

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
WILLIAM T. WAMBACH
Pilot, US Navy and Marine Corps, World War II
2018

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Wambach, William T., (1925–). Oral History Interview, 2018.
Approximate length: 1 hours 23 minutes
Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Summary:

In this oral history, William T. Wambach of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, discusses his service with the United States Navy as an aviation cadet and Marine Corps officer during World War II. He entered service in 1943 and was discharged from the reserves in 1952.

William Wambach grew up in West Allis, Wisconsin, and the northwest side of Milwaukee during the depression. His father was able to maintain a job during that time as a draftsman, designing generators at Allis Chalmers in West Allis. His father also worked on the Hoover Dam and volunteered with the Army Air Corps on high altitude flights testing weightlessness.

Wambach recounts the first time he heard about the war, and that after Pearl Harbor, he knew the war would affect him. His recruitment journey began at Marquette University in Milwaukee. He qualified for a program that admitted high school seniors to Marquette. After finishing one semester there, Wambach received draft orders to report to St. Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin, for Officer Training School in 1943.

He experienced his first airplane ride after arriving at Lawrence College on a privately owned Piper Cub plane in the Appleton countryside while out for a ride with a local farmer. This inspired him to choose becoming a Navy pilot as his first priority. He passed the exams and switched from the V-12 officer training program to the V-5 program as an aviation cadet after his second semester at Lawrence. While at Lawrence he took classes in English, physics, drafting, and physical education.

After being accepted to the V-5 aviation cadet program he was promoted to seaman second class and participated in a few months of preparatory flight training in southern Iowa before being sent to aviation-preparatory flight training in Mt. Vernon, Iowa. At Mt. Vernon, cadets were trained on bi-wing planes dubbed Yellow Pearls. He was able to ride in the back of the planes with more advanced cadets.

Wambach was then sent to pre-flight school at Saint Mary's College in Moraga, California, that focused on physical conditioning for flying. A typical day at St. Mary's included physical fitness activities that included boxing and soccer. Instructors were regular college teachers and Naval officers who trained them to be officers. He met recruits from all around the country that surprised him with some of their behavior.

Wambach finished at Saint Mary's in February 1945 and was then sent to the Naval Air Station in Glenview, Illinois. At Glenview cadets learned how to fly with two-seater planes. Training included aerobatics, loops, snap rolls, slow rolls, along with formation take offs, and landings.

After ten hours of initial training, his first flight alone was a quick take off and landing after getting a Dear John letter from his girlfriend in Appleton that caused him to lose his fear of going out on his own because he was so upset.

During the summer of 1945, he started his advanced training in Texas. He was six weeks away from getting his wings when the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He learned his job would have been to support the invasion of the Japanese home islands had the war not ended then. Many of his instructors were already veterans of the war and were able to recount the dangers of the war to the cadets.

Wambach trained in Texas to fly SNJs, which are single engine, single wing advanced-trainer aircraft. He learned instrument flying, shooting guns from a plane, formation flying, navigating over open water, touch-and-go landings, and night flying.

Wambach experienced his most dangerous moments during a night flying practice in December 1945 while in a three-plane formation. While on approach for landing he misjudged how high he still was in the air and “landed” ten feet above the ground, bouncing the plane and stalling the engine. He bounced a second time onto the left wheel and wing that caused the plane to veer off the runway. He then applied both breaks that caused the plane to sink into the sand and flip over onto its back. Wambach experienced a court martial for this incident that caused him to repeat the night flight test where he ultimately passed. While in Texas, Wambach also trained in pilot aerobatics and dive bombing with the Dauntless Dive Bomber.

Towards the end of his training, he passed an exam and received a commission to fly for the Marines. He was an active-duty Marine for only six weeks before receiving his discharge orders and during those six weeks he was assigned to a training base. His job was working as assistant officer of the day doing barracks and troop inspections.

Wambach joined the reserves and returned to Milwaukee in May of 1946. He started a program in electrical engineering in the fall of 1946 at Marquette University and married in 1948. Wambach occasionally went on two-week active-duty cruises to earn extra money and decided to leave the reserves in 1952. He retired as a district engineer with the Wisconsin Highway Department. Wambach was very active with the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Young Eagles Program.

Biographical Sketch:

William T. Wambach was born on August 22, 1925, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He served with the United States Navy as an aviation cadet and Marine Corps officer during World War II. He entered service in 1943 and was discharged from the reserves in 1952. He returned to Milwaukee after the war, completing a program in electrical engineering at Marquette University and retiring as a district engineer with the Wisconsin Highway Department.

Archivist's Notes:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript, if possible.

Interviewed by Adam Novey, 2018.

Transcribed by AWS Transcribe, 2020.

Audit check by Luke Sprague, 2020.

Abstract written by Paul Moriarity, 2020.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2143.Wambach_master.wav]

[00:00:00]

NOVEY: All right. Today's December 18, 2018, this is an interview with William Theodore Wambach who served with the Navy, an aviation cadet corps and the Marine Corps during World War II. This interview is being conducted at Mr. Wambach's apartment in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Interview is the interviewer as Adam Novey, and this interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veteran Museum Oral History program. So, uh, just to start with, um, where and when were you born?

WAMBACH: August 22, 1925, in Milwaukee.

NOVEY: Okay, and tell me a little about a little bit about growing up.

WAMBACH: Oh, well, when I was four, my folks moved from Milwaukee out to West Allis because my dad worked with Allis-Chalmers Manufacturing company. And so then, from four until sixteen I grew up in West Allis, went to a public school through third grade, I guess, and then went to parochial school through eighth grade and, uh, started Catholic high school. When I got to the high school age when I was sixteen I had two years in and my folks decided they needed a bigger house and they found one, and it was way on the northwest side of Milwaukee. And so we moved over there, and I finished high school there, which was a long way from school. And the bus didn't come out all our way. So my brother and I either hitchhiked later on we got where we took our bikes. I went what was it? Seven miles, I guess. With our books, our musical instruments and our gym bags our bicycle.

NOVEY: Yeah. So what was your family's experience with the Great Depression?

WAMBACH: Oh, boy. My dad was lucky. He kept his job, at Allis-Chalmers he was a draftsman. And they were doing important government work, I guess is what did it. So he was never without a job. We had to scrimp a little bit, you know to get by on what you mean, but we made it. We had a big garden across the street.

NOVEY: Okay. Do you have any siblings?

WAMBACH: Oh, yes. Six of them.

NOVEY: OK.

WAMBACH: Three brothers, three sisters.

NOVEY: What was it like growing up in a big family like that?

WAMBACH: Well, I was the oldest, so I had to give in to all the younger ones. Yeah, that's how you learn.

NOVEY: So, uh, your father is working in Allis-Chalmers. What was he building there?

WAMBACH: Oh, he was a draftsman.

NOVEY: Okay, okay.

WAMBACH: Drawing up plans for primarily, uh, electric generators.

NOVEY: Okay.

WAMBACH: So he worked with the engineers there. In fact, he worked on the Hoover Dam.

NOVEY: Okay, so that was probably working with the, was it the civilian conservation that the CCC? That was working on that, or?

WAMBACH: I don't think so. But anyway, part of what he had to do one time one of the big impellers on a double railroad car, uh, tipped into the pond that was being filled because, you know, it was built on broken rock and got unstable. And so he had to go out there with some other a couple of their engineers, and he to check and see if the wooden casing around have protected it enough or did they have to haul it all the way back to West Allis and repair. And so they were able to fix it there. He had an interesting experience there, too. Uh, the Army Air Corps asked for some volunteers in that area where he was working to go on, uh, flights where they were testing weightlessness. So, you know, along with working on the generators, on the Hoover Dam. He got to go on a flight where they would, you know, put the plane up high and dive it over so that the guys have floating up there.

NOVEY: What year was this?

WAMBACH: I suppose 1935, '36 somewhere because I was a kid in grade school.

NOVEY: So what types of planes were they using for that?

WAMBACH: God knows. I don't know. I was too young to know.

NOVEY: Okay. So, um, what was your first impressions of flight?

[00:04:35]

WAMBACH: Oh, I loved it. My first chance to fly. Do anything? Well, let's start before that. In 1942 the war World War II was going so bad in Europe that, uh, the top brass of the military took a lot of the officer candidates out of colleges and made them foot soldiers and sent them over there. So suddenly these colleges for other guys, that left now they lost a bunch of those. They had to do something. And the head people at Marquette University in Milwaukee decided, hey, we got a chance here. So they went out to every high school within fifty miles and told the administration there they would take any students who were the upper third of their class and were seventeen years of age because seventeen because if they were eighteen they're going to get drafted before the semester was over. And when they came out, actually, to say this, this was about, you know, either December of '42 or January '43? Because it was before the first semester of senior year was over and they said they take us if you're eighteen you'd get drafted before the semester was over. And if you were sixteen you get through that semester, you get to start on the first semester of college, and I fit the criteria. So I went. But once I got there, I said, I don't want to get drafted and just be a foot pounding soldier. So, I went and looked and they had a Naval ROTC program going there, and I went and asked to join it, and they said, OK, let's see your high school diploma. I said, I haven't got it yet. I gotta finish

this semester satisfactorily to get it. Sorry, I said, What am I gonna do? Go down a recruiting station, see what they've got? And I did, and they had a program where you could get your parent's permission, written permission past physical, pass the written exam, and then just go on with your schooling. Well, they put you in a holding tank. Okay, so I finished that semester, and within two weeks after it was over, I got a summer job. It only lasted two weeks, and I got my orders to report to Lawrence College in Appleton, Wisconsin, for an officer training program.

NOVEY: Okay, so, back when you were still in the 1930s, when you were a kid, had did you have an interest in flying?

WAMBACH: Oh, yeah. I mean, my brother and I made model airplanes all the time. You know, the ones that to beat out of uh, balsa wood and rice paper and we were rascals. We lived in a two-story house in our bedroom was on the second floor. There was an airing porch out back so we'd get these airplanes built and go out there at night, put lighter fluid along the leading edge of the wing light a match to them, we'd wind up the propeller and fly him off there just to see 'em go down [both laughing] totally destroying the work you did all that crazy crazy stuff that you do when you are a kid. But we liked it.

NOVEY: Did you know any pilots? Uh, who had been in World War I growing up?

WAMBACH: No.

NOVEY: So, when did you have your first airplane ride?

WAMBACH: Well, right after I got to Lawrence College. Ah. A farmer called me up and said his sister had been one of my teachers, a nun in grade school. And she said, will you check on this kid and take care of him because he is the first time he's away from his mama? So he said, "How'd you like to come out this weekend? Uh, go to church with us. You know, we're same faith and then dinner." It sounded good to me. And this is just a week or two after I got to Appleton. And so he did that. And after dinner, he said, I'll drive through the countryside and show you what it's like out here before we get back into the city. And that is going along here. There was a pastor with a little, it was a hangar, really, I don't know what it looked like, a garage. And but there was a sign board out at the highway. That said airplane rides for a buck or two, whatever. In 1943. And he said, "Would you like an airplane ride?" I said "Sure would, but I haven't got any money, I didn't get paid yet." "Well, I'll take care of us." So he paid the dollar or two, whatever was and I got just, you know, a little flight up and around and back down again in a Piper Cub. The littlest plane you can think of. And it really grabbed me. So later on, after about a semester, semester and half the Navy had a night when they called us all together and told us the different kind officers you could try to work, toward. And that would be a deck officer, a chaplain, gunnery officer, a pilot. Whoa. Hello. So I put that one down for my first priority, and before the second semester was over, they had a test for aviation cadet and I passed it. Okay, so then at the end of the second semester, I got a huge promotion. I was an apprentice seaman, uh, in the V-12 program to become an officer someday. Well, my promotion was to a seaman second class. But now in the V-5 program, which was gonna be a aviation cadet. And so I spent maybe three, four months sweeping runways, gassing planes and doing the dishes, you know? Yeah, a little bit of code and [microphone noise] for training. But mostly it was just grunt work until they had room for us. Because what was happening, of course, again, the war was going bad in '42 but it turned around, somewhat. And so they had been putting lots of guys in because they expected a lot of them to get killed. And, uh, so the pipeline was pretty full when I got in so, had do something with us.

[00:10:48]

NOVEY: So, going back a little bit. When did you first hear about the war in Europe?

WAMBACH: Oh, Lordy. Probably in seventh eighth grade, you know, you make you hear it on the radio, folks let you read the paper once and well, and I remember one day walking home from school number three ladies standing on the sidewalk talking, and as I went by one lady, that Hitler, man, you know. So I knew he was bad a guy.

NOVEY: Okay, so but you didn't really It didn't really hit you that it would affect you. Or do you think that it?

WAMBACH: Well, I didn't think about it right away. But once, uh, for a harbor happened, and I was what? It was December 41. I was a junior in high school. Then I knew it's gonna affect me because, you know, the next day, the president said we're at war, and so I started to think about it and get ready. That's why when The following year, I got in college and I told you what happened there. I want to get in his officer training program.

NOVEY: So was it only the Navy that was offering this type of program?

WAMBACH: No. no.

NOVEY: Army Air Force offered.

WAMBACH: Well, there were other programs, but I didn't. They weren't at Marquette. They might have been before. They're taken all these guys out, but, uh, I didn't I wasn't aware of them.

NOVEY: So you said when you started your training for the, um your training?

WAMBACH: Officer training.

NOVEY: Yeah. Uh, you were working on sort of agree with the ground crew like you were. Like, you're helping gas planes.

WAMBACH: So after I got on a college had two semesters at college, and yeah, and yeah, I was working on ground crew is for sure, doing the dishes. You know, I go steam the dishwasher. In fact, I learned a lesson there. It was a very hot job in the middle of summer and steam all around. And there was an ice cream cone wrote on the side and some older guy, you know, who was a non-commissioned officer. He said, Hey, you guys, you know, I'll show you something. He showed us how to Jimmy up to cover the thing and sneak our hand in and get an ice bar out. And he said, if anybody tries to put you under report and arrest you, tell 'em you weren't getting fed enough. What a guy. Yeah, you learn other than official, channels.

NOVEY: So I when you join. You said at first, you were just put in a holding tank until you have finished high school. Is that right, uh, And then,

WAMBACH: Well, I was actually finishing my first semester of college, but I had to do that to get my high school diploma. Okay.

NOVEY: So You finished your first semester of college. And then after that was when you were inducted into the Navy program.

WAMBACH: Yeah. Yeah. Just two weeks after that, it got done with my exams. Started my summer job. Two weeks later, I got my orders to go and report to Lawrence College.

NOVEY: All right, so, and where's Lawrence College?

WAMBACH: Appleton, Wisconsin. Yeah, you're not too far, but yeah. 100 miles away from my mama.

NOVEY: So how is it like transitioning into the military style of life.

[00:14:14]

WAMBACH: Right. Well, I'll stay. Would have On the way up there on the train, different guys were getting on different. I came from Milwaukee and on they would get on at Fond du Lac, Oshkosh and so forth. And, uh, then we were talking on the back platform when conductor. "What do you guys doing their I yours this was Appleton Junction?" Yeah, but we're going to Appleton. Oh, you guys, that's where you're supposed to get off. So he said I let you off at the next place, which was just a crossing. You know, Kimberly, combined locks. I forgot some place like that. And so he pulled the chain and we got out. And then there we were with our luggage. What do you do? He probably ten miles from Appleton. So we started walking, and I think we probably gotta ride before it was over, but this was in July, 1st, we were supposed to report July 1st, and by the time we got there, we were pretty pooped. Didn't realize it. And the first thing this chief petty officer did with us was stand us all that attention out in front of the I can't say barracks. It was a student dormitory and was Jonas where the bear did it in the buckwheat, you know, and ahead of me, some guy. [Whistles] Bonk, passed out and I thought holy mackerel. You know? Well, that must have scared because the chief got him over there, set him on the steps, pushed his head down to get the blood running back. And then he came back. He starts talking again, and I'm standing there all of a sudden, the sun came right down into my face, you know? Not literally, but I couldn't see them. So I turned to put my hands on the twos walked between the rows. And I could just hear the chief say, "Oh, you damn athlete, got me over there" and shove my head too push up against get blood going into again and I got over it. It was obviously exciting and explore. And I was only seventeen.

NOVEY: Yeah. Okay. So, was this a military base or was it?

WAMBACH: No, no, just a college. Appleton, and they took a contract with the Navy because they didn't have any students at the time.

NOVEY: So was it Navy instructors?

WAMBACH: Um-hm. There were also the regular college instructors and teaching some of the courses, but the Navy instructors were teaching us drill. The athletic officers were taken us out in the morning for exercises and running. I can remember learning how to break step running over the bridges over the Fox River because if we were all ponying at the same time gonna shake the bridge.

NOVEY: Yeah. So were you. What types of classes do they start you out learning?

WAMBACH: Uh, well, we had English, uh, math for sure. Physics, I can remember. Had physics eight o'clock in the morning. Oh, boy, that was tough, but we had a good, reasonable, prof who took into account that we were just kids. And had to learn. And the drafting. PhyEd of course. I can't remember anymore.

NOVEY: Okay. And this was before you were split up into being an aviation cadet.

WAMBACH: Yeah. Okay. I had no thought there. I was just going to go to an officer. But then when they gave us this opportunity and I picked pilot first well, I took the test. Then after those two semesters, they moved me into the preparatory group, if you call it that, the seaman second class V-5, which meant you were going to be a cadet someday. And so after three or four months of doing that grunt work they had room at a flight preparatory school in Iowa and I got sent there.

NOVEY: Okay, so you were you were doing this grunt work. Was this at an air base or?

WAMBACH: Yes. Yeah. It was a primary, the very beginning flight training base. And so because the cadets there we're learning how to fly the open cockpit bi-wing yellow perils they called them cause they all had yellow paint on. And, uh, we'd have to crank the engines. We had gas 'em sweep the runways. All that good stuff, but we've got a chance to go ride in the back seat once in a while, there's some cadet was finally advanced far enough where he was right in the front seat without an instructor in the back seat was available. They frequently needed somebody in that back seat to keep the plane balanced while they go to practice their aerobatics. So I learned early on that, uh, my stomach didn't like it. [Laughing] Except, I did find out early on too that once I had control of the plane when I was doing something, the concentration or something just did away with my nauseous-ness. Before that, I was puking over the side.

NOVEY: You think it had something to do with other students who might not know how to fly at the best.

WAMBACH: Nah, it didn't bother me, it was just the motion of the plane.

NOVEY: Okay, all right, so you were sent down to Iowa, you said,

WAMBACH: Yeah.

NOVEY: Okay. So tell you about that transition about what you were doing there.

[00:19:49]

WAMBACH: Well, the first place I went to do the sweeping runways and stuff was also in southern Iowa. In fact, while we were there for that three or four months, there was a flood on the river in town. And then they got everybody from the base, everybody, including us guys and took us into town and made us help work on the flood. You know, uh, getting boats and going to people's houses and take them their stove or whatever we could get out of there. Okay. [cell phone rings] Uh darn, excuse me, I should have shut this off. Stop that. I'll put it on mute. That's my fault. I should have taken care of that

as soon as I sat down. I have to do it when I go to church Have do when I go. Anyplace else. Forgot? Yeah. Okay. Where was I?

NOVEY: See?

WAMBACH: Oh, I was helping with the flood. And the most interesting part of it was second, third night, whatever, I was sent with a coup into a whole driven out [??]. And there was a oh, earthen dam across the river and then a concrete dam. You know with the waterfall where they did their electric power and the earthen dam was starting to get overtopped, and they were afraid it was going to get washed out. And so we were all up there and we had a going dig the dirt and gravel from the front of the earthen dam, and put it into gunny sacks. Put it on their shoulder carry it back twenty, thirty feet, whatever was, slide it down the other side behind ropes to. You know it was the kind of exciting the middle of, old boy. I hope this doesn't give away because You know, I don't know if I can swim, good enough, but I made it, obviously.

NOVEY: So were a lot of the different military personnel in that area helping, or was it just Navy cadets?

WAMBACH: All of us. All the military were pressed into service to help civilians there because, you know, it was bad deal.

NOVEY: Yeah. Okay. So, uh, once you finally started school for the cadet program, uh, tell me about your first.

WAMBACH: Well, the first places flight for preparatory school was just like college classes for three, four months, whatever it was. And so we had instructors from the college, and it's finding whether they're in the summertime, so all the other students were gone, which meant this little bitty town of Mount Vernon, Iowa, had three teenage girls and there were sixty cadets. Teenagers, wow. So they were busy running there? Uh, USO, you know, vacant store with a record player that we'd go there and dance with the girls, but, you know, sixty guys can't dance with everybody. So a lot of us would hitchhike over to the big city of Cedar Rapids, which was probably fifteen, twenty thousand or something.

NOVEY: Yeah. Yeah. Okay.

WAMBACH: But what was really keeping me going all this while was the gal who is my wife now and several other gals from our church in Milwaukee. It belonged to the Catholic Youth Organization, which I belong to in my brother, my sister. These girls decided they were going to write the all the guys that were in the service. Okay, so the Laurette [??] was one of them that was right to be in and two or three or four others, and it ended up much later because I had really one date with her. But I'll tell you the rest of story when we get there. [Laughing]

NOVEY: So your first, uh, you first getting into the naval cadet program the training of it. It's pretty much

WAMBACH: Ground school

NOVEY: Ground school, then just general classes.

WAMBACH: Well, yeah.

NOVEY: When did you start? Uh, learning for actual flight lessons?

WAMBACH: That I had another school to go to before the flight school? Pre-flight school.

NOVEY: I am getting ahead of you, so.

WAMBACH: Yeah pre-flight school, There were four or five of them around the country and colleges, and I was at the one at Saint Mary's, California, and there it was mostly physical fitness. Okay, we're getting us in good physical shape before we try to learn how to fly. The interesting thing was visited there one time many years later in and an aunt lived in California, eventually and Laurette [??] and I were out there and I said, "Oh, stop at Saint Mary's and just look around," see what it was like a way many years later and I went in to the library. Then I found some issues of the weekly or whatever it was newspaper that the Navy put out. And for cripes sakes, I ran into my name in one of them, which said, I can't believe this because I'm a little skinny guy. I set the record in the obstacle course, indoor obstacle course. Okay, for now, that was in 1944. You war had been going on quite a few years. So it was something I beat all the guys ahead of me. I'm sure it was broken after that. But it was just fun to I did. I had no idea I forgot all about it. Must have been a big deal when it happened, but I went on from there to. And that was in February of 1945 that I graduated from there and went to Glenview Illinois Naval Air Station to begin learning to fly.

[00:25:28]

NOVEY: Okay, So back in California describe a typical day there.

WAMBACH: Oh, my. We had lots of courses and it was lots of physical fitness. You know, for a couple a month, I guess they I had boxing. In fact, I feel pretty good about it. Oh, I lost my first fight, won my second. They went weekly. We've worked during the week and have a match. And I want the second one, I won the third one, then the forth one I came up against the lefty. Oh, man, I didn't know what to do. He decked me once each round. Finally, in the third round, after he decked me again, one of my buddies around the bell and bang, he rang up the bell, he didn't wait for the round to end, but the coach, who was a Navy officer had been the coach at Washington University, and he got me on the side and said, "When you get done with the war and everything, come and see me, I'd like to see if I can get on my boxing team, you got some possibilities." Well, it didn't ever happen, but it was nice to know that he thought I could use my left for jabbing. I was no knock anybody out of anything, but I could pepper 'em away. Phewy, and we did. Oh, the sports learned soccer. Never had soccer in high school, but learned soccer there. And that was interesting being in the Navy and you're playing soccer. All you had on was a jockstrap of pair of shorts, socks and shoes. That's it. Okay, you know, So you really banging against each other. And, uh, getting physically fit, that's for sure. It's a wonder we didn't get concussions, really. But when I would back at flight preparatory school in that summer, uh, the local high school coach was gonna have his football team practice in August and he asked the Navy officers if if we would scrimmage against 'em. And so here these kids came out with their, it was their practice uniform. But they had pads on and us guys were dressed like I told you, like, for soccer? And there we are, across the line from these kids, but now there, anywhere from one to two years younger than us. And so they're looking at us like this because we all have scabs on our knees, you know, from going bare kneed. First couple of plays. The blood was running down. It was just interesting.

NOVEY: Yeah. So what were your instructors like? Like the like in Iowa and out in California?

WAMBACH: Well, like you said, some of them were college teachers, women, men, whatever. But then we always had three or four, that were naval officers, and they were teaching us really how you're gonna get to be an officer, The others were courses that were basics, you know, your math, your sciences 'cause you're gonna need to know that in order to do the, uh, navigation, astronomy and all that stuff eventually and you're gonna have to know enough about science that handle you're weapons too.

NOVEY: Yep. Okay, so were your instructors at this point, were any of them had any of them been overseas during the war yet?

WAMBACH: Yeah, sure yeah, most of 'em had, come to think of it, yeah, they had been overseas, and then they came back to help train us, which was great, because they knew what we were supposed to be working toward. And, you know, some of the phy-ed guys had not been overseas, but they were had been coaches.

NOVEY: Okay, so what would you do for fun out in California?

WAMBACH: Get into town, because Saint Mary's is a little bitty suburb way outside of Oakland San Francisco area. And so we'd get on a Navy bus and ride it into its town on a weekend if you had the whole weekend. And in fact, I got to know a gal from there and she had a fiancé, if you will, a boyfriend. And so we were just friends. Yeah, but, uh, it was interesting to have a place to go in. Her folks would have me for dinner on Saturday night, and they happen to be Catholic like I was. So I go to church with him on Sunday morning and yeah, we did, and we'd go to the campus of the university in, uh, San Francisco.

[00:30:04]

NOVEY: Okay. So, uh, whenever you move to a new location, how are you moving with it? Was it by train?

WAMBACH: Yes, Definitely. Definitely. Yeah. I can remember when we finished that flight preparatory school. They didn't know where they were going to send us so my orders were just to go to Kansas City to a place where it was official administrative place and they were gonna figure out where to send us so that we get there. And there were a whole bunch of cadets then reporting from all around the country. And then, uh, that's when I got sent out to California from there.

NOVEY: Okay, so up in Appleton, probably even down in Iowa, was it mostly people from Midwest people who you were training with.

WAMBACH: No, no, no. In fact, when I first got in at Lawrence College, I can remember one of my roommates was from New Jersey. Another one was from Oshkosh, but, uh, when I forgot, we're all else, you know. But there were, like, six of us in a room, and we had bunk beds, you know? Three sets of bunk beds in one room [laughing] really crowded. But yeah, there are guys from all over the country.

NOVEY: So how does that, uh, like getting used to people from different areas?

WAMBACH: [Laughs] It was interesting because you find guys do stuff you'd never even think of doing. [Both laugh] And Frank [??] said, "I knew it was a sin." [Laughs]

NOVEY: Yeah, so after California, where did they send you?

WAMBACH: Glenview, Illinois, Naval Air Station. In fact, that doesn't exist anymore. And all that's left of it is the control tower. The whole rest of the airport has been torn up concrete, everything built houses on it. Okay, Wife when I visited there once just to see what was all about. And now I belong to the Friends of Glenview Naval Air Station. And send 'em a little money once in a while to keep up the memories. In fact, I learned that's where George H. W. Bush that just died last week, he trained at Glenview Naval Air Station. But I the year before I did, because he was your older than I. And he phew went right through, because that's when the war was going tough and he got done. He got overseas. He was already shot down out over the Southwest Pacific when I was just learning.

NOVEY: Okay? And he has only a year behind you.

WAMBACH: Yeah, I know. A year ahead of me.

NOVEY: A year ahead of you.

WAMBACH: Yeah, because he was nineteen when he got shot down.

NOVEY: Okay. Huh. Yeah. So what did they start training you for in Illinois?

WAMBACH: Learning on the fly and it was amazing to be were only there three or four months and they had us taking these two little these little open two-seaters and uh, we were doing aerobatics, learning to do loops and snap rolls and slow roles and formation takeoffs and landings after only three or four months. I mean, you guys, you know

NOVEY: What types of planes with these again?

WAMBACH: They were rag. You know, that's what they call it. They are covered with cloth. Okay. And, uh, there were two wings. Upper and lower wings, open cockpits. In fact, while I was there, at Glenview one day a cadet came back white as a ghost. He went out for some kind of training, and the officer was instructor was sitting in the front cockpit and he was in the back cockpit when they were doing aerobatics training, and he got over into a loop and the officer fell out. It wasn't funny, he must have hit his head or something because his parachute never opened they went out and found him splattered on the ground. Holy goods. Think of us that he hit his head and going out because, you know, in the front seat, the gas tank was over there. There's a kind of a cutout, so you could get into it. But if you went straight out, you would hit your head on that. And he had forgot to put his shoulder straps on, apparently. Okay. What a jolt for a young guy to have the other cadet say "My instructor fell out," you know. And then you find out later, you know, he didn't know what happened to him, except he went out, and then before the day's over your find out going out looking and they found him dead on the ground.

NOVEY: So accidents, stuff like that. How did that make you feel as a cadet?

[00:35:00]

WAMBACH: Uh, you still feel invulnerable. I don't know. I guess when you're eighteen, nineteen years old, you don't think about it. It's gonna happen to you. The other guy made a mistake. All I could think about that, officer, he must have been out the night before and had too much to drink, you know, and why would you forget to put his shoulder straps on?

NOVEY: Okay, tell me about your, uh, your very first flight with you at the instruments.

WAMBACH: On instruments? [Laughs] That didn't happen until I went on down to Texas. On instruments, but in the.

NOVEY: But how about, your first practice plate with where you were flying.

WAMBACH: Oh, boy, that was It was interesting. Especially after ten hours of training. And the instructor said, I pull over here and I'm getting out you know how I want you to go up and come around on land by yourself. Well, God knew what he was doing, because that day we got our mail down at the flight line, and I got the letter from my girlfriend who, you know, we weren't engaged, but we had exchanged her high school class rings. And I have gone back up to Appleton to see a girl that I knew there and she didn't like that and wrote me this Dear John letter saying, "Here's your ring, [inaudible] you don't care enough about me, blah, blah." And I was so damn mad that when he said no to fly alone, I went up there and I forgot to be scared. I came around and I landed okay. Then I had to find another girlfriend.

NOVEY: Okay, so during this time, uh, there's a lot going on in the war around the world. What were you it as a cadet? What were you hearing about what was going on?

WAMBACH: Well, some of the officers that came back from the war came to our place to be our instructors. And so we'd hear from them, you know what was going on in the war. And it was dangerous as hell and war is hell. And, uh, some of them have been involved with guys that got their partners, you know, that killed? Uh, and, you know, the war wasn't going. It had turned somewhat in our favor, but it was still tough, tough, tough in 1945. And, uh, when I finished a Glenview and got sent to advanced training down in Texas, uh, I was eager to go you know by then it was what? June of 1945. Yeah. And I started my advanced training. So June, July, August fourteenth. Harry Truman dropped the atom bomb August sixteenth they dropped the second won and Japan gave up. By then, I was within six weeks of graduating and getting my wings. If that bomb hadn't been dropped. I learned all this after all over history, we'd have been sent over right away. I'd learn how to fly a dive bomber. And we're gonna go and protect the guys trying to invade the beaches of Japan. And the top brass were expecting half of them and half of us to get killed. I mean, because they knew the Japanese had defended Okinawa and other islands so fiercely that once we got to their home land, they'd have the elderly and the kids out defending. And so I was very lucky. It, uh, ended before I had to go.

NOVEY: So you would have been helping with air support for the troops?

WAMBACH: Flying off a carrier to dive bomb the guys on the beach so that our guys could get on the beach.

NOVEY: Okay, so, uh, when did you transition from the bi-wing planes to the what were they called the SNJs?

WAMBACH: Yeah, how do you know that? I didn't tell you that yet?

NOVEY: I did some research.

WAMBACH: [Laughs] Yeah, the SNJ was a metal plane, single wing. It was used by many smaller countries as fighter planes and dive bombers. And that's what we, that was our advanced training. And I got.

NOVEY: This is what you're learning, once you got sent down.

WAMBACH: As soon as we got to Texas, the first thing we did was learn how to fly those. And then we did the rest of our training in that. And that's where we did instrument, learned instrument flying. Learned how to shoot guns from a plane, you know?

NOVEY: So, uh, what was it like to transition from flying these basically biplanes to this, uh, monoplane?

[00:40:05]

WAMBACH: Well, the monoplanes had such more powerful engines that it seemed the main thing you had to learn was they also had retractable landing gear. So when you took off, you pulled up the wheels. Then you have to remember when you come back put him down before you try to land. Because that did happen to some few guys. You know, they make a mistake forget to put the wheels down and land on the belly and wrecked the plane. But, uh, I didn't do that I did some other dumb things, but not that.

NOVEY: Okay, so, um uh, what were they started teaching you on S and J's? What did they start teaching you? First off, just basically flying? Or did they start teaching you combat techniques with planes?

WAMBACH: Well, they first started flying and then formation flying, then out over the water, where you couldn't see nothing but water, you are away from the land and got navigate yourself back again. And then, uh, night flying. Boy I'll never forget one of those. We were out on a night flying practice. This was in December of '45. After I had, the war was over and, uh, we were in three plane formations and we were given a place to go out to where there was a field with a floodlight on top of a building. And we're supposed to circle that and do our formation flying, shifting front to back so on. And when it was time for us to come in, the tower called and I was on the right wing and the guy in the lead didn't answer the tower when they called him a second time and he didn't answer. I got on the radio and said, he's not answering, I'll have to take the lead and I'll call you back. And they said, "Okay, let us know and just keep circling." So then I had to get busy with a flashlight and signal him and signal the other guy, you know what we're gonna do. Phew, boy, that was tough. Monkeying around doing Morse code with a flashlight, but we finally got switched because I had to switch around to the left side and the guy in the front went off to the right side and the other guy went in front. We had a switch again, you know, until I got in the lead. I called the tower and said, "I've got the lead now." "Okay, keep circling. Will call you when we're ready for you." And I was so relieved that, uh, I felt the nervous pressure on my

bladder and I, uh, undid my shoulder harness and there's a relief tube underneath and I urinated. And then I put on my shoulder straps and seat belt and pull 'em on good and tight and then went around and they finally called to come in, and I signaled the guys we're going and off we went. And when we got near the base, I signaled 'em and into ah, echelon again where I was in the lead, but the guy on the left went around behind the guy off on the right of guy on the right, and I kissed him off with my flashlight you know signal, "I'm leaving" and I peeled and thought, Man, this is great. Here we were, of all things, it was the same runway that two nights before I'd been doing touch and go landings on at night, which was, you know, I know how to do this nothing to it. So I came around. It's a big long runway for bombers, so I came in. But are, even though the war was over, our chief squadron officer wouldn't let us use our landing lights. We're going to just judge by the flare pots, see how high you know, if the flare parts are lined up. Obviously, you're on the ground, when you're up in air you're seeing the gap between 'em. And so I'm coming down trying to judge that. And I misjudge I landed about ten feet in the air and the flame went [whistles] boom and bounced up. I thought son of a buck and shoved the throttle home. And, of course, ramming the throttle home when the plane is basically stalled. I want to bend the tip the plane to the left. And so I had a jam, my elbow in to hold the stick to keep the nose and from coming up any higher pulled the throttle up and thought hell let it bounce. Bounced a second time, but it already been tipped over. And so it went. Left wheel. Tail wheel. Left wheel. Left wing tip. Pheeeew. Bent me right off and out between the flare pots I went into the dark, [inaudible] over the sand, you know. Hoi! And, you know, this is going in, like, sixty miles an hour I was just stalling speed. And, uh, suddenly in the red passing light I saw the glow of the red passing on some trees of up ahead. Holy cripes. And I hit both breaks. Bad mistake. You're supposed to do one at a time when I had both breaks and actually the wheels just went right down into the sand, flipped it over on its back.

[00:45:07]

NOVEY: Okay.

WAMBACH: Thank God I had pulled everything good and tight when I got yeah, relieving myself up there and, uh, you know, boom upside down and I pulled the strap. Only dropped about one inch my head with the tower that protects you from getting your head rammed in and I sneaked out, stood up. Took one look, but I forgot. Go back in again. Shut off the gas. Shut off the switch crawled back out again. And went holey mackerel, you know and then I was a bad boy. I always wore my goggles up on my head. I didn't like the view of these rims of the goggles all the same. So I when I was landing, I push 'em up and I had broken one of the lenses. So I was standing there picking the glass out of the lens with the fire truck came out. And the guy, any asbestos suit came out there, went up to the plane, you know, gas off, gas off. Switch off, switch off. I'm replying to him, and he waited there for a minute or two, and then he started to hop back on a fire truck, and I said, "Can I ride back with you guys?" I didn't want to wait for the meat wagon to come out. I'm not hurt. And so they let me stand on the back with the guy with the asbestos suit, and we pulled into the parking ramp. Here are other cadets waiting for the next leg with their eyes this big, you know, and I got off and tried to crawl through the crack [inaudible] 'cause I'm the root cause of the whole thing. And, uh, I got inside and it was taken off my parachute and, uh, getting ready to take off the monkey suit. And I hear a voice saying cadet Wambach. Yeah, chief, he said the doctor wants to see go to sickbay. Okay, I thought he would. So, you know, I turned in my gear and went, like, through dark over to the sick bay and waited because the doctor was on the meat wagon, the ambulance out there, checking to see if I was all right. And when he came back, he shook his pack of cigarettes. And he said, "You want a cigarette?" And I didn't smoke at the time. I mean, I picked up some of my dad's snipes, but I never, I wasn't a smoker. I said, "Yes, sir. I'll have one." He said, "You're a lucky boy. I expected to find you splattered all over that instrument

panel." I said, Well, I'm lucky, too, because I had pulled all my straps good and tight before that, and, uh, then I had to go to a court martial about the accident. And there were three flight instructors and, uh, with the review board when I went in this, uh what Is that running out?

NOVEY: No, it isn't, just adjusting it.

WAMBACH: When the, uh, non commission officer took me in, the officers asked me, tell us the story, what's it all about? And so I told him, like I told you, I made a mistake. It was 100 percent pilot error. I thought I knew this runway well, and so I just came down and too cocky landed high in the air. Boom. Bang. I told 'em the whole story. All right, step out. We'll talk it over. So went out there I was sweating. [Laughs] When the non commissioned officer called me back in, the spokesman for the three officers said, uh Cadet Wambach "We've decided that, uh, you're gonna have one more night flight, takeoffs and landings, touch and goes, touch and goes." And if the landing signal officer, you know, in the Navy, you have a landing signal, officer, even on the ground because they're teaching us so that you'll fly on a carrier. If the landing single officer gives you an up, you'll go on with your training. If he gives you a down, you're going back to Great Lakes as a seaman second class. This was third week in December. Well, because the war was over, the commanding officer gave ninety percent of us two weeks leave, and I didn't get my night flight in. So I went home, come back from the two weeks of leave. Very first day. There I was on the board for a three day flights and a night flight. Well, that's one more than the rules permit. You're not supposed to fly, I am ain't telling anybody. I'm gonna get this over with you know. So I did. My three day flights came in from my night flight. I landed it like army pilot on the front wheels instead of on the tail wheel. First is, we're always taught land tail wheel first, because that's what you are going to have to do on a carrier to get the hook. So I landed on the main wheels. And took off, went around coming around the second time in all of a sudden, boo up goes a very fissile [??] light and the tower turns red [inaudible] oh cripes, you know. So I started going around and I looked and I saw what happened. One of the very pistol flares that landed in the dry grass and the grass was burning. So I just circled the field and circled the field until finally the light went green. Come on in and then he says, make it a full stop landing. Oh, no. Only made one landing. Now, I'm gonna come make a second landing. I do this all over again. Oh cripes!

[00:50:19]

So I came in a taxied the plane in, uh, parked it and I came out and I'm walking towards us. Ready board. You know, in the landing signal officer had pulled in with his genius [??] standing there, raising his thumb up, and then down, up, down, wiggling it like this just giving me hell, and I'm walking toward him. Oh what's he gonna do. And he finally put it up like this with a big then I "Yes, sir." Oh, man, what a relief. I wasn't going back to boot camp, and so I got to go on.

NOVEY: Okay, so he said you're also learning gunnery on SNJs. So describe that a bit.

WAMBACH: Well, it had a machine gun. Yeah, you learned how to run machine gun on the ground, everything. But then he had a run in it in the airplane, and, uh, we also had to learn how to lead because it's just like suiting birds. You know, the plane pulling the tow target is going by and you're coming around and you've got a aim ahead of him so that when the bullet gets there, it hits the sleeve. So, uh, they had cameras on our plane so we could see what's happening. And as luck would have it because the war was over, I don't know what happened. I got the film, but we didn't get to review it. So I really don't know if I was getting the target [laughs] or not. And, uh, you know, then we went to another base for the last couple of weeks to learn to fly those dive bombers, and, uh, they're I almost washed out too,

because one day, when three of us were, we're all going out just to do what they call familiarization. I could just go out and fly wherever you want to fly and come back. And so three of us talked about it in the barracks let's get together, go out and do some formation flying. So we did that. Well when we got in line. The one guy in the front was a cocky son of a buck. He goes down into the Nueces River about fifteen, twenty feet off the water. [Whistles] You know, between the trees around the river, everything, and boy I'm following him, the other guys behind me. All of a sudden I look up and I see a dam up there and this guys is boring right toward it, not me, you know and I raised up and as I raised up, I could see a sailboat above the dam. I knew what was gonna happen so soon as he pulled up over the dam, his prop wash dumped that sailboat right over, and I went. Zewww. And I called on the radio, hit for the sky. Get your tail down so they can't see your number. We, uh, went out and flew way around the base came in from a different direction because we knew there was gonna be a lot of radio chatter, as soon as this guy in a sailboat could get on and let the Navy know. And we got away with that somehow nobody figured it was us. [Inaudible] Phew. After all these, you know, months and months and months. About a year and half and you're gonna dump the whole thing. We're doing something stupid like that. And you should. But one another day walking to do chow hall at noon and, uh, heard the siren going looked up in here there was a big plume of black smoke. So those we left the chow line and ran toward the fence, clambered over the fence, to get over there and to see what crashed you know. Here it was one of the dive bombers had crashed and as a the fire truck got there. It was just terrible. The guy got out with the asbestos suit, went over there and reached into the cockpit. Pulled out a charred piece of meat, was the pilot. That's all that was left of him. I don't know how we finished our lunch that day. We had to go back, climb over the fence and go do it. We found out the guy that crashed, it was actually an officer already who had, uh who had been a deck officer came back and took his flight training, and he was scheduled to get married in a week or two. He did something wrong and died in the flaming crash. And again, you know it by then I was twenty years I guess, but keeping thinking boy what did he do wrong? You know, some really he did something really wrong. Wasn't me. They ain't gonna happen to me.

NOVEY: Nope, so were you learning dive bombing tactics with the SNJs too?

[00:55:07]

WAMBACH: Sure. Yeah, fighter pilot aerobatics, but also dive bombing because you didn't know which way it was gonna go. What kind orders you're gonna get later on. They had to train on all these different possibilities. In fact, some of the guys went into multi-engine, flew twin engine. Er, yeah.

NOVEY: How did they decide that you would go into the dive bombers?

WAMBACH: I have no idea. You salute and do what they tell you to do.

NOVEY: So how was flying the dauntless dive bomber different from the SNJs?

WAMBACH: And again, it had a much more powerful engine. Now we didn't get to use the dive flaps because they were smart. They wired up the dive flaps because only fifty miles away from where we are based was an Air Force base and they knew damn good and well, that they didn't wire 'em up, we're gonna go over and dive down on the Air Force [both laughing] and show about how the Navy guys fly. [Laughs] And one of the guys in my squadron one day took off in his SBD dive bomber, and suddenly, you know, his plane is veering right toward the tower and they're screaming at him and somehow he missed the tower he had forgotten to take off the wood battens with elastic, you know, a

bungee cord in between. They held the rudder. So even though he is pushing on the pedals. He couldn't move the rudder. He could move the elevator he could move aileron, he couldn't move the rudder. So they sent him up high and made of shake around, and he finally got the batons knocked off. But then, you know, six, eight months later, after I got my commission, and six weeks later, I got my orders, went home, and I'm reading the Milwaukee Journal. Here was a little news item, ensign so and so had died crashing into the back of the aircraft carrier, same guy. So he wasn't gonna make it. He just made too many mistakes. I only made one. Not so many.

NOVEY: So were you learning to landing on carriers a lot?

WAMBACH: Never did get to go to practice on a carrier, but we practiced on land. When we came in, they'd have a place marked as if it were the carrier deck and you have a plan right there. You weren't getting caught with the hook. But you had to come tail wheel first land there and then put the power on go around again.

NOVEY: Okay, So when did you start doing that? Was that still with the SNJs or just with the dauntless, dive bombers?

WAMBACH: No, we did that even with the Stearmans, the first ones. The bi-wing planes. I mean, they talked you right from the very beginning how to land tail wheel first. And, you know, a controlled crash. Like you're gonna do it someday on a carrier you gotta learn right from the beginning. So that's just automatic it. Come around. You get the nose up high enough, keep the power on. Get that tail wheel down, the cut the power and let her down.

NOVEY: Okay, so I during your training, did you know that you would be ordered to, uh, that you would be sent into the Marines, Marine air?

WAMBACH: Right near the end, maybe a month or six weeks before we were going to graduate that the Marines, which is part of the Navy, would put a notice up in, you know, they're gonna pick so many guys like I think they were taken 15 out of our class of 150. But you had to take a test for and I'm a competitor. So I took the test and I passed it, and so I got my commission in the Marines.

NOVEY: Okay, so.

WAMBACH: Then I was a Marine on active duty for six weeks 'cause the war was over. They just said soon as they could, they had my orders cut. Go home. But I'm sure they figured out cost too much money. One day you are a cadet and they are paying your \$57 a month the next day you get your wings in your commission, you're an officer. You get \$135 as an officer plus fifty percent more for being a flight pilot. You know, so you went from \$57 to \$200 a month. The taxpayers can afford these kids not so many of anyway. So most of us had our orders to go. But I stayed in the reserve, the volunteer reserve, not to, I don't want to do the ready reserve because I was in a hurry to get married. By then I was getting kind of serious with Laurette [??]. [Laughs]

[00:59:46]

NOVEY: So what was it like before you got your wings, you were in the cadet program. There you don't have any real mil--. You're sort of in a, um you're part way between, uh, you're between ranks. You don't really have a military rank. Is that?

WAMBACH: Your rank is cadet at that means your salute everybody. Meaning, noncommissioned officers, commissioned officers, salute, salute. But I did one thing. I'm just lucky, when I was at, uh I think it was that flying the dive bombers, and I'm walking on the flight line. I don't know why this was not right after breakfast, but it was a little later. Another cadet and I were walking toward the flight line, and an ensign came the opposite direction, you know, brand new shiny wings out and I recognize him. He was one of the guys have been a cadet way back in that first flight preparatory school I was in. And when I was there, they had a purge. They had too many guys in the pipeline, so they took the upper two-thirds and, the lower third were sent out, but they gave him the opportunity since they've gotten that much training, they could go to ninety day wonder school, which is what we called it. It was a ninety day trading to finish up and become an officer. And he did that. Well, then when it got to being in the middle of 1945 and they're getting ready to invade Japan, they brought some of those officers back in to finish their flight training. Well, then, obviously they cost so much, they were pushing them ahead of us. And I was so irked. So when he came by, I didn't even look up. And he got two strides behind us and he says, "Cadets halt" And we saw it spun on her heel. Yes, sir. Don't you salute when you pass an officer? And I looked him right in the eye and said "Not a washout, sir." Turned on my heel again and headed on. This is it. I'm going to report. He didn't put me on report. I give him credit for that. I'll never even forget his name Malcolm Lanjanadi. I mean that was 1945. Which how long ago was that? Who was at seventy-three years and I still remember Malcolm Lanjanadi. Not the best student wasn't the best [inaudible], you know, he was in the lower third, so he was leaving. But he was good enough to be a good officer. [Laughs] And thank God, he had sympathy or whatever you wanna call it not to put me on report.

NOVEY: So how did it feel to you finally get your wings and become a commissioned officer?

WAMBACH: I was flying without even having to get in the plane, [laughs] man, I loved it. Yeah, I know what they did with us for the six weeks in the I got assigned to one of the training bases as the assistant officer of the day. So I have to go with the, uh, officer the day on inspection of barracks, inspect troops and everything. I'll never forget. I don't know if I told Laurette [??]. I think I probably did tell her. Got to the one of the Waves barracks, you know the women. We met the Wave officer. And we went through and were looking at this that the other thing you know. As we went out the back door. There was a porch out there, and here was a Wave taking a nap her, wrap around, whatever you call it was open. And she had one breast hanging out and I'll never forget this officer and I am following him. And he just turned to the lady officer. Mark down, gear adrift. [Both laugh] I'll bet she gave that little poor gal hell. [Laughs] That's gear adrift all right sir.

NOVEY: So did you do any flying once you got your wings?

WAMBACH: Yeah, under and during that six weeks, I'd fly every chance I got. I'd even go back and fly some of the Stearmans once in a while, just for fun. Mostly the SNJs. And then after I got out and came back and I couldn't get into college right away, I got home in May of 1946. Yeah, and they didn't have room for me right away, so I didn't get in until September. So for those months, I goofed around. I tried to going to the Federal State office of labor, where you get unemployment compensation and I don't know, two or three weeks I got the unemployment compensation, that form that I had my commercial pilot license. You know, that's a kind of job I am looking for. Finally, I get in there one day and the guy running, I said, I've got a job for you in the industrial valley. Cleaning up in the oil yards. And I says, "Say what?" Uh-uh. He said goodbye. That was the end of my unemployment

compensation. So then, fortunately, my dad needed the house painted. He kinda hired my brother, who had just gotten out a couple months after me. We need to paint the house.

[01:05:16]

And then I got into college in the fall. And, uh, soon as I got into college, I met some other guys, you know, Air Force, Navy, Marines, whatever that were pilots. And we went to Glenview [??] Naval Air Station, which only one hundred miles away we would all get together and go in one car and go down there and check out planes and go flying. But then I have got married and '48. And how does that work? I was already married, and we had our first child, and I decided I would be important to go and get a two week active duty cruise so I could make some extra money on the reserve. And I did that, uh, went to Glenview for a two week active duty cruise and, uh, one of the flights I got was a cross country from Glenview Naval Air Station up to Minneapolis. And as we're crossing the great Southwest, all the un-glaciated area. I'm cruising long, listening to the Brewers ballgame on the radio. All of a sudden, I thought I could hear the engine not running so smooth. You know. I'm looking around. What the hell. And I'm looking down, where the Hell would I put this thing down all this rough country, down here. And so I really had turned off the radio and paid attention. There was nothing wrong with the engine. It's just [laughs], but it bothered me and I got to go there all right. And they came back the next day, and when I got home, I thought, I think I better drop out of this reserve. I'm not doing enough regularly to fly well, and so that was the end of my volunteer reserve.

NOVEY: That was in 1949?

WAMBACH: That was in '52.

NOVEY: 1952

WAMBACH: OK, that's when I was done with reserve flying.

NOVEY: So is there any, uh, any talk of sending the reserve over to Korea?

WAMBACH: Oh yes, as a matter of fact. One Saturday I got a letter from Great Lakes Naval Station signed by a major in the Marines giving me orders to report for active duty. I thought What! Well, I quickly the phone number was on the letter, and so I called up a that God the major was there even though it was a Saturday. And I said, "Sir, this is Lieutenant Wambach. I've got orders to report for active duty. I said I finished college two years ago and I have not flown since then. Uh, I'm not gonna be any good to you. And besides my wife is expecting our second child." And he said, "Lieutenant, the reason you got those orders because you didn't report in for your promotion. I said I did, sir. I got the physical done." "Where? Recruiting station Milwaukee." He said, "Okay, Monday morning, you go down that recruiting station and tell that." [Coughs] I won't use the word we used, but anyway, the guy "the, uh, medical tech to send me a copy of your physical or else you report down here to Great Lakes [Naval Station]. Yes, sir." So I turned around, said to my wife, Laurette [??] Monday morning I have to go down to the recruiting station will you call the office and tell 'em that I won't be there first thing in the morning? I gotta go down there and get this thing sent to Great Lakes by teletype, you know, and, uh, I'll either be there at noon. Or I'll be there in a couple of years. [Laughs] Phew. I got down there and the guy had the record and he teletyped it in and the major, reversed my orders and I didn't have to go into active duty, but yeah, and then I found out several years later. In fact, our oldest grandson was born. One was the second guy because the owner's grandson, when he was about ten or twelve found

out he had bad kidney and he was on dialysis, and, uh, he was gonna go in. He finally came up on the list for a transplant. So we were down to Texas to visit him. And I don't want a bottom every day for the whole week, so one day I was looking in the phone book, see if I could find one of the guys that was in my flight from Dallas in '40. I've got a name just like it is, uh, George A. Nikud [??], Junior. And I thought, boy that that's unusual enough It probably is. So I called up and it was one or two in the afternoon. Young lady answered the phone, said is George Nikud [??] there? She said well, "He's taking a nap now why?" And I said, "Well, my name's Bill Wambach and I just I knew a George Nikud [??] in the Navy Flight cadet she said "Stay right there," she went and woke him up. [Both laugh]

[01:10:28]

And he said, Bill, "What you doing?" And I said, well, I'm here, to visit my grandson because he's gotta go for surgery. He said "Let's meet for breakfast tomorrow morning I'll take you." So we did and I find out he was retired already because he had been called back to active duty he was still single in the Korean War and he got caught and he was not [??] a Marine as well and he went and got to fly Corsairs. But then you got shot down. He had a bad back injury and he was given a medical discharge and that bothered him all the rest of his life, that's why he was retired so early because his back was still killing him. So that's how lucky I was.

NOVEY: So going back to World War II, uh, were you told anything how the air war was going in Europe?

WAMBACH: Oh, sure.

NOVEY: Yeah. Like, have you heard anything about, uh, what was the casualty rate for those planes?

WAMBACH: It was terrible. It was terrible.

NOVEY: So.

WAMBACH: Especially with the B-17s that, you got ten guys flying the thing. And when got down, ten guys all at once. And you know, the Germans were bound and determined not to let him come in and bomb their cities so they would be shooting 'em down as much as they could. Yeah, we heard all that terrible stuff.

NOVEY: So, was it different in the Navy? The casualty rate once you got overseas?

WAMBACH: I don't suppose it was a lot different. You know, it was more, you know what I wanted. Because the Navy didn't have a lot of big bombers, they were float plane bombers, and, uh, so even the dive bombers were having a fight with Japanese fighter planes.

NOVEY: Okay, so. How did your service in the military help you with your life after? Did it help you career wise or how did it affect you after?

WAMBACH: Well, sure. Well, one I will tell you is college, because the dean of the engineering school and I decided when I was I found out I was getting out to right back to Marquette. And even though I had started that first semester in pre-law, I found out in the Navy that I was good at math and physics and astronomy, and I should go into engineering and I got a booklet from them and I looked it

over. So I'm gonna go for chemical engineers, get the best pay. So I wrote and asked for that and the said, "We don't have that anymore." We dropped it during the war 'cause we had so many other kinds of engineering and we had to drop it. What am I going to do? Dad was drafted with the electrical and well tried electrical engineering, and I got in there and I think I had two or three. We went in engineering school. It was by quarters, three months quarters and had three three months quarters made up a school year, and I'd either two or three quarters done, and, uh, I finally got a course on differential equations and the guy teaching it had been in the fleet and came to Appleton to the training session to become an officer. And he went on and finished and then got to be a professor at Marquette University. And I knew he was a straight shooter. I gotta C, oooh, I really don't know this stuff do I? My grades were sinking, sinking, and then I can ready to go for the next quarter and the head of the math department said, "Wambach you don't have enough math credits" well you know, getting in early in 1943. Uh, I had enough math credits in high school that I skipped freshman math. Well, he said I didn't have enough credits. Well it was the freshman I didn't have and he wants me to going to advanced differential equations. So I went to see the dean who had come back. He retired and come back, and he was very partial to veterans. When I said, "Sir, you know, Mr. Bowler wants me to take advanced differential equations. I got a C in differential equations, and it was Stan Cup [??] that was teaching it. He's a straight shooter. If I don't get it from him. I'll never it get. "Ahhh" He said here and he gave me a list of four or five, what do you call 'em optional classes?

NOVEY: Electives.

[01:15:02]

WAMBACH: Electives, yeah, and I looked at it. Ohhh, that looks good. So I said, "Could I take that one on psychology for engineers?" Sure. So I did. And I'm glad I did. You know, I had a whole semester with a private practice. Psychiatrists or psychologists came into teach us guys, and he took us out to the home for mental deficient of the county, you know, and showed his patients. I learned a lot about dealing with, you know, the kind of thing you would learn in liberal arts school. And I earned it an engineering school. So it felt good.

NOVEY: So did you join any veterans organizations?

WAMBACH: I didn't feel like I deserved it. I didn't. No. And you know, this is legion still sends stuff out once a year or something. So why don't you join the America Legion? I just I wasn't overseas. What did I do? But, you know, I know a lot of the guys did, and they're honored, and I suppose I might have, but I didn't. It certainly wasn't a Veteran of Foreign Wars. I couldn't join that.

NOVEY: Okay, so, um, what about you were involved with the Young Eagle Flights Program. Tell me about that.

WAMBACH: Yeah. Yeah, Well, I had joined the Experimental Aircraft Association as soon as we moved back down here from Superior because so close by. And I joined a flying club in Madison. And, [laughs] when the EAA started the program for Young Eagles, it was some of the older guys, you know, who were World War II vets, of course, got together and said, hey, and this isn't going so good here. When we were kids, we could write our bike out to the airport like that first flight I had. You just go to the airport, talk to the guy, get an airplane ride. But if you go there and do some work for me in the airplane, ride? They got fences around the airports now. And so we gotta do something to get kids going. So they started this Young Eagles program, and so I talked to the president of our flying club

and said, "Can I come to the board me this month? I'd like to talk to 'em about our club taken on be part of this program." So he said, "Sure." So I went and I talked the board agreed they should do it. So the prez says, "That's fine. Bill you are the Chairman of it." [Laughs] I was it for the next twelve years or so. [Laughs, coughs] But I loved it. I loved flying the kids myself. And we had two seat planes and we had four seat planes. And so whenever I couldn't take the four seat planes take three kids at a time. I ended up in before I quit flying Young Eagles. Laurette [??] made me quit when I got turned to be ninety. "Who wants their kid to fly with a guy that is ninety years old?" I said, I tell I am ninety they [inaudible] fly, but I had 667.

NOVEY: Wow.

WAMBACH: And on my goal was to get 700 and I never did. That's life. [Laughs]

NOVEY: Okay, when did you return to flying?

WAMBACH: Oh, uh, let me think, nineteen. I was about sixty-three years old. All right, and I was still working, of course, but, uh, I know what happened. Our youngest daughter was going to Marquette, and even despite having two jobs she still needs some help from us. And when she is ready to go for her last semester. She's only between semesters and Laurette [??] is writing out an assistance check for \$3000 for the next semester because even though she was working hard, she still needed that kind help. And I said to Laurette [??], as I signed the check. You know, this is gonna be like a \$6000 raise next year, and I know want what I want to do with my half. She didn't even ask me what I meant. I must have been talking about it in my sleep. She said, Go ahead. So I went to MATC took ground school the end of the course. You took the FAA test, and I passed it so then I started taking flying lessons again.

NOVEY: So how is it like being a, you know, commissioned pilot? I, you know, in 1946, what was it like going back toe flight school?

WAMBACH: Oh, I knew that this kid who was twenty I knew more about flying than I did because, you know, I was twenty when I first got my and he's there now, and I've been away from it for so long. How long was that from twenty years old. Forty-three years. I hadn't been flying. He's gonna teach me how? Of course I scared the hell out of him because we come around and I'd start dropping the tail, you know, "Bill you can't do that." He'd shove the throttle. He wanted the land on main wheels, you know? And I was taught from day one tail wheel first. Well, there wasn't a tail wheel on this plane. It was a tricycle gear. So I got to learn how to fly a tricycle gear, plane you, land on the main meals, and then put the nose wheel down. You don't go down the back. There's nothing there but a ring to tie it on.

[01:20:26]

NOVEY: Okay. Yeah. What do you think the legacy of the greatest generation is?

WAMBACH: Uh, just having belief in yourself and belief in being team work. You want the other people to be with you and help you and go ahead. And I felt like every job I was in, you know, that required teamwork and you learn how to work with other people. And that's why I think I got up, up, up on the highway department. I ended up, being a district engineer.

NOVEY: Okay. Yeah. All right.

WAMBACH: And, uh, after I got to be a district, there were three other guys that had been at Lawrence College with me in 1943 who were also districted. There's only nine in the whole state. Here I was, the fourth one. Then, of all things, I was at the airport one day when I was in Superior. That's where I was the district engineer. I was at the airport in Madison to go back Superior. And here I saw the, uh is a state superintendent of public construction, who had been the commanding officer the base at Lawrence College when I was there. That's how he got to be a lieutenant in the Navy because he'd been a school superintendent. And I said, Mr. Rothwell, you won't remember me, I'm Bill Wambach, I one of your kids back in 1943. And I just got to tell you, though, that I just got promoted to district engineer, that is where I am going up to Superior? And I saw your name, you know, 'cause he was a superintendent in Superior on a building at UW Superior. Says Rothwell Student center. Oh, well, hey, look it is one of my boys, there are three more guys from that class that our district engineers. Oh, he felt good, you know, to hear that four of us had done well, that was kind of wonderful coincidence that I got to see the man.

NOVEY: Yeah. So what would your advice be to future generations?

WAMBACH: Grow up. No, listen, listen, and observe. And you don't be too damn cocky. I mean, you gotta have confidence, but don't be too damn cocky, you know? Just listen, pay attention. Always be observant. Work hard. It takes hard work to get anyplace. Nobody's gonna give you anything. Understand that.

NOVEY: Okay, well, thank you very much for sharing your experiences.

WAMBACH: You're very welcome.

[01:23:07]

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