety-blank. For years, for years, I felt real bad for the nurse. Here's this "Nightingale" nurse, she wants to help me and I'm cursing. I'm yelling at her, "Leave me alone."

So, for years, I was trying to apologize. I don't know if you know, the Vietnam Wall in Washington, they put up a statue for the nurses. They have a statue of a nurse holding a soldier in a way that you don't recognize his face (because it could be anybody) and another nurse standing there, looking up, looking for the helicopter. During the service, a lot of soldiers would be calling up and saying, "Nurse Betty saved my life, I want to thank her." "Nurse Judy did this, Nurse Lainey did this."

So, I tried to call her and I couldn't. I still owed her an apology. I was in the hospital for an ulcer problem and the word got out. A nurse that used to be in Vietnam worked in the hospital. She came up to me; I apologized to her. She goes, "Now, it's all over, don't worry about it." So, I got my apology in to a nurse. It wasn't the one that I yelled at, but it was a nurse that was there.

It was important to me, but, other than that, that's the only memory I have of that situation. I brought it home from Vietnam that I have to apologize to somebody.

SI: Tell us about coming home. Were you ready to come home then or did you not have a choice? Were they pulling out your unit? How did that happen?

WS: Got discharged; my four years were up, plain and simple. They assumed I'm going to reenlist, which I did not, because of my wife. They just discharged me. I flew through Alaska back to McGuire Air Force Base. That's where I got discharged, plain and simple. Then, as I said, I got my GI Bill, went to college, got my degree and the rest is history.

[Editor's Note: The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, known as the GI Bill of Rights, offered funding for college or vocational education, as well as one year of unemployment and loans to buy homes, to returning World War II veterans. The Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952 and the Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 provided benefits to Korean and Vietnam War era veterans, respectively.]

Then, after Vietnam, I was missing that excitement of doing something. So, wherever I lived, I joined the volunteer ambulance and fire departments. Some ran with the ambulance, like Dorothy, New Jersey, had a department with an ambulance. Dumont, New Jersey, it was split, but I joined the fire department.

At one fire in Denville, New Jersey, we were there, mutual aid, from Boonton Township. I went into a burning house with a bunch of young guys and I'm starting to cough and starting to pass out, but they still want to stay in. You go in as a group, you come out as a group. You just don't abandon anybody. So, I ordered and we backed out. I said, "My body's telling me I'm too old for this garbage. I don't want to fight fires anymore." Just the excitement that I was missing was filled by that.

My son, who joined the fire department, goes, "Dad, I'm not learning very much. I want to join the ambulance squad in Boonton." So, he joined the ambulance squad. After this fire, he goes to me, "They need drivers. You want to join the ambulance squad as a driver?" I said, "Yes, I could drive an ambulance." I can handle one person at a time now. I don't have to worry about lifting and carrying heavy equipment.

So, I joined the ambulance squad as a driver. Now, a lady, Norma Riker, talked me into it, to joining, to learning to be an EMT. I went to EMT school and I ran for officer. I was second lieutenant, first lieutenant, then, I was captain for a while on the squad.

That's where I met Rainey. Rainey joined the squad. Any time we get a young member now, I call them "Little Rainey," because of their enthusiasm to work the squad. Rainey became an EMT and she's still very enthusiastic about it. That kept me going until I retired from that--from work, then, I retired from the ambulance squad.

Now, I'm bored stiff. That's it. You got my whole life. [laughter]

SI: Over the years, after coming back, did you have any extenuating issues relating to your service, health-wise or otherwise?

WS: Health-wise, no. Mentally, that apology bothered me for many, many years. A lot of people have talked me into going the VA [Veterans Administration] and talking to them, "Maybe I'll meet a nurse there and talk to them." I said, "All right." So, I went there, filled out my paperwork. In West Orange, New Jersey, there's a VA hospital there. I went there.

They said, "Well, we want you to talk to a psychologist." I said, "Look, I know I'm crazy. Why do I need to talk to a doctor about it? He won't tell me nothing new." They said, "It's for free. Go talk to him." I said, "All right." So, I went there and I introduced myself. I talked to him. He goes, "You were there for three years?" I go, "Yes." He says, "You've got to be crazy." So, he wrote me up. I get disability from the government now, twenty percent disability, because I am crazy and Rainey will verify that. [laughter]

LC: Yes, definitely. [laughter]

SI: It is interesting that you wanted to find some of the excitement that you found in Vietnam in civilian life. I have talked to some veterans who feel like that or they carried weapons for years, they sleep with a gun or a knife under their pillow. Was there any of that sort of adjustment for some period?

WS: Well, I went the other route. I used to go hunting with my brother. We both had shotguns. When I came home, I didn't want to see another weapon in my life.

I actually brought back with me the bayonet and the rifle I got bayoneted with as a war trophy. The Vietnamese government gave me one, a French Mauser, as a war trophy. So, I had a Russian SKS and a French Mauser with me. My father built up a large picture frame with all my medals in it and it had the two rifles alongside of it, mounted on the wall in the house.

It was registered with the federal government, both weapons, but New York City--we lived in Queens, New York, at that time--has a law which supersedes that law, which you have to register the weapons. I didn't know that. So, the cops come to my house, knock on the door, "Do you have these weapons?" "Yes, they're hanging right there on the wall." He gave me a ticket, says, "You're going to have to go to court," and took the weapons. I said, "All right."

Then, he took me aside and says, "Look, go and start registering your weapons. So, you tell the judge that you just didn't know, but you're registering them now." I said, "Okay." So, I went and started the process. I go to court. It's funny. I'm sitting there and they called up people, they come up, "Guilty or not guilty?" They say "Guilty." "Here's your fine." "Guilty." About twenty, thirty people, straight guilty, and the recorder's just sitting there, just checking them off.

Then, he calls, "Walter Stepaniak." I stand up, "Not guilty." He looks up, like, "Stop the music, Walter's coming in." The cop was sitting there, because the cop knew I was going to say not guilty. So, the judge asked what's going on and I told him. I showed him the paperwork, "I'm registering." He said, "You can have the weapons back." I say, "Okay." I go to the property

clerk. I [try to] get my weapons. The guy goes, "You've got to have the DA co-sign this letter from the judge." "Okay."

So, my wife and I, we go to the DA's office. This young DA, which I could've put him over my knee and spanked the shit out of him--I'm sorry, spanked the hell out of him--starts cursing at me, says, "No, you're not going to get them. I don't give out weapons. Who the hell do you think you are?" yatta-yatta, really getting personal. I said, "Excuse me, there's ladies in your office, my wife's standing right here--watch your mouth. Who the hell do you think you are?" So, he wouldn't sign it.

I walk out, I go back to the property clerk, I gave the paper. He goes, "Who's the DA?" I said, "John Brown," whatever his name was. "Oh, he's an idiot." He gave it to me. He signed it, gave me the weapons back. [laughter] So, I got the weapons.

They're not here anymore. My nephew has them at home. He's on active duty in the military. He's a National Guard at Wilmington, Delaware, the first sergeant of the company. He has the weapons now. My wife said, "Enough, we've got a little child here. You don't need guns in this house." I just gave up the guns. I have no use for them.

SI: Can you tell us a little bit about your career, what you did for a living?

WS: Okay, my civilian career, after college--Rainey mentioned I never went to my graduation--the GED didn't have any graduations. My wife got a job at RCA Global Communications as an executive secretary. Her boss offered to interview me and helped me get a job at RCA. So, I did my final exam in the college, I turned it in, I never looked back, walked away and went for the interview.

Mr. Weisberg said, "Look, I've got a job for you here, but I'd rather not have you and your wife in the same department. I will sign a letter; you go to these other departments." He gave me about two or three contacts. "Go for an interview there, see if you get a job. If you don't, you've got a job here," but he'd rather not have a husband and wife in the same department, which I understand. We're newlyweds.

I went to the first interview with his letter, I got the job. I dealt with communications at the international level. [For example], a company has business between America and Europe--they have a computer line between the two--I provide that line, dealt with COMSAT for satellite and AT&T for the cable, undersea cables. I would assign the channels and coordinate the activation of this facility.

The most memorable part was the *Apollo-Soyuz* mission. Knowing the language, I was asked to be involved in coordinating that circuit for NBC and CBS, between the two locations, high-speed data. I got a certificate from NASA verifying this, it was quite interesting.

Knowing the language, we went to the Russian Embassy. I told the guys, first of all, "Look across the street, about fourth floor up--you're being photographed." So, we went in and they put us in a room. I said, "Look, there's more cameras in the room, while we're waiting--so, watch

what you say and do." Then, this Russian guy comes in. We started talking and we got the information we needed, got the circuits set up. The mission was flown. They met in space, shook hands. Everybody came home alive.

[Editor's Note: On July 17, 1975, an American *Apollo* module and a Soviet *Soyuz* module docked in orbit. American astronaut Tom Stafford shook Soviet cosmonaut Alexei Leonov's hand after the docking and opening of the hatches.]

After RCA, I got a job with Pan-American World Airlines, again, in communications data group, which was very nice, because we had unlimited free travel benefits, which my wife used extensively to go back and forth to Australia. I worked in Pan-Am until Pan-Am went under. I was one of the last people out of the data center, turning off the lights.

After Pan-Am, I got a job at a brokerage house, again, strictly communications, for a couple of years. Then, my boss from Pan-Am calls me up and says, "Are you still looking for a job?" I said, "Well, you can make me an offer." So, he brought me into AIG [American International Group, Inc.], the insurance company. I worked there until retirement, traveling all over the country, moving offices and installing new ones, all their servers and routers and communications stuff. That was my job. That's what I retired from and that's it--here I am.

LC: Walter, didn't you also work as an EMT for transporting special needs kids to and from school as a retirement job?

WS: Yes, I keep forgetting about that one. Yes, after I retired, I was at the squad house doing something and the phone rang. I picked it up and this gentleman was looking for EMTs. It's a bus company that transported special needs children to and from school. In the State of New Jersey, as I understand it (I could be wrong, so, I'd better be careful), every school has a set number of slots for special needs children. If your child requiring that service is above their capability, they will transfer you, at their expense, to another school.

That's where I come in. I would pick up the child at home, we'd take them to that school near Bound Brook on 287 (forgot the town), all over the place, different schools for different children with special needs. Some required medical EMT certification, some did not. Some just needed a first responder-type person, a caretaker, but I did that for a few years, yes, just for the heck of it. That's it.

SI: Are there any other experiences or memories that you want to share or things that you think we skipped over that you want to talk about?

WS: Anything we haven't discussed was with my medical experience. Like I said, I delivered a couple of kids, saved a few, lost a few. Being a volunteer EMT member, you don't get paid for it, but it's rewarding. You get to learn a lot, like Rainey joined us as a junior squad member and she became an EMT, which I'm very, very proud of, and she's saved a few. I don't know if she's lost a few, but I know she's saved them. Other than that, that's about it, I think.

SI: Lorraine, do you have any other questions?

LC: I do not think so, besides Walter did retire and he moved out of New Jersey, but he is a life member of our squad. He still does weigh in on some politics, and when we need advice, because he was a member for so long, we reach out to him. He has so much experience. We're going through a whole reorganization right now. Whenever we need help, we call Walter because he was in leadership for so long.

WS: I sit here sometimes, quietly, waiting for my pager to go off, which I don't have a pager anymore, but I got used to it. So, I kind of miss it.

SI: Thank you very much. I really appreciate all your time and thank you for your service. It is very unique. I have not interviewed too many people who have been in two different branches of the service and just the amount of time that you were in Vietnam is pretty remarkable. We really appreciate it.

WS: Well, one war story goes (I just remembered, this is a good one), I got a call. I was up north at Hue area. The radio operator shows up and says, "The plane's waiting for you at the runway. You've got to go immediately." I said, "Where?" because, normally, I would stay a day or two to brief the new operator on what's going on. I thought either my brother or someone at home passed away.

So, I fly all the way back to Saigon. I walk into the headquarters. They said, "Your call sign on the radio has just changed," because the Army advises, but we wore the Vietnamese uniform, the reason being that the Vietnamese were smaller than we were and, [if] we wore the different uniforms, the snipers could pick us out.

So, at least, even though we were taller, to blend with them, we wore their uniform, which included a red beret. So, the call sign for the Army was called "Red Hat" and a number. If you were a senior advisor, you'd be "Red Hat 7," for the Seventh Battalion. The Air Force was called "Red Marker." Why? because we marked the target and we wore the red beret.

So, he goes to me, "You're not 'Red Marker Charlie' anymore, you're 'Widow Maker.'" I said, "Why am I 'Widow Maker?'" "Oh, I can't tell you." He says, "Load up, get your gear ready for an extended operation. You're on call. When you get this call on this frequency (you've got to monitor it), report back to the parade field here immediately. You'll be told where you're going. You'll board the helicopter with your jeep and they'll take you where you're going."

I said, "Oh, no, I don't want to be in this. I'm not Special Operations." "Well, you're going." I said, "Okay." So, again, I reloaded up my jeep, got resupplied with ammunition, a case of beer, of course, and I'm waiting. I got tired of waiting. The Tan Son Nhut Air Base MACV compound (where General Westmoreland was in charge) had a large swimming pool. It's right on base. I said, "Let me go there."

[Editor's Note: US Army General William Westmoreland served as the Commander of Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) from 1964 to 1968, then served as Chief of Staff of the Army from 1968 to 1972.]

So, I drove my jeep, everything fully loaded--not allowed to enter with weapons. I said, "Uh-uh." I took my weapon. I carried a letter called, "Combat Essential Orders." I gave it to the lifeguard. I said, "Here's my radio. Listen to this frequency. Here's my weapons. I'll be right here below your feet, swimming around in the swimming pool." Of course, the call comes in while I'm in the water. I jump out, answer the call, off I go.

The mission was cancelled while we were setting up in some Special Operations compound. What was going on--the mission was cancelled--it turned out to be a rescue mission for the POWs in North Vietnam. My job was to stand by and provide any and all air support for this mission. I think, if you read the history book, the Army got there, the compound, the prison was empty. That's why it was cancelled.

Other than that, yes, I was a little scared about that, a little apprehensive, but it didn't work out the way we wanted to. At least I felt that they had a respect for me, for my knowledge and experience, that they called me on a mission like that, because not every radio operator could go on something like that. We lost quite a few advisors. Their names are up on The Wall. We lost one Air Force radio operator. He was in a convoy. The convoy was bombed and he got killed.

[Editor's Note: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, dedicated in 1982 and known as "The Wall," lists the names of the 58,281 service members who lost their lives in the Vietnam War.]

In the Special Operations Museum at Fort Bragg, North Carolina [US Army Airborne & Special Operations Museum in Fayetteville], they have a pavilion where you put your stone markers. Every unit has a section and I have my stone marker with my unit. I got special permission to move my brother's marker from his unit to my unit, because he was Airborne, he was a Green Beret. They allowed it.

My unit allowed it, even though my brother's unit did not allow me to go there, which is fine. I have no problem with that, but my unit allowed my brother to go there. So, our markers are there together, because, right now, if I should die, I want to be buried next to my brother at Arlington. You cannot reserve a place. So, I've got to hurry up and die, so [that] I can be buried close to him before it fills up, but that's about it. [laughter] That's it, I'm done.

SI: Okay. Again, thank you very much.

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

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 12/11/2021
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 1/10/2022
Reviewed by Walter Stepaniak 2/7/2022