

Dr. Walter P. Guenther
Veteran

Wayne Clarke
Interviewer

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WC: Would you please state your full name and date and place of birth?

WPG: I was born September 8, 1918 in Berlin. I grew up in Berlin, Germany at the beginning of the war. My name is Walter P. (Paul) Guenther.

WC: You grew up in Berlin?

WPG: Yes

WC: You attended school there and what year did you graduate from high school?

WPG: I graduated in '37 and I started to study law and philosophy at University of Berlin when the war broke out and I was drafted immediately in August of '39. Basic training took place at the German-Polish border and only up to winter and then we were sent to a war and along the Alpine Valley, facing Strasbourg. Nothing happened there.

WC: Okay, now how long was your basic training for?

WPG: Oh, for about three or four months. Basic training was how to handle machine gun mostly. Also, a little bit of artillery. You know the 4.5, the very light artillery, was used against the Panthers, so a hand grenade. Also, some basic help in case somebody got wounded.

WC: Was that your first time away from home?

WPG: Yes, that was the first time.

WC: Because you were in college when you were drafted, were you picked to go to officer school?

WPG: No, that's just regular. But after the basic training, I was considered officer's candidate. It was a little human about the upper left. [Points to shoulder to show height of person] But officer school, that was for the professional officers. They went immediately to places like Döberitz outside of Berlin. I was never there. I really started from the very bottom.

WC: Where did you go next?

WPG: After basic training, to the war, along the Alpine valley. Nothing happened there. We faced the French. The French called it the "Croix de Guerre". Funny, or strange or nothing happened, not even one bullet over (six range?)

WC: This was in 1940?

WPG: That was in spring '40 till May '40 when Hitler decided to attack France. We had to ship right away from the war in direction to Trier (Germany), that's near the border, Luxembourg, and Sedan (France), but we were not involved in the combat unit at first encounters. The first combat we were involved in was in Schlacht um Verdun [Battle of Verdun]. It's a famous battlefield from the first World War. Our leadership was very poor. I was promoted to sergeant and I was very unhappy. My superior hated me, and I hated him. He tried to keep me down forever. I was in his unit up until 1941. It took two years until I was wounded and then I got in a different unit.

WC: How were you wounded?

WPG: I was wounded in Russia the first time. That was a year later. In France I was not wounded, although six people of our company were killed and about fifteen were wounded. That was mostly in the Aisne-Oise canal. It was northeast of Paris in the city of Reims, and the Notre-Dame Cathedral. We bypassed Paris east in direction to the lower level to the center of the heart of France. At first, we were very much afraid of courageous counterattack! We were there and there was very little additional support of artillery. We were just a line, and something never happened. Everybody knew the history of France from the first world war and how courageously they fought and how the Germans never made it in Verdun. They never broke through the lines and never reached Paris, or reached the suburbs, so everybody knew that! And everybody knew how well the French army was equipped. They put all their energy into the Maginot Line, and it was hardly any reserve there. We didn't know that. It was still on the Aisne-Oise. The French were up a hill and it was a big meadow between the river and the canal, and we were exposed to direct fire, so it was very unpleasant and frightening to see Germans to the right and left being killed in the open field. There was hardly any artillery support on the German side, but the French had it. After this, we crossed the Marne River to unite. Again, we were frightened, and we knew that the French were in the defense line on the other side of the river. It didn't happen. They had partially fled. Most of the soldiers were gone. We took many prisoners to the other way. It was already chaos on the French side. Of course, we didn't know that, and we were still really afraid that somehow there would be a counterattack. We thought "it can't be possible that we can break through that easily without severe and courageous resistance." But it happened. There was only sporadic fighting and up to the Royal River and after three to four weeks there was (unclear) and we were relieved, and I personally felt sorry for French nation being defeated in such a fast way. My parents were very (unclear). My father had studied in Paris. He was a Federal Court Judge. My mother spoke fluently French. We spoke French twice a week at home just to give me a lift and I am still very grateful years and years later. That practicality saved my life because later I was prisoner of war in France and I was about the only one who could speak French. That saved my life.

WC: Ok, and then after that you were sent to Russia?

WPG: I was sent to Romania from France. We could not understand what happened. Why Romania? We knew they had a Nazi dictatorship, [Ian] Antonescu was his name. They had got rid of their King Carol, and we said we are just there to help and to help strengthen the unpleasant or unpopular regime. Until June 21st, we attacked Russia. We were afraid and we knew it and I personally studied a lot of history and I remember very well a part of French history when Napoleon decided to invade Russia. Tallyho, his secretary said "Sir, you are worse than a criminal, you are an idiot to attack Russia!" I remember that and I knew eight million

Germans against 250 million Russians? How could this ever end in the victory? So, the big surprise was that we faced militia which means people in the age of thirty-four to forty is very poorly equipped. Many times, we had only two people, one guy. Very poor sole issues resorted to wooden soles, so it was pathetic. But! The moment they tried to run away; it was a commissar who shot them. We attacked along the Black Sea towards Odessa. Odessa was nearly an empty city. I don't know or remember if we were the first wave, but at least I remember that there were hardly any young men or young women; they were all gone. Only grandparents and grandchildren. Again, it was an eerie feeling to enter a feeling with no resistance. And then resistance started along the Black Sea towards Crimea and that's where I was wounded the first time in fall '41. (Squints eyes and shrugs shoulders)

WC: How were you wounded?

WPG: I was wounded and shot in the leg. So, I could not walk for a while, but it was not serious. It just went through the calf of my leg.

WC: Ok. Were you in direct combat at that point?

WPG: Yes, yes (nods). There was organized resistance in the Northern end and Northern side of Crimea peninsula and the city of Sevastopol was not taken at first.

WC: Now at that point, were you well equipped and well supplied?

WPG: Yep.

WC: Now once you were shot?

WPG: I was taken back to a hospital in Germany. Unfortunately, I got out of that unit, I was still sergeant, and they gave me the nickname "Permanent Sergeant" because I was never promoted, and I was supposed to be a lieutenant already. The commander, again, disliked me very much and I disliked him as much as he did. (Laughs and smiles)

WC: How long were you in the hospital for?

WPG: During the winter of '41.

WC: Did you get to visit your family at all?

WPG: Yes. (Nods head) I was and at first, I was taken back to Bucharest, the capital of Romania and the hospital. It was quite a nice experience because the wife of the dictator came and visited the wounded soldiers. She spoke in the Romanian language of course and then she suddenly said one word in French, and I could thank her in French. Je vous remercie beaucoup Madame et c'est un honneur de vous rencontrer. I thank you very much Madame, and it's an honor to meet you, and she was very much surprised and so it was quite a blessing. She handed out a package of cigarettes and cookies and then back to Germany. (unclear) Unit then it was 1942.

WC: Ok, when you went to visit your family, had they felt any of the effects of the war?

WPG: Not yet. It was strictly rationing, bit still it was not alarming, you know?

WC: Was your father still a judge at that point?

WPG: Yes. He was just a judge and then he retired during the war. We lived in the Western part of Berlin, and that all came later. It was all destroyed and bombed out and so on. That was the

winter of 1941-1942. It was a catastrophe of course on the Northern front towards Moscow and St. Petersburg.

WC: Ok, so you were sent back to Russia but in a different unit?

WPG: Yep, that was in '42.

WC: What unit was that?

WPG: That was the Sixth Army, and it was built up towards Stalingrad in 1942. It was quite hastily built up and I still remember we did not even have artillery. We just put together units and you didn't know your fellow soldiers or fellow sergeants. So back to Russia, and up to the Donets and Don rivers towards (unclear) that was toward Stalingrad. That's where I was wounded a second time, west of Stalingrad.

WC: Ok there's a lot of resistance at Stalingrad.

WPG: Yes! But I was wounded before the real resistance started. And many people were killed. (Hands and facial expressions)

WC: How were you wounded this time?

WPG: I was wounded with shrapnel. Again, not really serious, but I lost a lot of blood and again I was taken back to the hospital in Germany, while our unit got caught in Stalingrad. And of course, you know the disaster of Stalingrad? Powerless, very unpleasant men because of a salon officer – a man who clicks all the time, smiles all the time, always say yes to a superior and who had accepted stolen Jewish property in Berlin. Everybody knew that. Well, if you do this, you are Hitler's poodle and Hitler made it forbidden to break out of Stalingrad and the German forces were 20 miles west of Stalingrad. He [Hermann Göring] could have easily saved the 100 thousand German soldiers, but he was forbidden. Hitler promoted him to Field Marshal, and at the same time forbade him to break out but he finally surrendered in January '41. The big fat Göring promise of course, supply from the air, it never happened. It was horrible! And again, I survived because I was luckily wounded before the Russians broke through the German supply line.

WC: Now you mentioned that you were helped by your fellow soldiers?

WPG: Oh yes, all the time. I survived things through comradeship. That was accepted automatically. I remember a year later in Russia, a delegation when I was already a company commander. A delegation of soldiers came up and told me "we want you to know that we don't let you bleed to death we pull you out." I was very moved by that. And the only thing I could say was I would do the same thing, for any battlefield, there is no difference.

WC: After the second time you were wounded, you went back to Germany again?

WPG: Yep. (Nods head) Back again to Germany. That was about a year later and a rebuilding of the Sixth Army. The Sixth Army was destroyed, ninety-one thousand soldiers surrendered, and about eight years later, six thousand soldiers came back. Five people out of my company came

back after their rebuilding of the Sixth Army. I was one of the six people, so maybe a few more survived, some not severely wounded ones. That rebuilding took place in France.

WC: Ok. Now do you want to tell us about how you were promoted to an officer? How did that come about?

WPG: France, 1943. Of course in 1942 I was a new unit – they didn't know me I didn't know them, and I was still the sergeant. Now 1943 was rebuilding of the German army and then I was commissioned within six weeks in France.

WC: Did you have to go for any training?

WPG: Yes, there was a training. (Nods head) But, I already had so much better experience that it was no problem for me. Yes, it was three weeks training, you know, as a commander, but it was no problem for me. I was very lucky that I found wonderful superiors. It's funny, it really clicked. They liked me, I liked them, so you know the first minute that you are in the right unit. That was in France. The general feeling in Germany after the disaster of the selling ad was 'it's the beginning of the end'. We lost the war. It sent shock waves through Germany, and Germany ran out of manpower. 1943 in the spring and in Bretagne [Brittany], that's where they were rebuilding to place people. The young soldiers age was between fifteen and seventeen years old. Under-knowledge, frightened because everybody knew what happened in Russia and in Stalingrad, and everybody knew we are going to be back to Russia facing death.

WC: Now during this time, were you able to communicate with your family?

WPG: Yes! All the time, all the time. In France, we felt it was always a paradise. Look, flourishing black markets, but of course, very expensive. Food, you could get food, but let's say for a week's pay you could get maybe one meal at a black market. However, the French were very anxious exchanging rings (unclear) because I spoke French, so I managed to get more acquainted with the owner of the hostel and very easy. They didn't want too much money, but I said "well, maybe I could get you silver." So I asked my mother "why don't you send me your (unclear), you have so much silver at home." And she sent plenty of silver and for each item I get two meals. Each spoon, two meals. Each fork, she had, I don't know how much, but it was wonderful. (Smiles) And she gave me coupons and I could give it to the sergeants. I had two very good sergeants, so I give it to them, and I gave it to another sergeant. In the meantime, I was an officer now. And, of course, in the fall, back to Russia. 1943.

WC: Now how did you get there? By train?

WPG: By train, and then partly attacks to the line between Kiev [Russia] and Chekhov. A big surprise is that it was very quiet, and nothing happened.

WC: Now what about the winters there? Were they pretty brutal?

WPG: The winter was brutal but then the German army was ready, and I had an additional cover, you know? Nylon material and you could sleep on snow and you still kept warm. Outside was white, but the inside was khaki so in the springtime you could turn it inside out and that was valuable in contrast to the first winter which was a catastrophe. There was no equipment ready and they had only a coat and blanket that was not enough. (Shakes head.) And that was for a certain time, relatively quiet, ok? I still remember it was kind of a very large valley. We were here on the little hill and they were there on the little hill about half a mile away over in no-

man's land, but you had to be very careful because sometimes you during the night the Russians came and planted mines. The Russian mine was very very effective and very dangerous! You stepped on it and lost at least a leg. Many times, there was no immediate help and you bled to death. (Shakes head.) It was just a little kind of cigar box, very primitive in contrast to the German mines like a big mushroom which was protection against the Russian T-34 tanks. (Uses hands.) It was very good on the Russian side. Ours was not as good as the Russian tank but Germany rebuilt tanks and did the other extreme! Two heavy tanks which got stuck many times.

WC: And then you were wounded again?

WPG: Yes, but that was heavier later. We were there at kind of a standstill between Chekhov and Kiev but Heldburg (unclear) at Christmas night. We noticed already movements walking back and forth and the Russian's attacked the night at Christmas and I hardly saw them. They came from the right corner and attacked the right wing of my company. We defended ourselves as long as we could, and we finally ran out of ammunition. It was one wave of Russians. The second wave we thought we defeated them. Then there was a third wave and a fourth wave. Manpower was no problem in Russia. But here we were thinner and thinner and thinned out our defense line. So, they broke through the wall and broke our line. We ran out of ammunition and we didn't want to be taken prisoner of war. In the meantime, the Russian warfare became very (unclear). I knew very well they shot each German officer. The first thing they did. So, I didn't want to be shot, this is easy to say. I had my own handgun and say before they shoot me, I shoot myself. It's easy to say, but probably hard to do. (Chuckles, nods head)

WC: Now what kind of weapon did you carry?

WPG: I carried at first a machine pistol. It was not very good. Then the regular rifle was very good. The German machine gun was very good. It was air-cooled, the model 34 and it was valued, and it was also not wasteful in regard to ammunition. You could pull each individual shot, or you could grip for (unclear) so it was very effective, much better than the Russian. Generally speaking, half of them were duds. The Russian artillery was not very good, but still, they had plenty of ammunition. The Russian machine gun was half as good as a German. You've heard it much slower – dut dut dut dut - the German's was– zirrrrrr zirrrrrr – so when the Russian had broken through our lines and many times we were surrounded, we knew exactly what we heard and here are the Russians to the right and to the left. Again, we are encircled, are we going to make it? So, I divided my company. I had two very good sergeants. It's easy to sneak through the lines more in the small groups than the big ones. And we had, again, very good winter (camouflage) uniform so they didn't see it. (Unclear) There were frightening moments, you know? We were addressed for direction and the Russian tanks also came on. So, he said "clear that" so they didn't see us and they bypassed us half a mile away...nothing happened. And there were some very frightening moments we knew we were surrounded. You heard us you know, all around, and it started very serious problems of discipline. (Hand gestures) Some of my students practically tremble. My soldier collapsed and many said, "we are lost", "will die, all of us" and "it's hopeless", you know? And I knew it was a very dangerous moment! I thought and said "I KNOW we will not be lost I guarantee you. I know in twenty miles away it's a safe haven. The city will reach the German defense line and we have to know, and we will make it. A German saying, 'Determination can move mountains' and we will make it." Now they started to cry and I said, "Have a good cry, it's not a shame to cry." So, he came to me we had a good cry, I gave him a bear hug and I realized that's a very critical moment in my unit. It may fall apart; people

may run away and try to break through on their own and that's hopeless. And fortunately, the danger was over, and we made it to the first safe haven, and then another safe haven and so on.

WC: So, you were on foot at this time? You walked all of the way?

WPG: Yes. It was in the Western direction in some very critical moments. At our first safe haven we reached there was a captain there that said "Ok, good but I have order I have to blow up all of the supply in three hours" he said. So, "God", I said, "You are not going to blow this up and I take over, ok?"

"Oh, you can't do it, I'm the Captain"

"Yes, I can! Things are different. You are not going to destroy food. We need food and we have to food as much with us as possible because we don't know wherever and whenever we can get more supply." And he got quite nasty when I surprised him with what I did. (Chuckles) I pulled my gun and shot the ceiling. "And so you understand now?" The man responded with "Ooooooooo!" (Laughter and hands waving) I certainly had a little fun! (Laughter) Yeah, he was the first one to leave! He had his Jeep there, no waiting, so I told him an order to take three of my soldiers with him. "No, I cannot" was his reply. "Yes, you can. He can sit on top of it." "Oh, it's outside." They were children. One of them always started to cry. It was pathetic. From one safe haven to the other and with a lot of luck we made it and I was then through the winter in March '44. We reached the Polish-Russian border. Russian was almost lost. There was of course the summer the Battle of Kursk (?). The second big disaster. From now on the Russians took the initiative, the Germans could not and out of manpower, impossible. The Germans got weaker and weaker and the Russians got stronger and stronger and so on. I was wounded there and that was very serious, right hear near the face. (Points to cheek and ear)

WC: Were you hit with shrapnel there?

WPG: Nope, the so called 'dum dum'. You know that means a bullet, the (unclear) really, cut the top of a bullet, and it tears up your face. So, I just turned around and I was wounded here and out here. (Points to face) I was very hurt, and it was beyond pain. I've seen people dying and I knew that if you don't have any pain anymore, that means death is approaching. I saw it in the face of two wonderful sergeants who helped me to get out of my (unclear). They started to almost cry under that. "Oh, for heaven's sake, stop crying! It only makes it more difficult for me." And then I went to my battalion commander major and it was so written in his face, you know, 'he's going to die', that you know, I saw it, and very lucky. I knew my colonel, and he came from Berlin. Two blocks away from where I lived. He managed to get a helicopter seat for me.

WC: Now that must have been very unusual, the helicopter?

WPG: Very unusual! They were very primitive, the first helicopter. There were only four little seats and the pilot and his assistant: for six people. He managed us, thanks to him, and he practically saved my life. I was flown to a University Clinic of Limburg, (unclear) the capital, southern Poland, which is today, Ukraine. From there I was taken to the Dresden Hospital, only to witness the horror of a destruction of days. I spent almost a year in the hospital. I could not eat for several months, the law was dislocated, they had to pull it back with a bone transplant and so they did a marvelous job in a special clinic. Today you hardly need it, but still, it bothers me. I had a very severe concussion of course.

WC: Now, were you in the hospital when the war ended?

WPG: Yes. All of us! (laughter) You know the destruction and the horror of the bombing of Dresden? I was there in the suburbs and anybody who could walk. I could walk then already. I had to learn how to walk because I don't hear, the balance of equilibrium is in the ear. (Touches ear, side of head) I saw this and ran against the wall...it took the body awhile to readjust. And then, the irony was that I was sent to a unit in the western part of Germany, the Teutoburg Forest which is close to the Dutch border. Now it was already March and April '45 and take over a company, you defend western Germany here in the Teutoburg Forest, ok? Rain the English and American forces and so on, and it was almost a good test situation. We had maybe ten French rifles, ten Belgium, five Dutch, hardly any ammunition but we were up on a hill and could look down and see the highway. I gave an order not to shoot. That if you shoot, they come; already we saw them coming; "if you shoot, that's the end of you." You were surrounded. If you want to survive, you know it's the end of the war. So, I give orders not to shoot and everybody was delighted to follow that. They kept the English forces and probably American forces you could see them coming. We were again surrounded but the war is over "go home." In ten minutes, people were gone. (Laughs and smiles) They followed us. I warned them "please, be very, very careful." Many times, in no-man's land if the SS Unit caught you, they would shoot you right away as a deserter because they knew also that their end was coming. That was the end. Now my problem was 'where do I go? The war is over.' Certainly not to Paris or Berlin where the Russians are. The Russians took everybody.

WC: Now did you surrender to the Americans?

WPG: No. It was just the end of the war and everybody went home if possible. But I was in West Germany and I did not have any friends in West Germany, although a fellow officer said, "come with me to the Rhine River, I have an apartment my parents, my in-laws, something must have survived." But on our way, we were arrested. Now I don't know what English American; I could not see the difference.

WC: Okay. Now do you know if your parents were alive at this point?

WPG: I knew that both were killed

WC: In the bombing of Berlin?

WPG: Yes. My mother was killed about March 1944, about the time I was wounded. I had no connection of course during the retreat of Russia. We had a beautiful summer home outside of Berlin, but my father was killed in February 1945. They threw a bomb directed at him. So, I knew there was no way going back to Berlin. I would not have gone anyway because the Russians had conquered Berlin and they took every able-bodied man to Siberia to the coal mines. That means four weeks to live. I stayed with this friend of mine. We were both arrested and then we were separated and about half a million of German prisoners of war were taken to France. It was hell at first. So, we're talking about a concentration camp. We were first on a meadow. Nothing to eat but a little bit of a bread each day. After a week, the first people died. Usually, the very young and the older ones. The ones my age could survive better because they were hardy enough. Then we were in a big factory hall and then France. Nothing ready for us, just plain cement floor, no blanket, no beds and about twenty to thirty people died daily. Of course, I don't blame the French. They themselves even didn't have enough to eat and the Germans, so no. (Raises shoulders) What saved my life was my knowledge of French. In no time they wanted an interpreter. Hardly anybody spoke French, I did, they had no problem and instead of getting one

little bit of watery soup each day, I went down 210 pounds. Everybody lost weight. Then it went better and better and the (unclear) and the soldiers could volunteer and go out and work on the farms. So that means they survived and got enough to eat. But the officers were not allowed to do this according to an old agreement from 1895. However, they were always looking for a way to rearrange things and if you had a group of ten or twenty people, you could take over and apply in a community and you were like a foreman there. That's what I did and that's how I survived there. It was in Bretange [Brittany, France]. The funny thing is my wife is French, and she comes from Bretange! (Smiles and laughs) Not far away, but I was prisoner of war and we never met. We met here in the United States. (Smiles and laughs)

WC: Now were you still in uniform at that point?

WPG: Yes, yep. (Nods head) Then we got some odd pieces of the (unclear) uniform and English uniform.

WC: Ok, and then at what point did they release you?

WPG: 1947. Almost two years later. Back to Berlin and I was very bitter (unclear). The moment I received my freedom, I didn't know where to go to. I had no home, I had no job, I was still not in very good shape physically, okay, I knew my parents were killed...

WC: Now what about the summer home you had?

WPG: That was outside the Russian zone (facial expression) I would not go there it was all destroyed but there was a village. I had an aunt in Berlin, and I could stay in a little maid's home, but of course first they had two or three other family members in one apartment because so much was destroyed, and people were forced to accept them. And after a while I said, 'what can I do here?' I wanted to continue my University studies, but the University was controlled by communist east Germany, east Berlin. The historical section of Berlin was in the east. I applied – oh a long, long questionnaire – 'what was your path, were your parents communist, where; why are they not communist?' I could not and did not want to and went to the man and said, "Ha ha ha you don't seem to know that we are now the Farmers and Workers Republic" so I ripped that application. (Laughs and pretends to tear paper) So there I was, what should I do now? I'm not going to live in East Berlin, ok, West Berlin I could find a room up in the attic of the half-destroyed home, but positions were open for teachers because many teachers were Nazis and I found in no time, a position to teach French and history. I never forget was horrible over there. The food rationing, it was famine particularly after the war. If you didn't have anything to trade into their bank of soldiers or (unclear) you died. I traded in all of my decorations in the Berlin Zoo, flourishing black market for a candy bar and cigarettes mostly because if you had cigarettes you can go to a banker and three cigarettes equals one hard (unclear). Money was worthless. Hitler had printed so much. And finally, my brother found me. My brother had emigrated in 1935 through your [American] agencies. He didn't want to serve in the Nazi army, but it took two years to find me now that everything was destroyed and there was no postal service. And then I emigrated. He lived here in Albany [New York]. He had a good position; he was a lawyer already. He worked for the Court of Appeals, he could help me, so that's how I arrived here and I'm very happy and grateful to be an American citizen. Many don't know what it means to be in freedom, to live in freedom.

WC: Okay, and what year was that you arrived in America?

WPG: 1951. I had to wait a little awhile. It was a long waiting line and (unclear) came at first, so then I came to Albany. Because I didn't really have a diploma, they gave me quite a good, let's say credit for a bachelors. And I wanted to take some courses in education and so on and then I got my Masters in Middlebury and I got my PhD at the University of Albany.

WC: What did you get your PhD in?

WPG: In French and German culture and history. In the meantime, I went back to France and also got a diploma from Sorbonne. So, I had many diplomas and I taught at the Albany school system and I was very happy. I taught special classes and people got college credit for it. It's a big school system and among three thousand students, there were always fifty or 100 students who were really anxious to learn French and German.

WC: Okay, now was this in college you taught?

WPG: Yes. It was college level, they got credit for college or it. Although I taught in high school; that's level five. If they had at least five years of foreign language they could speak, really some of them, fluidly German. I refused to speak any English. (Smiles) Ich verstehe kein Englisch. 'I don't understand any English!' (Laughs and smiles) And the French was 'Je ne comprends pas l'anglais' (Laughs and waves hands) So anything we did was in French or in German and they learned a lot and they loved it. Even if going to the toilet wasn't in French "Oh, I don't know" "Well, you are going to learn!!" (Laughter)

WC: Now, you met your wife in the States?

WPG: Yeah. (Nods head) Here in the early '60's. There was a very interesting club in Sugar at the International Center [International Center of the Capital Region]. When we met there, I was in charge of the German section and I was very active in the French section, contributing to the program. That's how I met my wife. My wife was the widow of an American soldier and had a son, so I have a stepson and I have a grandson. But I don't like the word stepson, so, we are very close. And then in retirement, and even before retirement, I was a president of the Teachers Association for German and French. We had programs all over the states, you know? And one we had to pull up in West Point [Maryland], and I met a colonel there and we became very good friends. He retired in the meantime and for about ten years there was nothing. We had, two years ago [2006], a very interesting meeting and conference on the second world war in Guilderland [New York], that's outside of Albany [New York], and there were two officers from West Point participating. I participated and they approached me and said, "could you and are you willing to come to us and talk to the candidates?" I said, "oh yes, very much." So, I knew ties and knew friends, and very good friends with the colonel here. Brought me by his first name, I call him and he's wonderful. He knows an awful lot and he is, for me, a young hero. Because he has been already two years in evac...yeah, so highly decorated. He was just a lieutenant colonel and this summer [2008], he was promoted to colonel and I was invited at the ceremony and was very moving for me. And I would be back there. I await any minutes to hear from him. (Smiles) I was twice this year giving talks to the cadets mostly about Russia and the problems about discipline and leadership. How I managed to keep my, let's say 'shit together'. (Smile)

WC: Over the years that you got out of the military did you ever encounter anybody that you had served with after the war?

WPG: Only once in Berlin. One of my company, yeah. Quite an interesting story. I have to return back. After Stalingrad, they say Hitler turned against his own people introducing the Russian-type commissar system, because a political officer with unlimited power who should weed out the so-called pacifists or the Democrats could degrade you any minute. You could lose your rank and very dangerous men to face. (Unclear) Fortunately at the battlefield, you don't see him too much but, in the back, more or less. Now, the man I met in Berlin from my company, had told a joke about Hitler. Maybe I tell the joke? (Smiles) It's a very good one and many times it's a play on words and it loses. So, Hitler's driver drives too fast and kills a dog. Hitler said, "You have to go to the farmer and tell them you killed that son of a bitch." So, the driver went to that farmer and it took minutes, and minutes he came back very happy and Hitler said "Oh they were wonderful people, they were so nice to me! What did you say?" "Yes, I said I'm Hitler's driver and I killed that son of a bitch and everybody hugged and kissed me." (Laughter) He got half a year, you know? Somebody turned him in after having told that joke! He got half a year in a Soviet Punish Unit. That means pick up mines in no-man's land. That means you are ready to die. So, he survived, and he was in Berlin somehow, somebody screamed (unclear – name)! (Looks around) Said nobody knows me here said who is it? It can't be true. Maybe there is somebody else with the same name. No, he came running! A big bear hug and so that's the only one I met. One person.

WC: Alright, and you were a young man while Hitler was rising to power.

WPG: Yes.

WC: Do you remember what it was like? Was there a lot of fear in the community about this?

WPG: It started step by step. At first, I hate to say it, but he was very popular. He said not one penny to France anymore, Treaty of Versailles, you know Germany was severely punished to pay? The democratic government of Weimar tried to get relief, let us/allow us to pay less. You know, the situation, Hitler said "NOT ONE PENNY!" Well, he was very popular. There were millions of people without a job. Overnight they found a job – very easy, building up the army. From 100 thousand men, to five million people. So, everybody suddenly had a job and was very happy. Ok, well of course they kicked the Jews in the derrieres. (Unclear) said you shouldn't do that, you know, but I'm happy I have a job you know? I was five years out of a job so it's very difficult to judge. My family, our family, didn't suffer at all. (Unclear) They were almost rich. They traveled all over. My father traveled all over the world as a young man. But the moment the war started. Hitler lost his popularity. Everybody said "Ohhh only twenty years ago, 1918." My grandmother said, "We have not forgot the horrible years of the first World War." The hunger, the starvation, the Sugar War when the Communists tried to take over in Berlin particularly with the help of Soviet Russians connoisseurs. When the worst situations are more radical the more brutal the regime became. We know exactly in 1943 there was a term created of us Sippenhaft in German. It's an old Teutonic [language] and what Sippen means is 'a larger family' and haft means 'arrested'. So, if something happened, you told the jokes, you made a remark, you were arrested and put in a concentration camp and if they could not get you, they put your next relatives in. If I would have said something like "Oh! You see, now we are going to lose!" Somebody would turn me in, and my parents would have been put in a concentration camp. That means you months, and you die there. You're supposed to die there. Everybody knew that. Nobody knew really about Auschwitz and Treblinka. They were, of course, rumors all the time and they knew that the Jews are somehow picked up. That was even my first horrible experience on our own apartment house in Berlin. There were two Jew sisters, 1941. My parents didn't

know what happened. The Jews are being picked up during the night. Not police, not army, no, special units. You know, not uniforms and they take them somewhere to the East like cattle. And I knew that I saw it, you know? And then you come back and fight for this regime that brutal criminal regime? And may give your life. I knew very well what happened and millions knew, and they were trapped. I did see Auschwitz after the war. There were always rumors in Berlin about it and of course that was important. Hitler was a very shrewd fellow. Brutal and shrewd. Nobody could travel more than fifty miles unless you apply, you know, to go to Dresden or for a certain reason, but it must be one night unless you're with a (unclear) or a relative in the hospital. That was the exception. So, nobody could travel to Poland and that's really where the organized murder took place.

WC: Alright, well thank you very much for your interview.

[Walter is standing with box of badges and medals in hallway]

WC: Okay, we have a few of your decorations. Do you want to explain to us what they are?

WPG: [Badge in top left] This is an infantry badge, and it was the highest decoration. It was only awarded to people in combat units. [Badge in lower right] This is the second one is Iron Cross first class, I had Iron Cross second class already in France, but you only used to a limit. [Badge in middle] Now this is a first lieutenant and [Upper right] that is silver for being wounded three times in Russia

WC: Okay, and then what is this other badge?

WPG: [Lower left] This is just an infantry badge. It was not a very high decoration, but you get it after, let's say, half a year in Russia.