

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH WALTER G. ALEXANDER, II

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

WORLD WAR II * KOREAN WAR * VIETNAM WAR * COLD WAR

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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and

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SOUTH ORANGE, NEW JERSEY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

DOMINGO DUARTE

Catherine Dzendzera: This begins an interview with Dr. Walter G. Alexander, II, in South Orange, New Jersey, on November 6, 2009, with Catherine Dzendzera ...

Sandra Stewart Holyoak: ... And Sandra Stewart Holyoak.

CD: Dr. Alexander, thank you so much for having us here this morning.

Walter G. Alexander, II: You're quite welcome.

CD: To begin, could you tell us when and where you were born?

WA: Yes, I was born in 1922 in Petersburg, Virginia. That was my family's home, and my father and his father lived there.

CD: Could you tell us about your father and his family history?

WA: Yes, as much as I can remember. My father was a dentist. ... I can't tell you the undergraduate school he went to. I never did remember that. I know he went to Meharry Medical School [in Nashville, Tennessee], and that's where he met my mother.

CD: Okay.

WA: And she was going to Fisk University, which is right across the street from the Meharry Dental School. From there, he graduated about 19--, I'm not sure, '18, '19. I'm not sure of the year of his graduation. I never got around to ... digging that out, [laughter] but they met there and, on graduation, they left Fisk and came to Orange, [New Jersey], because my great uncle, my father's brother ...

SH: Would that be your father's father's brother?

WA: No, wait a minute, let me see.

SH: Your grandfather's brother?

WA: My grandfather's brother, okay, was a physician.

SH: Was he?

WA: Yes, he went to Boston College of Physicians and Surgeons and was a physician in 1903. He began practice in Orange, New Jersey, in 1904. My father came to Orange with the idea of setting up a practice in Orange; turned out that they ended up living side by side. When they first came, my dad had an office next to my uncle, with a small house, and then, they enlarged the house and ended up with Walter G. Alexander, MD, and R. (Royal) C. Alexander, DDS, side by side, and they stayed like that until they both died, in that position.

SH: Your father's name is very interesting, Royal Alexander. Is there a family history with that name?

WA: His father's name was Charles Royal and that's the connection there. ...

SH: Was your grandfather also a physician?

WA: Yes, yes.

SH: In Petersburg?

WA: In Petersburg, yes, and I don't know, this is a family story, that he, when he took the Virginia board, got one of the highest grades on the state board. ... You can't pin it down, because nobody gives out the exams [grades], but that's the story we got; [laughter] sounds good.

SH: That is one you should perpetuate.

WA: Yes, sounds good and sounds reasonable. ... From some of the stories I've heard about my great-uncle, the one for whom I was named, and some of the things I know he did as part of his practice in his office, of course, back in the '20s, the idea of having someone do tonsillectomies in the office wasn't that strange.

SH: Really?

WA: People did tonsillectomies in an office, and whether it was too bright, [laughter] as far as the consideration of what's involved and the dangers involved, [is questionable], but they did a lot of things in the office that they don't think of doing now, and it's smart that they don't.

SH: Do you know where your grandfather and his brother went to medical school?

WA: ... My great-uncle went to Boston College of Physicians and Surgeons, and I don't know how that came about. In the case of my grandfather, I'm not sure. ...

SH: However, your grandfather was an MD.

WA: Both my great-uncle and my grandfather were MDs. ...

SH: Were there other family members, other siblings?

WA: My father had a brother, Clarence. He also was a physician, and a sister, Grace, whose son, Thomas Baugh, became a physician. My mother's father was a physician, also, and he did not go to medical school [right away]. He was a teacher and he taught for something like four years, then, went to medical school.

SH: Really? Where did he teach? Where was your mother from, and her family?

WA: Texas, from the ...

CD: I think you are thinking of Fort Worth.

WA: It was ... really, near Fort Worth, and ... I can't think of the name, right now, of the [town].

SH: You can put that in later when you do the editing.

WA: Okay, but it's one of those names that you should remember. ...

SH: In the Fort Worth/Dallas area.

WA: Yes. We looked it up, and actually went near there once, but never got actually there. [Waxahachie, Texas] ...

SH: Do you know which subjects he taught before he went on to medical school?

WA: High school.

SH: Okay.

WA: I don't know, nothing more than that, but I don't know what caused him to tear up all the roots and, I guess, by the time he decided to go back, I guess ... his kids were out of school. I don't know how it could have [happened].

SH: God bless him. [laughter]

WA: Yes. I don't know how they managed, but he got through it and came to East Orange later on, moved to East Orange, set up a practice and practiced in East Orange, on North Clinton Street in East Orange.

SH: Did he really?

WA: For a good while, a number of years, I know.

SH: What was his name?

WA: John W. Tildon, and my brother was named John after him, and, well, let's go back and talk about ... my father's brother, [who] was named Clarence. He was a physician. I think he also went to Meharry. So, my father and his brother were a physician and dentist, and my grandfather, on my mother's side, was a physician. His two sons were physicians, went to medical school. I don't know how my mother escaped, [laughter] except that, at that time, it was very unusual for women to go into medicine, but, then, going on in my generation, my brother, my older brother, went to dental school, started dental school, did not finish dental school. ... The middle brother went to medical school at Meharry, finished, was a general practitioner, later

on, became a pediatrician. When he went in the service as part of World War II, he was stationed in Aberdeen, Maryland. When he got out of service, he decided that, [since] he had been involved with pediatrics and was almost a pediatrician, [he] decided to take the time out of the office, got somebody else to go into the office and cover his office, which was, at that time, on Main Street in Orange, and he went to; I'm not sure where. He took the ... time to get the training for pediatrics, and I can't think right now [of] which hospital he went [to], but he completed his training, came back and set up the office for pediatrics. By that time, I was finished my internship in dentistry at what was then Newark City Hospital.

SH: Okay.

WA: I took a year there, came back and opened up the practice on Main Street, where we had been in an office together.

SH: Really?

WA: Where he had saved a space for me, [laughter] and it worked out very nicely. So, we practiced together on Main Street for a number of years, until I found a space over here, and then, upset the apple cart. [laughter] ... I don't know how we managed to, but ... we finally figured out some way to set it up, but I actually pulled the rug out from under the setup, because there wasn't much else to do. ... I couldn't practice [in] both places. Once this place [Dr. Alexander's practice on Centre Street] was open enough to get into it, I had to get into it. ...

SH: I am sure, I am sure.

WA: But, it worked out. ...

SH: Do you remember what year you moved here, off of Main Street?

WA: ... 1967 ...

SH: ... You talked about your mother being at Fisk. What was her degree in and what did she practice?

WA: No, ... she got her undergraduate degree. I think she had a degree in social work, because I know she was a practicing social worker for the City of Orange. ... Later she got her masters in Social Work, I think at Columbia University.

SH: Did her family remain in Texas?

WA: Yes, until her father came to East Orange.

SH: Okay. Did she have siblings?

WA: She had two brothers, both of them were physicians, and there were no sisters, that I know about.

SH: Did your father go into any service during World War I?

WA: World War I, no. No, I don't think [so]; I never knew about any service, no.

SH: You talked about your mother and father meeting at the university ...

WA: Fisk, yes.

SH: In separate universities, but in the same area. Was your older brother born in Virginia?

WA: Well, they met, I think, while she was at Fisk and my father was at Meharry, because Fisk and Meharry are across the street from each other. [laughter] ...

SH: Was your older brother also born in Petersburg, Virginia?

WA: No. My older brother, I think, was born in Texas. I'm not too sure about this, but the way that things [unfolded], when I stop and think about it, I was born in Petersburg, I think John was born in Nashville and I'll have to try to figure out and find out. I'll try to find out for sure where Roy was born. Roy was born in Fort Worth, Texas.

SH: You have two older brothers, right?

WA: Yes.

SH: Are there any other siblings or just the three boys?

WA: No, just the three of us.

SH: How long was it after you were born in Petersburg that the family moved to the Oranges?

WA: Yes, and I remember growing up in Orange and we came to Orange when I was a baby.

...

CD: Could you talk about what it was like to grow up in Orange, what activities you did?

WA: Well, first thing that I remember, that I can start with, is the school. The local school where I started was right around the corner from home, in the next block, was Oakwood Avenue School, which went up through fourth grade, and then, next was Central School, which was several blocks away, at least I would probably say three-quarters of a mile away. ... Then, after Central School was, next was; no, at that time, it was Colgate School, which was from fifth, sixth and seventh grade, then, was Central School, which was actually right next-door, and Central School went through eighth grade. Then, we went over to high school, which was about a mile. ... All these were walking distances. ...

CD: Were you in any sports or clubs?

WA: Clubs, no; sports, track. I was on the track team and I started running track through the influence of an athletic director at the Y. [Editor's Note: The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), popularly known as "the Y," is a not-for-profit community service organization with athletic facilities and programs in communities across the world.] ... It's funny, up until that time, I was the smallest boy in whatever class I was in.

SH: Really?

WA: Yes, [laughter] and, when I went to high school, I was, yes, the smallest kid in high school, period, but I had started track that summer and, by the time I got to high school, I had started to grow. I'd started a growth spurt, one of those growth spurts that killed your parents. [laughter] ... I grew out of a whole suit in, I guess, six months, [laughter] completely out of it. You know, you buy a suit with room in it and, in six months, your arms are out of the sleeve. It was one of those things, and I had actually started growing that fast because I had started track, and I was reasonably gifted in track. I did well in the indoor and outdoor seasons. We had an active indoor season here and I got a lot of fun out of it. ...

SH: Was your specialty distance?

WA: ... Yes, I ran the mile and the half mile and I stayed with the mile and the half mile and, by the time I got through high school and went to Rutgers, I went out for track there and stayed with that, I had learned to hurdle, because one of the exercises I used to loosen up was just to do exercises over the hurdles. ... When I was doing one of those exercises on the hurdle, the track coach saw me, at Rutgers, and said, "You're our hurdler now, because we don't have one," [laughter] because you give away points, if it's a dual meet, ... you're head to head, and if you don't put somebody in the race. Well, I thought I got some honest points out of it, [laughter] as I called them, and had fun, but, basically, I was a distance runner, [also ran] cross-country in the early part of the year. I did cross-country, I think, one or two [seasons], and the last time I did cross-country was the day I got out there and he [said], "Okay, take off, get ready," and I had my track suit on, and he [said], "Take off ... your sweat suit." ... You stand up there in your track suit and it's, I think, twenty-seven degrees, [laughter] and I think that was my last track meet, in Lehigh, over in [Pennsylvania]. ... However, before that particular meet, when we had practices, I borrowed tights from the wrestling department and wore them for the practices. I hated the cold weather. I looked funny but I was warm.

SH: Up there on that hill.

WA: Yes; that was the end, but I did not like cross-country, especially after that. [laughter] ...

CD: Understandable. [laughter]

SH: As a young man, growing up, did the family take vacations? Did you get to travel?

WA: Yes, we would take vacations. My dad was a great one for driving and he [would] put three kids in the back seat and wife in the front and take off and drive down to Petersburg. [laughter] ...

SH: Back then, that was not easy.

WA: Oh, no, that wasn't an easy drive. As far as the car itself, it wasn't easy. You were lucky if your car stood up and performed well, but just the roads and everything else, and we'd try to figure out a way to break up the ride and, along the way, we used to stop in Baltimore, [Maryland]. One of my mother's uncles was Dean of Students at Morgan State [University] in Baltimore. So, we used to drive down and stop over there, spend the night with my uncle and aunt and go on the next day to Petersburg, [Virginia], and that was a nice way to break up the trip. ...

SH: Petersburg is down near Richmond, right? I think my geography is correct.

WA: Yes. ... Let's see, [we] used to break it up. Baltimore was a stop, forty miles on was Washington, [DC], and then, sixty miles on to Richmond and something like twenty-five miles on to Petersburg and that was it.

SH: You had those all marked. [laughter]

WA: Oh, yes, I've remembered those for a lot of years. [laughter]

SH: Did you tour Washington as a tourist and visit different monuments and museums?

WA: Oh, yes, we used to stop there. It was one of the things we would do. ...

SH: You talked about being involved with the Y here in Orange. Can you tell us more about that?

WA: Yes, well, the Y was right around the corner from us. The Y was a new building, that was built while I was growing up. ... At first, the Y was just a small building. They had a separate Y up on Main Street, and then, they had our Y down ... on Central Place. They were separate, a black and white Y, and the only swimming pool was in the other Y, the big Y, up on Main Street. Then, later on, while I was growing up, they built a Y right around the corner from me on Oakwood Avenue, which was the Oakwood Branch. So, we had our own Y, with a swimming pool and all the facilities, and they had the separate branch.

SH: This was under that guise of "separate but equal."

WA: That was what it was supposed to be, yes, and that's when we had this separate Y and the new athletic director that got me and a group of others started with track, which was one of the first things that was obviously developing, because this fellow was from Springfield Y College, and so, he was a completely trained athletic director and was interested in track. [Editor's Note: Springfield College, previously known as the School for Christian Workers and the International

YMCA Training School, in Springfield, Massachusetts, trained YMCA workers in business and management.] ... That's why he had everything going, a lot going, along the lines of track, and got people who were interested in the Y, in Orange, who had track potential, not only developed with the Y, but developed with a group called the Shore AC [Shore Athletic Club of New Jersey], at the time. ... In Orange, in our area, there were people who had reputations with the Shore AC and that was one of the athletic groups that had known, developed stars, names like John Borican, and, I don't know, I can't remember any more. [Editor's Note: John Borican was inducted in the US Track and Field Hall of Fame in 2000.] Those, I remember, because I was in that same group. ...

SH: Does the Shore AC mean Atlantic City?

WA: No, Shore Athletic Club. [laughter] It was actually at Elberon, New Jersey, which is one of the Shore towns, [a section of Long Branch, New Jersey], and some interested person down there had an interest in track and got a group of people [together]. ... It just so happened that some of them [who] got interested had a lot of talent and some of those who were with it or in this club had enough talent to warrant a lot of publicity and got a nucleus of a group together and [the Shore AC was] one of those that developed. So, through Rudy Wheeler, the athletic director at the Y, I got connected with this group and [it] got me some activity and some of those things that you could go to and develop an interest in over the summer, keep you out of trouble.

SH: That was what your summers entailed. [laughter]

WA: Yes. My father was really in favor of that, because I got [in] some pretty close scraps with trouble, ... you know, places I didn't have ... any business being and nothing to do. So, I mean, when you're in that kind of situation, it's easy to get in trouble. ... [laughter]

SH: What kind of trouble, if you do not mind telling us? [laughter]

WA: Oh, no, I didn't get into any serious trouble, out past curfew a couple of times, but, see, as long as I was trying to run with the track team, why, my parents didn't have any trouble with that. I was not trying to stay out late. If I was out late, it was because I was in somebody's car that didn't bring me home when I was supposed to get home and I was in trouble on my own. So, it gave them a pretty good handle on me and it was good for me. [laughter]

SH: Were you involved in things like the Boy Scouts or church activities?

WA: Not so much. There was not, as I remember, an active Boy Scout troop or group at the time I was growing up there. When I got to be, I guess, into the teens or getting into the teens, there was just track and it got my full attention, really, and I stayed with that. Also, my brothers and I were great swimmers. We literally lived in the Orange Y pool. I started my grandson, Marcus, and granddaughter, Tiffany, with swimming lessons, age five and seven respectively, at the Summit Y. They were also on the South Orange pool swim team during their summer visits. I was also into making model airplanes. They were all over my bedroom.

SH: Obviously, education was important in your family.

WA: Oh, yes.

SH: You were planning on heading to college.

WA: Oh, yes. There wasn't any question about that. All of us were going to college, at least.
...

SH: Did you have a mentor in high school who offered you guidance?

WA: No, just my parents. There wasn't any question that we were going to college and what else, but the funniest thing, I'll tell you next, [was] about what do you decide to do? I knew that I was going to college. I had heard about the scholarship, State Scholarship, that was available through the examination and I had taken that. ... I got news that, okay, the scholarship, tuition scholarship, was there, and the day to register comes and ... nobody talked about it. My father's a dentist, and everybody else is a physician, so, there was no pressure put on me to go either way. So, I got on the train, went down [to New Brunswick], went down to the [College Avenue] Gym. We sat there all day taking this damn examination [and registering for classes?], and, when I came home, every[one asked], "How did everything go?" "Went fine." "So, what'd you finally sign up for?" "Mechanical engineering," and it was real quiet, [laughter] really quiet, and, finally, my father said, "Who do you know that's a mechanical engineer?" I said, "No one." I didn't know a soul who was a mechanical engineer, but, up here [Dr. Alexander points to his head], I knew I wanted to go into mechanical engineering. So, after, it stayed quiet for awhile [laughter] and, of course, I'm sure my dad was disappointed, he figured I would go into dentistry or, at the very least, I'd go into medicine, [laughter] but mechanical engineering, that was a real [surprise]. So, we talked about it and there was no good reason, there was no reason that I could develop, to sign up for mechanical engineering. Why mechanical over civil? There wasn't any chemical to speak of, or I didn't know anything about it at that time. There was electrical, civil or mechanical at Rutgers and those three departments were there, and, fortunately, during the first year, they were ... all three identical, except for minor [differences]. The development into mechanical, civil and [electrical] didn't happen really until the second year. ... There wasn't any question that I was more into, more interested in, civil engineering, I mean engineering, either civil, mechanical or electrical, than I would ever had, ... at that time, in dentistry. So, I just took off and went through it. ...

SH: Why did you pick Rutgers?

WA: Well, basically, I knew Rutgers had the best school I could afford to go to, free. ...

SH: You were able to get a scholarship.

WA: Yes, the scholarship, ... and it was close and all of those things. ...

SH: Were any of your classmates from Central also going to Rutgers?

WA: From Orange High?

SH: Yes.

WA: ... No. Nobody, no, I had no idea that I would know anyone at Rutgers and that didn't even ... cross my mind, really. [laughter] I mean, there was a place to go and I knew it was a great school and I knew as much about Rutgers, maybe more, than any other school in the world, except maybe Lincoln. Lincoln University was a school in Pennsylvania that my great-uncle, Walter G. Alexander, had attended in 1895. On his own, he spent the entire summer studying Greek grammar to ensure his admission to Lincoln University. He was just fourteen years old. He graduated from Lincoln in 1899, *magna cum laude*.

He was a great alumnus. He was greatly involved with Lincoln University. ... Both my brothers had gone to Lincoln University and we'd been down to visit, and I had never even considered going to Lincoln. [laughter] I didn't like what I saw there. I'd never discussed it with anybody [laughter] and it just had never even crossed my mind. I don't know what I would have done had I not gotten the scholarship. It was just so obvious; you know, obviously, you took the exam, you got the scholarship, you're going to Rutgers. [laughter] So, I didn't think about anything else. What I had seen there, I liked. ...

SH: Did you visit the Rutgers campus before you took the exam?

WA: Yes, I had gone down, yes, but I didn't have any idea where I was going to live or anything like that, no.

CD: Where did you live?

WA: I ended up living in the freshman dorm. [I] can't remember the name of the dorm; Ford Hall?

SH: Was that your first or second year?

WA: First year, I stayed in the freshmen dormitory, in the Quad.

SH: Was it Pell or Tinsley?

CD: Mettler?

SH: Mettler or Demarest? They may have changed the name of the dorm since then. [laughter]

WA: They may have. ...

SH: Do you remember who your roommate was?

WA: I had no roommate. I had a single room.

SH: You had a single room.

WA: Yes, and I don't know whether that was arranged or not, because I was the only one, only African-American, in the dormitory.

CD: Really?

WA: There hadn't been any in the dormitory before me.

SH: Really?

WA: No.

SH: Very interesting.

WA: Yes. I didn't know that until after I got in there, but, ... let's see, what happened? I started out commuting and I saw a notice on one of the bulletin boards about a room available, and for freshmen, and I pulled it off, got in touch [with the poster], and told my father, asked him, "Could we do this?" ... I said, "All we have to do is talk to the fellows in the room." He said, "No, we don't do it that way. We're going to go down to the office with the notice and take it to the office first, make sure it's all right." Then, I understood what he was talking about, [so] that it couldn't get reversed, see, ... because we didn't know whether this is something that the school was going to allow, whether they would allow a mixed dormitory. ... I hadn't thought of that, but, then, I understood it right away and the way things get done. My father was more aware of the possibilities of being turned down than I was. Growing up, I didn't realize that discrimination was really happening. My father was very tuned in because he remembers his father, my grandfather, telling him stories that his grandfather had told him. When the Indians and whites married, they were considered mulatto, same for white and Chinese or white and American black. If the offspring were born with white or cream skin, they were registered as white, or left Virginia and lived in the norther states as white. Then the government of Virginia decided that the mulattoes had no right to register their children as white. Instead, the government placed the name "mongrel" on any mixed race birth. Rather than be considered mongrels many mulattoes joined many mixed race groups. Those who owned land and had money didn't let the separation of races bother them. They just made sure that their children became well-educated and independent, and lived a very good life. Today, with so many interracial and inter-faith marriages, the government doesn't dare tell you what your children are. You make that decision loud and clear for your kids. [laughs loud and long] Can you imagine any state calling children born today "mongrels"? Shows you the stupidity of racism. So, we went down and went through the office, and then, ... we got word, "It's all right with us [the housing office]. Just go through, get it straight and bring it back here and we will check it out." So, that's the way it went. So, I was signed up with the dormitory and stayed there the whole year, had no problems. The next year was Ford Hall and with two roommates, Harry Hazelwood and a fellow from Atlantic City. So, it was three African-Americans in this [room] and they set it up so [that] there were three of us in this room with two bedrooms and we converted ... what was actually then the living room and set that up for a bedroom and they made that work and it was okay, as long as it was set up right. ... It'd never been done before. [laughter] So, we were good boys and got in no trouble, and the next year, what happened? I don't remember whether I

stayed there. I think what they did was just take one out and Arthur Johnson and I stayed there. Harry Hazelwood was a preceptor in Winants Hall.

SH: Really?

WA: Yes. So, he got promoted, [laughter] and because Harry, by then, by his second year, was well-known, by the administration and everything, as a good student. ... He was pre-law, actually, and, after he graduated from Rutgers, went on, became a judge in Newark and with a good reputation. He's gone now, ... but we got through there with no trouble. ...

SH: Was it your roommate, Arthur Johnson, who was from Atlantic City?

WA: Yes.

SH: What was he studying?

WA: Economics. ... I think he finished in economics, ... but we didn't have anything in common as far as what we were studying, and so forth. ... [laughter]

CD: Do you remember much about the freshman initiation at Rutgers?

WA: No. [laughter]

SH: Do you remember wearing a dink?

WA: Yes, ... I remember that, and some of the things we were supposed to do, vaguely. What you were supposed to say when encountering people on the campus, I don't remember a thing about it, no. [laughter] I knew that there were things that you had to do, but, truthfully, that stuff didn't make a big dent on engineering students. Simple reason; engineering students went to school from eight o'clock in the morning until five o'clock in the evening, Monday through Saturday at noon, eight o'clock class every day in the week.

CD: Wow, that is a rough schedule.

WA: You did it every day in the week and you did a lab every afternoon in the week. So, you didn't worry about things like that. [laughter]

CD: You were also running track, right?

WA: Yes. ...

SH: Did you start training for track as soon as you arrived at Rutgers?

WA: Yes. As soon as you start, as soon as you get on campus, you start with track, because you're out there in; what is it, Buccleuch Park?

SH: Right.

WA: Yes, running, and as soon as you could get there. ... Of course, it was every day, but you didn't get there on time, because you didn't get out of lab until four o'clock, and then, you had to get down to the park and run your track, or your loop in the track. ...

SH: Was there also mandatory ROTC?

WA: Yes, we did that, yes.

SH: When did you have time to sleep? [laughter]

WA: One afternoon a week, you'd go out there and do your drill, or whatever it was. I don't even remember how much time [it took], but, yes, we made it to ROTC. ...

SH: Did you consider applying for Advanced ROTC?

WA: No, [I was] never interested in anything at all concerning the Army. That was the other thing that surprised me, later on; I had to get myself inducted into the Army. ... Well, let me finish school first. [laughter] I went ... on through and stayed with the track as long as I could. I did not stay with track entirely because it got to be too much. I had track; with the labs and everything, [the schedule] did not allow for [enough] time. I had made a decision that I couldn't do all that and keep up the grades with what I was expected to do, and so, we just cut down. ... I guess by the fourth year, I wasn't doing much track, and I don't remember how much track I did in the senior year, but I know it got difficult, because there just wasn't the time, and there wasn't any question about not doing what I had to do in the time.

SH: Was everything on campus accelerated because of World War II starting?

WA: Yes, that was the other thing. ... [laughter]

SH: Did you continue with your classes through the summer?

WA: We went through summer. ... At the end of the junior year, we kept right on going to school in the summer and there was no change. The classes just kept going and with no gap. So, we were scheduled then to graduate, to be graduated, ... somewhere in January, February, or something like that.

CD: I think it was January.

WA: Yes, and that was it. So, we knew we were going to be leaving school. ...

SH: Leaving school would have impinged on your senior year of track as well.

WA: Yes. ...

SH: Before we finish talking about school, what do you remember of mandatory chapel? I understand there was somebody taking names. [laughter]

WA: There may have been. I know we were supposed to [go], but I don't think they really [checked]. Especially with the engineers, I don't think they got really tacky about making sure you did attend it. I don't really remember anybody being really ... too hard on you about chapel.

SH: From what I have heard in other stories, chapel was more informative, with speakers on a variety of topics, and less religious.

WA: Yes, right, but I don't remember anybody ever being insistent upon it, to the point where it was something that I [recall]. If I went regularly to chapel, it's because I knew I was supposed to, ... but I don't remember anybody ever being insistent upon it, to a point where I remember it was anything, but, I remember, it had to be tough making eight o'clock chapel.

SH: With all of those requirements as an engineer, it must have been difficult.

CD: Yes, that makes it tough. With the world situation changing in Europe at the time that you were a student, were there any discussions on campus about what was going on?

WA: Not that I recall, there were [not]. Every once in awhile, there would be some incident during the war that would be a part of your awareness. ... I remember Pearl Harbor.

CD: Where were you when you heard about Pearl Harbor?

WA: In the dorm room, studying, and I heard all this [interruption]. First, I always had the radio on, and I studied, did everything, with the radio on, and I was there one afternoon, on Sunday, and something came in and interfered with what was going on on the radio, ... enough to make you stop and listen. ... That's when you knew that they had bombed Pearl Harbor and you got ... all the details on how it had happened and all of that. ...

CD: How did that make you feel?

WA: I was basically angry at first. ... [That was] the first thing I can remember, being angry that somebody had bombed Pearl Harbor and that somebody had been lax enough that they were able to get close enough to bomb it, and I felt let down about that and that, from where the Japanese had to attack, the idea that they could put together a satisfactory bombing mission from aircraft carriers, that never should have happened, but did.

CD: What did you know about what was going on in the Pacific with Japan?

WA: I knew that there was warfare going on and you'd hear, occasionally, get some details, about the island hopping that was going on. We knew about that, but couldn't keep up with that too much, and whatever you were up with, you were not "up with," you were way behind, as far as ... what you knew about the problems that they were having. ...

SH: Were your older brothers in the service?

WA: My older brother was drafted and was in the service, went to training, but not early enough so that he was so far ahead of me, but he was in the service. ... Then, the one [who] had gone to medical school was deferred in going through training, and he did not actually get drafted until; where was he? He was drafted and sent down for training in; ... I should straighten that out. I don't have that all together. [laughter]

SH: That is okay.

CD: What was your perspective on what was going on with the Japanese-Americans after Pearl Harbor, when they were being interned?

WA: Yes, I was quite aware of that and thought they got a bad deal. That wasn't well handled at all, ... because, by the time I was out in California, I had gone out there to work for Douglas [Aircraft Company in Long Beach, California] after graduation, and the business with ... the Japanese who were sent to the internment camps was already in place out there. They had already taken those people out of their homes and sent them to the camps. ... I was aware of it and ... some of the people that I was working with had been working with some of the Japanese who had been taken from places like Douglas Aircraft. They had been working there side by side, [Dr. Alexander whistles as an indication of how fast the Japanese-Americans were removed] and that was a very touchy situation, because they had torn up people's lives who had been, [the] day before yesterday, ... citizens and everything and stripped them out. ... Not a lot of people were completely okay with that, ... but that's the way it had to be. ... By then, I was working at Douglas, and what I was doing at Douglas was drafting, really, basic drafting, but it was different. It was something new that was being developed, a way of drafting and using those drawings in a way that hadn't been used before. Used to be, you made your drawings on paper, [you] copied them, made blueprints, made enlargements, if necessary, and used the paper, or blueprints, for special drawings. For tooling, you'd make drawings for tooling where, in order to make parts, you'd have to make details, and then, develop them, and then, make more drawings. So, what we did in this was, to make drawings more accurate, we put eight-by-ten sheets of aluminum, painted white, drilled and joined together with special screws, and made those drawings, maybe the size of this room, and we'd be crawling around the [floor].

SH: We are talking twenty-two-feet-by ...

WA: Four-by-eight sheets, joined together. So, we had several sheets enlarged, so that when you got finished, you had a full-sized cross-section of an airplane, and what we were working on was called a C-74 [Globemaster] at the time. ... [The] C-74 was larger than anything that was flying, at that time, and before they got finished, the C-74 was just another transport plane. They made that one and started on others, ... another one that was that size, but because they could do it that way, they could cut down the time that it took to get that airplane through development and construction, ... because they could make the drawings actual size and accurate, so that they could use them for tooling. Those drawings, where we would make a cross-section of the airplane by joining those sheets together, we'd go crawling around on the sheets and, when we developed the drawings and completed the drawings, they would photograph them and copy

them. You could build cross-sections of the airplane on these pictures, and they would be accurate, because they would be developed that way. ... It would save the steps of having to make individual parts, because they could make some of these parts actually from what was printed on the metal sheets.

SH: Had you worked on anything like this at Rutgers as a student?

WA: No, no. This was just something they had developed at Douglas and this is what they put me into. They found out I had good eyes, and, actually, I did have exceptional vision. They put me right in this group, special group, that worked on these sheets, and we could do our drawings full size, ... plus or minus a sixty-fourth for ordinary lines, and for the targeted lines would be plus or minus five-thousandths. ... With that kind of accuracy, they could make the actual parts on photographed sheets and, that way, they could cut out some of the tooling time, and it went like that.

SH: How did you end up applying for and getting the position at Douglas?

WA: Oh, I just applied as an engineer. ...

SH: Did Douglas recruit students from campus? Was it one of your professors who guided you towards Douglas?

WA: ... I don't know whether they inquired. All I know is, I sent [an inquiry] to Douglas Aircraft ... [for] a position as an engineer, and they took it from there. ... I didn't have anything specific that I was looking for and that was pretty much the way you got hired as an engineer there, and you didn't know what you were going to get into. I had no idea I was going to be a draftsman, but that was part of the way I learned about the business of building aircraft. I had a roommate out there who went out there, ... I think, in the same way I did, but he ended up in heating and ventilation, as an engineer. That's what he got into and it's where they needed [him], and he learned, let's see, ... air conditioning and ventilation and the different facets of that. ... So, he just went off in a different direction and developed there.

SH: Was he someone you knew from Rutgers or someone you met in California?

WA: Yes, he was [from] Kansas. [laughter]

SH: Was the work force integrated at Douglas?

WA: Yes. ... There was a lot more integration on the West Coast, all over, in every department, than there was on the East Coast. The integration was ahead of the East Coast. They didn't have the breakdown that they did here and things were a lot ahead, with fewer bumps. ...

SH: Were you deferred from the service because you were an engineer at Douglas?

WA: Yes, you were supposed to get a deferment, and I received a deferment ... just by applying to the draft board, telling them that I had a position ... at Douglas, but ... my draft board was still

back in Orange and I went through that and had to keep up with that. So, okay, that was fine. I was going along out here, in Los Angeles. I had bought a car. One little hang-up, though, buying a car; I wasn't old enough.

SH: How old were you? [laughter]

WA: [When] I got out there, California, I was twenty, so that I had to ...

SH: Were you maybe twenty-one?

WA: Twenty.

SH: This was in 1943, and you were born in 1921, right?

WA: ... '22. So, when I got out there, ... there was something involved with the title to the car and I found the car that I wanted; I wanted to buy it from the dealer. ... Somehow, I had to make some sort of arrangement where my father had to buy the car and they had to turn the title over to me. I don't remember how that went now, but I know that was funny. [laughter] So, we got through that. ...

SH: I understand buying a car during the war was very difficult.

WA: Yes, it was, and there was all [the] gas rationing cards and all that stuff, but everything was going all right. ... Somehow, along the line, I read in the paper, in some newspaper some place, ... there was a story in the paper about the pilot training at Tuskegee Air Force [Base]. ... I didn't know anything about it, but pilot training sounded interesting and I investigated a little further, to find out more about it. [Editor's Note: America's first contingent of African-American military airmen were trained at Tuskegee Army Airfield in Tuskegee, Alabama, during World War II and became known collectively as the Tuskegee Airmen.] The story was that, normally, in order to get involved with Tuskegee Air Force and to take the flight exam; now, there's a special exam you had to take that involved your vision and, in order to take that particular exam, "64," you have to be in the Army. You could not take the "64" [without being in the US Army], because that's part of what flunked you. ... Then, there was this story in the paper that said you were able to take the "64" [without enlisting first], and I made a couple telephone calls and found out that it was true. You could take it [if] you weren't in the [Army], [laughter] because, before, you had to be in the Army. ... If you didn't pass the physical exam for pilot training, you stayed in the Army [laughter] and you went some place that they wanted you, not necessarily where you wanted anything to do with. [laughter] So, I found out about it and it was true. I didn't have to do anything, I didn't have to even talk to the draft board, and I was not only interested in it, there were three or four, at least four, other guys right there with me. So, I talked to them and I said, "This is something I'm interested in; I want to do this. You guys can do this or not. That's up to you." Ended up, my roommate was interested [and] two of the fellows who worked in the same group in the department were interested. So, they had to ... take care of themselves; they had to contact their draft board and go through all of that, which I did [as well]. After I did that, I went to the local board, talked to them, and they said, "Well, okay, you're all right with your draft

board and they're transferring you to here and they'll be in touch." So, it took a whole week. [laughter] I signed up for it and, in one week, they had orders for me. [laughter]

SH: Oh, my, you had signed up for it and taken the test.

WA: ... I hadn't taken the exam yet.

SH: Really?

WA: But, they would get me in; I had to be ready to go to Fort MacArthur, [in San Pedro, California], on the following Monday, and so, next thing I knew, I was at Fort MacArthur.

SH: Is Fort MacArthur near Los Angeles?

WA: Yes, that's near Los Angeles, but, once you get to Fort MacArthur, you're going to get to some place where they're going to test you before you're going to get back. So, you're in; you can forget about Douglas for awhile, and so, I went down there. I found out what comes next. Now, what comes next is a train trip from Fort MacArthur to Kessler Field, Mississippi, [now Kessler Air Force Base].

SH: Really?

WA: Yes, that's it; you're in.

SH: Did you tell Douglas that you were thinking of joining the Air Force?

WA: I told Douglas what was going on, but, well, by the time I told them what was going on, there wasn't anything they could do about it. [laughter] ... When I decided what I was getting ready to do, I had to write a letter home to the draft board in Orange, and to my parents; I called them. [laughter]

CD: How did your parents feel about you joining the Air Force?

WA: Questions, some questions, but they knew that, going through flight training, if you were successful in passing the physical and the eye exam, okay, that's one thing, you're in, in the Cadet Corps, ... and then, you go through step by step, as long as you can keep passing the steps, and that's something [where] you don't assume that there's a problem, you assume that you're going to pass here. Step by step, you're going to learn to fly, and I knew I had good reflexes; I didn't have any idea whether I could fly or not, [laughter] enough to pass the exam. ...

SH: You knew you had good eyesight. [laughter]

WA: Yes, and so, next thing I know, we're on a four-day train ride across California, Nevada, Arizona, and whatever is next.

SH: Texas.

WA: And then, one day across Texas, from one side to the other was a one-day trip, until we got to New Orleans. New Orleans is where you change and you go to Kessler Field, Mississippi. Now, when we get down to New Orleans, all the way across from Fort MacArthur, we're two groups of PACs, Pre-Aviation Cadets. There were two groups of us, one African-American group, four of us. One of the fellows, who has the orders in hand, is one of the guys from [Douglas] that I got into this mess. [laughter] His wife never talked to me again after that. [laughter]

SH: I bet not.

WA: She didn't think that was a good idea, or that I shouldn't have brought it up, but, at any rate, okay, we went across [the] country. ...

SH: How many were in the white contingent?

WA: In that group, I think about ten or twelve, and we were all going to the same place, but it's just that, because of the way it's set up, they have two groups.

SH: Did you interact at all on the train ride?

WA: Yes, on the train ride, we were right there all on the same car and everything, but, in the Army, it's ... who's got the orders that counts, and we were all together, except that there were two sets of orders. ... The one who has the orders, he's the one that's in charge of the group, and that worked out all right. We had one little bump, but that was because the MPs didn't really know ... that business about who's got the orders. ... One of the MPs didn't know that there were separate orders. So, he started to make a little change in the way things were, but it didn't work that way, and we got to New Orleans.

SH: What did he want to do?

WA: He just wanted to put somebody else in charge of the whole thing, and he couldn't put anyone else in charge of us, because we had the orders for this group of four.

SH: Okay.

WA: And so, we couldn't be put under somebody else.

SH: He tried to put someone else in charge of your contingent.

WA: Yes, he assumed that's the way it would be, and it worked out differently. Anyway, [when] we got to New Orleans, we had another little change because of some of the things that we knew could happen. The MPs didn't know, as far as how who's in charge of a group matters to that group, as to what happens to them and how they get treated. So, by us knowing that we had a separate cut of orders, we were an individual, separate group and did not take orders from somebody else, because, when you're on a train going cross-country, you can't get off, you can't

get on, your treatment depends on who's in charge. ... If you don't know that, you can get really in trouble, as far as being taken advantage of, but we knew that much. [laughter] ...

CD: How did you know how that worked?

SH: I was going to ask that as well, thank you. [laughter]

WA: Because the older guy in the group had been in something, like National Guard, and had learned enough about the Army in that, that those were things, information, he had that they [the MPs] didn't have yet. So, ... when we got ... orders to go to Kessler Field, our orders took us all the way through. What they wanted to do there was put us on another bus that didn't leave right away. So, we were able to get on the first bus.

SH: The bus that took the white contingent as well.

WA: Yes, but had they gotten on the first bus, we wouldn't have got on that bus; it would have been, "Wait for the next bus." So, that's one of the things. ... The way it worked out, we got on the first bus and we were seated there. When the second guy came with his orders, [laughter] we were already on the bus with our orders to take us to Kessler Field. When we got there, we [they] went this way, we went that way, because we were going to a different assignment, ... but still ended up [at] the same place, [laughter] still ended up [with] the same training going around, ... drilling around the coast every morning and doing KP [kitchen police], post police, all the dirty deals that had to be done, until you got assigned to your training group. Once you're in your training group, then, you're going step by step through Kessler Field. First, they do all the examinations that's necessary.

SH: Were the two contingents kept separate for the examinations?

WA: Once you get to Kessler Field, yes, you're separated; you're in two different armies. [laughter] ... In this group, if there are maybe ten or twelve, you would have got a different set of orders for these ten or twelve people and they will go through Kessler Field, going to all the same classes, but in different assignments.

SH: Were the officers in charge of your group white or ...

WA: If they had them. ...

SH: Were there senior NCOs [non-commissioned officers] who were African-American?

WA: No, not generally. If they had separate [African-American officers and NCOs], they would be assigned separate, but, if they didn't have them, then, you got what they had, the way it was broken down, because, at the time, there was a black air force and a white air force. ... They had to be trained by the same people, but that's the only way they were together, and what happened, when they set up and decided it was going to be a separate air force, they made a whole new air force. They had to have a new place to train people, a new facility. They set up a new facility; Tuskegee Air Force was named and built because of that.

SH: Really?

WA: Yes, it was completely separate. ... So, they were doing the same thing here, building the same thing in Tuskegee, that they had all over the place, in Texas and different bases.

SH: Was it the Summer of 1944 that you arrived in Tuskegee?

WA: Yes, I think.

SH: Do you have any idea how long Tuskegee Army Airfield had been in operation when you got there?

WA: Tuskegee had been in place as a civilian airport for several years, and then, a Civilian Pilot Training [Program] base, and then, the Army took it over. [Editor's Note: In 1938, the Civilian Pilot Training Program was created as a means of building up the nation's pool of licensed pilots in preparation for a future war. Many CPTP facilities were located near college and universities, including Tuskegee Institute and five other historically African-American colleges.] ... They built a new airport, the Tuskegee Army Air Force Base, which was something entirely new. The Civilian Pilot Training had been there and that was the first step in the pilot training for the Air Force, at the civil training base, and then, Tuskegee Army Air Force was ... the next step in training the Army Air Force pilots, but your first step, actually, in pilot training, starts with these little biplanes. ... Then, after you've passed that, then, you leave that place and go over to the Tuskegee Army Air Force Base and go through the next steps, ... your primary, and then, your ...

SH: Is it secondary?

WA: Well, let's see, [laughter] we start out with ...

SH: Were those training you African-Americans?

WA: No. Later on, some of the pilots were brought back from overseas duties and trained as instructor pilots and some of them were brought into the training. ... It was unique that you had some of the people that you'd been reading in your stories about, that came back and were pilots, training, doing some of the [training]. Some of them were good instructors, some of them weren't, but there was a point in doing it and it worked. ...

SH: Did you enjoy flying?

WA: Yes. Oh, yes, I enjoyed it. First time I went down on the flying line, just sitting down there, watching, you could go down there and watch some of the other students who were ahead of you doing some of the things that [you] learn how to do, with success and sometimes ... without success. ... The trouble was, the plane that you're learning how to fly was difficult. It had spindly landing gear. They weren't very sturdy. They were kind of close together. The nose-heavy plane was not good. So, you're watching this happen, and you're watching these

students that had just graduated as advanced [cadets], and then, everybody's out there ... the beginning of the next week. They start out with, first, they sit in the cockpit and they learn where everything is. ... They do that for a few days, and then, they taxi the plane around, and then comes the day. Now, you've learned how to fly a single-engine plane. You've been trained on a single-engine plane, that, then, you're going to get out of this plane and get into a different plane, a very twitchy, heavy, powerful airplane that you have never done anything in, and you have to learn how to take it off, and then, get it back down on the ground. [laughter] The first thing it does, first thing, it flies a lot faster than the plane you've been trained in. The advanced trainer takes off at maybe eighty, ninety miles an hour when it takes off the ground. When it lands, ... maybe you put it down at 110 [miles per hour] or something like that. [laughter] The P-40 [Warhawk] that you now are learning weighs at least a third more, has twice as much power, which means that when you give [it] power, it tries to make it turn like that. It has a lot more torque, and anything you do with changing the power is going to make [a difference]. So, you've got to be ready for that. So, you get it off the ground, which is not real hard. You can do that, if you do things slowly, gradually, and then, ease it off and you can feel what's coming, but, then, when ... it's time to land it, it's heavy, nose-heavy; anything you do to change the power is going to make it want to go like that. The plane actually wants to go like that.

SH: Almost tip over on its side?

WA: Yes. It's torque, the amount of torque that is in that engine and, if you give it power too fast, it's going to [turn]. So, all those things that everybody's told you about happen and, when they come down and touch the ground, they want to turn, they want to go, and we [would] sit down there on the sidelines and watch [what happens with] those planes ... and watch the new pilots try to control themselves and the plane. ... That happens every time a class graduates there in Tuskegee. When my class graduated, you couldn't sit there and watch them, [laughter] because they had stopped doing that.

SH: Really?

WA: They sent our class; all the classes before ours now, their transition to a combat-type airplane takes place at another airbase. [laughter] So, we never got to do that. When my class went through all of the classes we went through, the primary and basic, advanced, and did all the same thing as everybody else had done and worked up [to that point], ... we never had to do it right there and I never got to do it at all, to get into a fighter plane, because the War in Europe was over and they shipped us home before that. [laughter]

SH: Did they really?

WA: Yes. I graduated, my class graduated, in, it was 1945 and the War in Europe was already over. ... Because of that, the next place that I would have gone to get the advanced training and combat training was filled, ... unless they could ship them somewhere, and they weren't shipping them overseas anymore. ...

SH: They were never sent to the Pacific at all.

WA: No. I guess maybe they went to the Pacific after a long time, but ...

SH: They were not sent in that time.

WA: No, and it was just too much in the ...

SH: Pipeline.

WA: In the pipeline, yes. When I graduated, it was June, I had done everything that there was to do. I could still fly and get flying time, but there was nothing that I could do to advance further. So, I signed a little piece of paper and was out [in] September.

SH: Really?

WA: Yes. I was home by September.

SH: Did you come back to the East Coast or did you go back to Douglas?

WA: Oh, no, I stayed home. I had been out of Douglas for a couple of years, you know, while I went through training. ... I had a job back on the East Coast.

SH: You had already applied for a job.

WA: Yes. When I got out of service, I found a job in engineering, ... in Newark, and was doing very interesting work. It wasn't actual machine design, but it was almost. I was working in a little office where there were the owner of the office, you'd call him the senior designer, the one under, next under him, was a designer and I was a detail drawing [person], and there was one and, sometimes, two other people in the office and that was it. ... That situation was good, except, when work got thin, as it did, the bottom was a little too close, [laughter] and that's when I decided to go back to dental school. That's what got me back to dental school.

SH: Is it really?

WA: I had to accept the fact that I was an engineer, I was learning; I could not see that, within any short, reasonable time, there's any way I could learn enough to possibly be on my own. If the work dried up or if something happened to the boss, I couldn't do what I was doing unless I had somebody to guide me, and there was nowhere I could get it. So, you look in front of you, "If I stay in a place working in an ideal situation like that, I'd have a lot of years to work to get the kind of experience it would require to be in a situation where I'd be on my own," and I didn't see that coming up. "So, what do I have to do to go back to dental school?" I had to find out. I know that I needed a couple of courses. ... Let's see, I needed to get biology and organic chemistry, went to Upsala [College, in East Orange, New Jersey] in the summer and got two courses and got the final exams, got "As;" had to get "As," because, by the time I have decided that it's time to go to dental school, I'm in someplace where the upcoming class for dental school has, realistically, already been selected. ... You know, when you stop and think, when they make up a class for the following year, that's already [settled]. So, I got some help, got my

father's friend, who was on the Board of Trustees at Howard [University] and has a little weight, ... but how much can you do? So, you don't go [in] with anything [like] "Bs" and "Cs;" you've got to bring in some grades, [so] that he can put some pressure on. [laughter] So, I got the grades back. We take them by hand and drive them down from Upsala to Howard, take them into the registrar's office and turn them in, with the letter, and [they said], "We'll let you know." That's all they can tell you. Of course, I went down there with all my clothes, because, if there's a chance I can stay, I've got to find a place to stay. [laughter] ... At the time that I went to register at Howard, I had also registered at New York University Dental School, where a friend of mine was teaching. I was accepted there but Howard University was cheaper because the University received federal money. Howard was also very integrated because of that.

SH: Did you go back to school on the GI Bill?

WA: That had to be arranged, because, you know, that's what I have to use, but ... no way they're going to tell you, "Yes," until it's gone through. So, all the papers have to go into the office, go to the dean's office, and they have to check it out. The dean, and the people who have the final say, have to meet and tell you whether you're going to be accepted or not, and nobody wants to say until they've had the meeting. So, they wait, and then, they tell you, "Yes, you're in." [laughter]

SH: How much time did you have to wait?

WA: They already had some information, besides what I brought down there, but, actually, I was given an answer probably in less than a week.

SH: Did you stay at Howard to wait for the decision?

WA: I stayed there, yes. ... While I was there, I just had to go and see if I could get a room, and I was able to get a room in the dormitory there, and then, breathe. ... [laughter]

SH: After all that, you could breathe. [laughter]

WA: That's what it took, [laughter] and I never had any trouble keeping up with what had to be done. I got some extra breaks, just through good fortune. You know how it is when you go in and a new class starts; somehow, somebody gets chosen, out of that group, somebody gets chosen to be the one that's in charge. I started out in charge.

SH: Do you feel that was because you were a returning GI and you were a little older than the other students? Was the class made up of mostly GIs like yourself?

WA: Class was at least a third GIs and part of it was that, part of it was [my last name], "Alexander," putting you at the top of the list when they start calling the roll, [laughter] and they'd come in, first name that gets called is Alexander, gets called most often. [laughter] So, then, the class has to choose; so, the first one that gets chosen is Alexander [laughter] and your name is up there, and class president, [for] the first year, is Alexander. [laughter] I kept the

position of class president until we graduated. The guys would say, "Alex, you're doing a good job." It was really funny. [laughter]

SH: Congratulations. [laughter]

WA: Yes. Once you get there, if you don't make a mess, you should stay there. [laughter] So, I did, but that's about the way it worked out. ... Then, after that, you're on your own; you have to do it for yourself. Fortunately, I had good hands and I was able to do what needed to be done, and I wasn't the best one in the class, but I was able to keep out of trouble [laughter] and, well, that's basically [it], you know. You just don't get into trouble and do what you're supposed to do.

SH: Did any of your engineering background help you in dentistry school?

WA: Oh, yes, yes. I mean, my work with my hands was good. ... As far as that was concerned, I could do the exams, carving things out of chalk. [laughter] We had to do that, [take] a piece of chalk and carve a tooth out of it, and be careful enough so [that] you don't snap it off. [laughter]
...

SH: You had to have somewhat of a Michelangelo in you for carving.

WA: Well, you had to have the ability to make it look something like a tooth, anyway, [laughter] and it didn't have to be a perfect tooth, but you did have to be able to measure and make an accurate model of a tooth that had certain dimensions that not only made it recognizable, [but] made it believable. So, as far as that's concerned, yes, I could do that, and I can understand what they were trying to do when they're trying to make things, such that the idea of the way the thing should be made, and to have their own strength and have a normal design, worked for me, for most things. Sometimes, I had problems with the strength. When you were making a wax pattern for a casting and wanted to, you were told to, make sharp angles, now, sharp angles are good when you want to make something fit accurately and have some retention, but, when you go too far with that, there's a place where your sharp right angles can get you into trouble. [laughter] ... You get a wax pattern that's got a real sharp angle in here; [laughter] ... yes, make sharp angles, but you'd better be careful that those walls are straight, or parallel, or not converging. ... So, things like that, but, in general, [I did well]. ... [laughter]

SH: It sounds like you needed to maintain a certain sense of humor while you were going through dentistry school. [laughter]

WA: Oh, if you don't, you go nuts, I mean, at that stuff. ...

SH: Were there any women in your classes?

WA: One. We had one. ... There were very few women in dental school at that time, and now, there are a lot, and they're good dentists, ... but, in the beginning, it was hard on the women, because the way they were looked at, they were "taking somebody's place." ... It didn't make any difference [to me], but some people just didn't like them, and some were the faculty that didn't like them being there.

SH: Your mother set a wonderful example, going to grad school, as a woman in the early 1920s; that was quite unusual for that time period.

WA: Yes. No, she's been a role model as far as that's concerned, and then, the attitude, in my house, has always been that you were expected to go to school; what school, what subject, whatever. ...

SH: Did you carry that philosophy on to your own family?

WA: As far as I could. [laughter] ... We made it mandatory that you were going to school; there was no question about going to advanced study. What you were going to take, that was going to be up to you. ... So, right now, our children went to school, our grandchildren have graduated from college, so, it's just something that's there, and going to stay there.

SH: Are there any more dentists in your family? [laughter]

WA: No. We asked them about that and ... none of my kids, neither of my two daughters, wanted to go to dental school, and I didn't push them. I knew they had the opportunity, like I did. "It's right there in front of you; you can see it. If you want to know about it, I'll tell you about it," ... but I don't believe in sitting somebody down and saying, "Here, do this." If you have an aptitude or an affinity for some particular subject that you like, then, you need to get help, but you don't need to be pushed into it, because being pushed into something to do for the rest of your life is a good way to make you sick of it. ...

SH: What year did you graduate from Howard?

WA: '52.

SH: Was there any chance that you would be recalled for the Korean War? Did you stay in the Reserves?

WA: I stayed in the Reserves and that kept me out for awhile, and then, I retired from the Reserve, but they didn't need me. ... It came close once. ...

SH: Can you tell us a little bit about that? I understand there was a doctors' and dentists' draft.

WA: Yes, and that's when my brother [was recalled]. Let's see, when did he go back in? They got him in one of those [call-ups], but, no, ... the fact that I had been in the Reserve [exempted me], because, when I came home, I went right in the Reserve, and flew out of Newark Airport.

SH: You flew out of Newark Airport.

WA: Yes. That was not fun. [laughter]

SH: Really?

WA: Not fun, not fun, no.

SH: Would you like to talk about that?

WA: ... It was interesting and it was good to keep my hand in, but flying in this area is not fun. There's too damn much traffic, and even just flying around here took me in contact with, over to; what's the name of the small, private [airport]?

SH: Is it Teterboro Airport?

WA: Yes, Teterboro. At Teterboro, at that time, they had an airfield right next to Teterboro, which was a seaplane base. We used to fly out up off the river. ... They were teaching pilots over there to fly and they did not pay particular attention to how far from traffic that they were flying. When you learn how to fly, you have to practice spins, how to recover from spins, and so forth, and you do it in a certain area and you do it away from other traffic.

SH: I would hope they would fly away from traffic. [laughter]

WA: Yes, well; [laughter] I was coming back, one afternoon, to come back to Newark, to land, ... oh, I guess I was maybe, oh, five miles from Newark, on the way in, and I look out the corner of my eye [laughter] ...

CD: A plane spinning.

WA: There's a damn seaplane spinning. ... That was really [shocking]; [laughter] where he was and what he was doing was just so ridiculous that I was totally surprised.

SH: What type of plane were you flying out of Newark?

WA: Fortunately, we were flying the same type of plane, the AT-6, the advanced trainer, same one I finished flying in. I wasn't really happy about that, but it was the best thing that could have happened for me because, in order to learn to fly the airplane that I would normally fly following training, which would be a very high-powered airplane, it's the same kind of thing I was telling you about, watching the [new pilots struggle]. [laughter] Well, no, you have to spend time to learn [how the new aircraft handles], and so, it was good for me that I wasn't able to find a [more advanced] plane and get somebody to [instruct me]. I don't know whether it would have happened anyway. [laughter] I don't know whether I would have done it ... without the right instruction.

SH: Was the Reserve unit that you were flying with integrated?

WA: Yes, yes. ...

SH: By then, the reputation of how well your unit could fly was known.

WA: Oh, yes, by then, they knew we could fly. [laughter]

SH: They figured it out.

WA: Yes, the word had gotten out.

SH: Those "Red Tails" had been successful, right? [Editor's Note: The pilots of the all-African-American 332nd Fighter Group, who had been trained at Tuskegee Army Airfield, painted the tails of their P-51 Mustangs red to identify themselves as they flew escort for bomber formations from their bases in Italy during World War II.]

WA: Yes, they did a hell of a job, and the thing that was the most impressive was the fact that out of all the ... bombers that the "Red Tails" escorted to their targets, they never lost one, not one, to enemy air fire on the way home. That's the only outfit like that, only escort, and that's amazing.

SH: During your training, were you ever visited by any of the brass, such as Eleanor Roosevelt or Jimmy Doolittle?

WA: Yes, they came, but I wasn't aware of [it]. ... I don't know where some of these visits took place, but, when Eleanor Roosevelt came, it was something quick, in and out, and I don't ever remember knowing about one of those visits. Of course, she could have been there, up there in the review [stand], and I could have been ... standing at attention out on the runway somewhere and not know who was up there. ... [laughter]

SH: Was there any kind of a social life at Tuskegee for the airmen?

WA: Oh, I had it great. [laughter] My uncle, the one that was the middle brother, my mother's brother, was stationed at the veterans' hospital at Tuskegee. So, he lived at Tuskegee. I had been to Tuskegee before.

SH: Really?

WA: Yes, I had been there. We had been down there to visit, [for] one of my dad's drives, he drove, and I had been down there. ... Besides that, his family consisted of two boys and one girl. The girl was the oldest; she was just about my age. She was going to Fisk at the time and, at Christmastime, she'd bring a friend home on the way and one of her friends that used to come home with her used to live in Columbus, Georgia, which was right down the highway from Tuskegee. ... That was interesting; it was helpful. [laughter]

SH: From a social aspect. [laughter]

WA: Yes, she had friends that would come by. ... I didn't have any time for anything, really, but it was nice that, at that time, there was at least something going on, [laughter] but that was nice.

SH: Were there any USO or similar kind of activities?

WA: Oh, yes, yes. ...

SH: Were you interested in music?

WA: Not really.

SH: I have heard a lot about the Big Bands of that time period.

WA: Well, I was interested in music on the radio, yes. ... Around here, before I got involved with the service, ... the Big Bands were at different places around here, Frank Dailey's Meadowbrook and places like that, but ... those places were not all open [integrated]. Some places, you might go, and then, by the time I left here, let's see, [there] wasn't too much open here. If you were going into New York City, like, if you were at home, you might go into New York, to either ... a club or, yes, some of the nightspots, but [not] around here.

SH: What year did you open your dentistry practice in Orange? Was it 1953 or 1952?

WA: '52, yes. The first year ... I had an internship at Newark City Hospital, which was mostly involved with ...

SH: What was the name of the hospital?

WA: Newark City Hospital; it's not in existence now. ... Newark City Hospital was the local hospital in Newark. ... What used to be [Newark] City Hospital is almost across the street from where the present hospital is.

CD: Are you thinking of St. Michael's Hospital?

WA: No.

CD: UMDNJ?

WA: UMDNJ, [the University Hospital of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey]. ... When we took the dental exam, we had to find our own patients to work on.

SH: You had to have a patient come in for the state board exam.

WA: Oh, yes, for your dental examination. The exam is given some place under the auspices of the state board. My wife's uncle came to Philadelphia to be my patient, because ... at that time, we did not have a dental school in New Jersey, so, our exam was given in Philadelphia. ...

SH: Where was the exam given?

WA: I'm not sure whether it was Temple or where it was, University of Pennsylvania? Oh, that's stretching too hard, [laughter] but that's what you had to do. You had to bring your equipment and everything to the dental school. ... The state would set up the places where the exam was to be given, and I'm not sure where we took the examination, whether it was at University of Pennsylvania or at Temple. ... It's funny, I remember now, after I had been a dentist for awhile, ... I was on the state board myself.

SH: You were on the state board.

WA: Yes, and I was then one of the team of examiners. [laughter] I later became president of the State Board of Dentistry.

CD: How did you come to be on the board? [laughter]

WA: Well, when the crew examined me, all the state board members were on the examining crew, and, at the time I became a member of the state board, the examining crew was more than just our state board. It joined another larger group that was called the Northeast Regional Board of Dental Examiners [(NERB)]. ... It was a group that had joined together, a group of state boards that had joined together, and said that, "If we all get together and give this exam, then, more people will be able to make use of this exam. By having the NERB give the exam, then, anybody who lives in any one of the fifteen states that are involved in [the] Northeast then will be eligible to be licensed in any one of these states," which was a big thing for everybody, all the dentists in these fifteen states, and saved a lot of time and headaches for those people, [who] could make arrangements to open more states to their licensing. ... So, as a result, luckily, for my first year on the state board, and that was not until maybe after ten years I'd been licensed ...

SH: That would have been in the early 1960s.

WA: Somewhere around there.

CD: What was the process like for getting on the state board?

WA: You know the right person.

SH: What?

CD: Know the right person. [laughter]

WA: You know the right person. It used to be that you were with the right group [and] you knew somebody. In my case, the person who took my brother's place in the office when he went in service, Dr. James Cowan, was appointed to be the Health Commissioner [Commissioner of Health for New Jersey] by [Governor William T.] Cahill, Governor Cahill, okay. So, when Buddy Cowan became the Health Commissioner, one of his appointments was to the State Board of Dentistry. He appointed me to the State Board of Dentistry. I believe that was in 1970 or 1971.

CD: That is great.

WA: So, that's the way things happened. ... So, I got [on] that way, and, after I had been on the State Board of Dentistry, three or four other [African-American] dentists were appointed to the board. ... It was never open to an African-American before, because they didn't have the connections. It's political and, unless it's politically facilitated, it doesn't happen. It was good for me to get in a position like that, because it becomes something that can happen for somebody else, and it did. ... Those were things that just grow out of connections. ...

SH: Were you involved in getting the Northeast ...

WA: Regional Board? Yes, it had already started and some of the people who were involved with that happening were also associated with the examiners that came to New Jersey to do examinations. ... You got to know them, because everybody that associated with NERB was also an examiner all around the circuit. ... I stayed there with that group over fifteen years and did examinations all through the year. Oh, we did at least a half a dozen exams a year, in different places. ...

SH: Were you involved in the establishment of the dental school here in New Jersey? Were you an advocate for it?

WA: Not directly, but, yes, because while it was being talked about and developed, yes, I was involved with that and involved with some of the development, because I was on the faculty when it was started over in Jersey City and I was in the Department of Prosthodontics. [Editor's Note: The Seton Hall College of Medicine and Dentistry was founded in 1954 in Jersey City, New Jersey. In 1965, the State of New Jersey assumed control of the college, renamed it the New Jersey College of Medicine and Dentistry and relocated it to Newark, New Jersey. Following the Medical and Dental Education Act of 1970, the college was merged with the Rutgers Medical School to become the College of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, now the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, with facilities across the state.] I was never full-time; I was part-time down there. ... While that was going on, I was with the NERB and there was some question about whether you should be on NERB and be with that. It wasn't a sensible question, ... but I didn't pay any attention to it. [laughter] There was some question asked about it, but nobody ever made any problems about it. ...

SH: If you can examine someone, you should also be able to teach them. [laughter]

WA: ... Yes, it wasn't really that way. They just didn't want examiners to be on the [faculty].

SH: Passing their own students?

WA: Yes, and I don't really know [why]. It didn't make sense, you're right, ... but they didn't do anything about it, to try to establish any rules, because the way they wanted it, most people wanted it, was to have anybody who was ... licensed to be a dentist should be able to teach or be an examiner, without hindrance either way, and that's the way it is. ...

SH: Were you involved in other organizations?

WA: Yes, the dental society [the New Jersey Dental Association], but not active. I'm not a really active person as far as the society [goes]. As near [to] being active in anything has been NERB [laughter] and I did that and I did a lot of NERB, [laughter] and didn't particularly enjoy the timing of the examinations; the examinations' time, [the] most convenient time for dental students, gets to be somewhere around Easter, Mother's Day, down there, you know. ... When you think about it, [for] the dental examination, you're going to go away, you're going to leave home and get to some exam site, might be any place. I've done exams in Washington, down in Atlanta, St. Louis, Ohio, two places in Ohio, Columbia Dental School, NYU Dental School, over here in [the] dental school we lost, and West Virginia. I learned to enjoy "red-eye gravy" in West Virginia. It was really good!

SH: Are you thinking of Seton Hall University as the one we lost?

WA: No, Seton Hall became UMDNJ, and then, the other one is; what's our other school, right over here?

CD: Are you thinking of Montclair University?

WA: No; well, anyway, too many of them.

SH: Was the school you are thinking of affiliated with a university or college?

WA: Yes, but the examinations used to come up regularly in the springtime, at the time when something else was coming up. [laughter]

SH: The idea of "Northeast" went right into Ohio. [laughter]

WA: Yes. It was, you know, Mother's Day, or something like that, and a holiday, Easter holiday or something, and [required you to] be out of town for three, four days, with two kids. [laughter]

SH: I would like to go back and ask a few questions about the Depression and how it affected your family. You were born in 1922, right?

WA: [Yes].

CD: You were around eight or nine years old at the time of the Depression.

WA: Yes.

SH: What do you remember of it?

WA: [What] I remember [of] the time of the Depression was the fact that my mother was working as a social worker, working for the City of Orange. ... I was aware that things were involved, that my mother working was helpful to the family, because [my] two brothers were in

college, at that same time, and nobody had it easy and that it was important for the extra income that was there. ... Of course, I didn't know anything about the finances. I knew that income from that source was important. ...

SH: Were you aware of any of your friends' families suffering from the Depression? As a young kid, it is not always easy to comprehend financial struggles.

WA: Not to that level; I was aware that everybody had to have somebody working. There were special things done to accommodate, special [programs].

CD: Do you mean FDR and the New Deal programs?

WA: Oh, yes. ... They were not only talking about it, FDR was talking to us. [laughter] We used to hear the "fireside chats," and that was a big deal.

SH: Would everyone sit around the radio and listen?

WA: Yes, sit around the radio. ... Not only that there would be a fireside chat, but you'd pay attention to what was being said, because, ... somehow, [it] would relate to your, what would it be, civics, or something like that? and it was important.

SH: Did you see WPA [Works Progress Administration] projects or anything like that put into place?

WA: Oh, yes, yes. You can't walk around without seeing a [WPA-built] post office. I mean, all our post offices are WPA projects and that's what the biggest thing around [was], the federal post offices and, sometimes, it's schools.

SH: I know that my school was a WPA project. [laughter]

WA: Yes.

SH: Was your family involved in politics?

WA: Not really, not really. ... I don't think there was any work with political parties to speak of at all, no. I only know that the family was Republican and that my great uncle, Dr. Walter G. Alexander, was an Assemblyman in the state of New Jersey in 1920 and 1921. In 2009, a bronze sculpture of him was placed in the hall of the Assembly at the State House in Trenton, New Jersey.

SH: Were you personally involved in politics?

WA: No. I stayed pretty much out of politics until there was something going on that being involved made sense. ... It wasn't much that I got into, because, by the time it came time to get into school and out of school, I was out before I got somewhere where I would make a difference. ...

SH: You were in pilot training when President Roosevelt died. Was there any sort of reaction on the base among the fliers when the President died?

WA: I don't think there was anything that would have interrupted any type of training. ...

SH: I understand training would not have been interrupted, but was there any kind of reaction among the men to the news that he had passed away?

WA: Yes, but nothing specific that I can [think of]. ...

SH: Did you have confidence in Harry Truman as the new Commander-in-Chief?

WA: Yes, I did.

SH: You were confident in him.

WA: Yes, because Harry Truman was the first one that said, "Let's stop all this crap," and came down and said that, "The Armed Services will be integrated," period, bang, just like that, no fooling around. ... It was said, it was done, and there was no pussyfooting around. ... There were people who opposed it, but it didn't walk. [Editor's Note: Dr. Alexander is referring to Executive Order 9981, issued by President Harry S. Truman in July 1948, which officially ended the practice of segregation in the US Armed Forces.]

SH: As an engineer, what did you understand about the atomic bombs dropped in Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

WA: I thought the fact that they dropped it, because they had it, ended things a lot quicker than going along, continuing the war, without dropping it. Having soldiers and Marines, sailors, trying to take back every little damn island or atoll over the period of years would have been much more difficult and much less human than what they did. The way they did it was inhuman as far as the way it treated those people who were incinerated, but, in the long run, or short run, I think it was a much more human way to do it and end it, and teach a lot of people that it's a stupid way to consider doing it again.

SH: You talked about how your father had been protective of you, such as when you came to Rutgers and you wanted to get into campus housing. Did you find yourself doing the same for your two daughters twenty years later during the Civil Rights Movement?

WA: Yes, ... you had to be protective of them enough to make them aware of what you expect, what you think ought to be and what you know there's going to be, in spite of what there's supposed to be, so that they can be prepared for it. ... Under the best or worst of circumstances, they will be protected from it and that they know what they're entitled to; doesn't mean they're always going to get it, but it means they know that they have a right to certain things and that if they push for them, they have a chance of getting them and that, in a situation where things are done properly, they can get things corrected, but it doesn't always happen right away.

Fortunately, they've had pretty good success at finding things the way they were supposed to be and [I] can't say we had a bad way at all.

SH: In the late 1960s, when there was a lot of unrest as far as protesting the Vietnam War and the rioting in Newark, how did you, as a professional and a father, react?

WA: It's not easy, because you have an emotional response and a response where you try to figure out ... the way things would perhaps better be solved, but [you] try to figure out the response that's going to provide, not the easiest answers, never the easiest answer, but it's an answer that provides a response and solves the most problems, not necessarily with the least trouble, but how you can solve more problems that gets the best result that you can get, that keeps functioning, because none of these problems are solved all at once, but you need to find one that's going to keep everybody moving in the same direction. My brother, John, would drive to Newark everyday to "Babies Hospital" during the riots. People knew his car and didn't bother him. The family, however, was scared to death for his safety. John was a tad bit crazy.
[laughter]

SH: Do you think education plays a part in that?

WA: Oh, sure, for everyone. Education is going to provide most of the answers for the questions that have to be solved. ...

CD: I have a few questions that go back to your pilot training and your time in the Air Corps. Can you describe any friendships that you had and any that you are still in touch with?

WA: I had some very close friendships that were developed while we were going through the pilot training and [as a result of] the close proximity that we were placed in. ... We didn't have any choices about who you were placed in training with or what roommates there were. It's just the numbers that came up. ... I don't know of any of the roommates that were just plopped down; I mean, it wasn't any choice. The rosters were written out by some clerk and he read out the names of the people on the roster and that's it, and how it worked out as far as who was a pilot, who was a copilot, in training, it didn't matter. It just was the way it came down, and that's the way it is with things like rosters and roommates. ...

SH: Where were your roommates from?

WA: Let's see, in Tuskegee, the four roommates, I had two from Philadelphia, Paul and Francis, (Bilbo?) from California, and [it was] just like that, I mean.

CD: Do you still keep in contact with any of them?

WA: Not anymore. It's very difficult, afterwards, unless, for some reason, you see them, because we're not doing any of the same things we were doing then. At that time, we were all taking flying lessons and going by a regular routine schedule. ... Once you were graduated from that, and the fact that that [the flying training] stopped right away and ... my class didn't go any further with that, so, that stopped all of that and there was nothing that brought us together

afterwards. Then, the next thing was the dental school, and we kept together with some [classmates]. I don't know, the dental school, in dentistry, you keep together. ... You have dental conventions; you may meet there. If you go to different conventions, there's the American Dental Association, ... there's a Greater New York Dental Meeting, which is, for me, very convenient, very interesting. They have different kinds of information that's available to you. They have all the advertisers who want to show you things in New York. So, it's all easy that way, and you'll see some friends in that context ... as far as the dental relationships are concerned. ... Then, it comes down to personal friendships that you may have developed. ...

SH: Do you know of any other dentists from the Rutgers Class of 1943? [laughter]

WA: No dentists that I know of. It's funny. ... [laughter]

SH: Have you stayed involved with the Class of 1943 or Rutgers?

WA: ... I go down to the reunion, and I've done that the last few years, and so, I see the guys at reunion. ... I was very close to Sam Piller and several of the others.

CD: Have you seen any of your old track teammates at the reunions?

WA: No. I don't think many of the track people came up.

SH: None of your old teammates are still running. [laughter]

WA: I don't think anybody really, [on] the track team, showed up. ... You see, in the engineering class, we get a good turnout, and that's been the same, pretty much the same, group that has come out and that's been good. ...

CD: Looking back at your time in the military, do you feel as though you would have changed anything about your experience, such as enlisting earlier or not at all?

WA: I don't think I would have gone in any earlier. I was never *gung ho*. ... At the time that the separation occurred, I was really disappointed that I did not get the opportunity to fly the advanced trainer, advanced, not trainer, the ...

SH: P-38 or P-40?

WA: Yes. ... No, I didn't want to fly a '40. ... I could have skipped that one. [laughter] The next one, the one that came after the P-40, was the P-51, and that's the one everybody wanted to fly. I would have stayed somewhere and paid to fly that. ... [laughter]

SH: Would you have? [laughter]

WA: Not really. ... [laughter] That was an airplane that you really would have wanted to stay and fly, because it had most of the good things that were improvements, and they worked. ... [It] didn't have the kind of little tricky things that were there that could trip you or get you in

trouble. It was a great airplane that flew reliably and did what was asked of it, and it was a good plane. ... That's why they were able to do so much with it. ... That would have been good, but not something that would have been demanding enough to ...

SH: Stay in.

WA: Stay in [the military], no. [laughter]

SH: I can appreciate that.

WA: Yes.

CD: When the war first began, did you see your community becoming more patriotic, such as people putting out more flags?

WA: I wouldn't say I was aware of any of that. ...

SH: Did your family talk about how rationing affected them?

WA: I don't know whether I paid any attention to that.

SH: At Rutgers, did you have to turn in a ration book for meals at all?

WA: No, not that I remember; I don't think so.

SH: I was just curious.

WA: I never thought of that; yes, everybody had coupons. I don't remember. I remember, after leaving Rutgers, having to account for your gas coupons. ...

SH: You would have been subjected to that out in California as well.

WA: Yes, definitely.

SH: Did you take the train to California to work at Douglas?

WA: Oh, yes, I did, great time. [laughter]

SH: Did you?

WA: Yes. Oh, there wasn't any option. Airline flights were [possible]; I guess people were flying, but I wasn't in any position to fly, but it was a great trip. I had a roomette and I spent most of the time sitting up in the bed. You couldn't have had a better opportunity to just sit and read on the way out, look out the window and the scenery you had. [laughter] ... I mean, you might have gotten a little sick and tired of going across Kansas. [laughter] ...

SH: I just wondered if your father decided that driving to California was a perfect road trip.
[laughter]

WA: No, no, he wasn't that *gung ho*, [laughter] but it was nice. It was a good, nice trip. It was a way to see what was going on. ...

SH: Was there anything shocking for you to see as a young man raised in the Metropolitan Northeast and now to suddenly be traveling across the prairie? Kansas is a long state. [laughter]

WA: Yes. There were some times when you can see an awful lot of the same thing, [laughter] but, in general, after you got past Kansas ... [laughter]

SH: We are picking on Kansas here. [laughter]

WA: Well, the mountains, when you get into the mountains, it's another story. ... [We'd] go around the mountains and crawl up the mountains and around and down, looking out the windows, sometimes, it gets a little hairy, creeping around that [way]. ...

SH: You were headed out West in the winter.

WA: Yes.

SH: A lot of those passes even close down.

WA: Right, and they take a long time going up some of those [mountains]. ... [We] never were aware of anything that was causing a problem, but that wasn't anything, just you knew it took a long time to get up the side of the hills and, gradually, up around and down. ...

SH: Mean feat of engineering.

WA: Yes, [laughter] and I was just glad that there was nothing that gave you any feeling that there was anything other than everything was normal, and there were times. ...

SH: There were no blackout drills or anything similar.

WA: No.

CD: I have one last question. You are an extraordinary man who has accomplished a lot. You were recently inducted into the Rutgers Hall of Distinguished Alumni. What were your thoughts about getting an invitation to become a part of that prestigious community?

WA: First thing was, "Who, me?" [laughter] Really; I didn't know anything specific about the organization and, when I read about it, I said, "That really doesn't sound like me." [laughter] ... Then, you look and the way the whole organization is developed, "There is a place for me and my feet will fit." ...

SH: Your feet will fit in those shoes just fine.

WA: Yes, I've done some things that are unusual, just because the things are unusual. The places I've been involved with, the organizations I've been involved with, I know that the group, NERB, is unusual, and what they've done and the way they've done it. ... I know that's unusual, and the length of time I did it makes it unusual. It was more than fifteen years, and so, I said, "Okay, I guess maybe I can feel comfortable." [laughter] ... I look at it that way. I've done some usual things and some unusual things, and that's part of enjoying your life and being lucky.

SH: What is your passion now?

WA: Well, I used to be a nut golfer, and then, I had ... a valve replaced, and then, after I got home from surgery with that, I had a problem with my neck. ... I'm not sure that that didn't have something to do with the process of the surgery, and nothing I can get mad with anybody about, it's something that happens. ... I got that pretty much straightened out and I still play golf, but I have trouble with my eyes a little bit and made it not so much fun playing golf. ... The problem was, I could hit the drive, I could still hit the ball, but trying to follow the ball, my eyes didn't pick it up. ... I'm looking around, "Where is it?" and you just can't go out every day and play golf and say, "Where is it?" and somebody else has to see it. That made it kind of difficult. I kind of lost interest and haven't gotten back into playing golf, but I may. ... There's always something; I'm not going to go nuts, not completely, anyway. [laughter]

SH: Do your children and your grandchildren live close by?

WA: Yes. One, my older daughter, lives in North Carolina, and my younger daughter lives over here ... off of [I-]78, so, she's handy. She comes over when she needs to, when she wants to or is asked to. [laughter] ... She's close enough so that she's easy to be available to help. I have trouble driving at night now, ... but that's not a problem. ...

SH: That happens.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SH: Let me turn this back on.

WA: Yes. ... I've enjoyed doing this and I can see where this can be helpful to the whole family of Rutgers, these sorts of things that you've been able to find and bring out and people have been able to remember. ... There are a lot of people who've done a lot more interesting things than I have done, but all of this is a part of the history of Rutgers and what we've been able to do and stories we've been able to tell. ... This is a nice way to do it and, unfortunately, we can't remember as many things as we'd like to, [laughter] ... or perhaps in the detail that we'd like to, but I think it's a good idea. ... I know a number of my classmates have talked about this and have talked about having done it, and they all feel the same way, that it's good. You really have to thank John Archibald for having me complete this. He really stayed on my case. [laughter]

SH: That is great to hear, a great validation, thank you, and thank you for your gracious hospitality.

CD: Thank you so much.

WA: You're welcome. ...

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Reviewed by Sarah Thomson 6/11/10
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 6/15/10
Reviewed by Walter G. Alexander, II 7/10