Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. William Fisher on the twenty-first of September, the year 2001 at approximately 8:20. We are in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections library and we are accompanied by Jon Bernstein who is a graduate research assistant and might ask some questions as we go along. So why don’t we begin sir, by you telling us when and where you were born and where you grew up.

William Fisher: I was born in Blair, Nebraska, in Washington County. I guess my first recollections were when my father came home from the Second World War. A guy came to the door, I must have been about four and he was dressed all in green and he had a big bag. He looked at me and he said, “Is your mother home?” He didn’t come in. So I ran and got her and he threw that bag which I later realized was a duffle bag on the porch and the whole porch just shook. I was just a little kid and I could feel it in my feet. He kissed my mom for a long time and I kind of hid behind her and then went in the house. He opened that bag up and he took out a tank that you wound up made out of tin and it would shoot sparks while it went across the floor. You could put your hand under and it had rubber tracks and it would go right over your arm or your hand. It must have been about ten or twelve inches long. So he and I hit it off right away. Anyway, he just came back from World War II. Then he went to work for my grandfather, Anderson, who was an abstracter in Blair, Nebraska, a land abstracter but I think he was never really pleased about that so he went back in the service. I’ve got one younger brother that says that he had some psychological problems, but I really don’t believe that he did. I know my dad suffered from claustrophobia because being in tanks, that’s a tight place to be in. I have some of that too. I’m not real happy when somebody shuts me in a closet but I’m also a tanker. He’d seen a lot of people burn up in tanks. He was at the Battle of the
Bulge. He was in the 1st Tank Battalion across the Rhine River at Remagen. We used to
go and visit battlefields all the time in Germany later on, but to get back to where I kind
of dropped off. He was put back on active duty and his first assignment was in Alaska
where he commanded an engineer company. Why a tank officer would command an
engineer company I don’t know, but it was a regular combat engineer company. It was
all black. He and the executive officer were the only two white men in the company.
There was another man there who was an Eskimo. I think he was an Aleut Indian
Eskimo. He had a sled dog. He was one of the last of the old Indian scouts. He was
what they call an Alaska scout I believe. I’ve known several old American Indian
colonels that were regular Army colonels that actually started out at the age of twelve or
thirteen as Indian scouts. I used to tend bar when I was in college at Fort Riley and a lot
of them were old cavalry officers and they lived there. They were retired there. So they
would tell me stories when I wasn’t busy at the bar on a Sunday afternoon or whatever.
So this guy was one of those scouts. He had a dog team and he would go out when a
bridge got knocked down by ice or whatever. He would take the dog team and take hot
chow from the chow hall out, maybe on a dog sled to feed the soldiers that were working
on bridge repair sites or whatever. Anyway, that was very interesting. After that my dad
was a captain. Apparently he also had warrant at that time too. He was also a warrant
officer, but he was on active duty as a captain in the Reserves I think. Then after that he
got to Fort Hood. He was in the 2nd Armored Division. He was in the 82nd Recon.
That’s really the same as a divisional cavalry squadron nowadays because they were
responsible for the reconnaissance for the division. He went with the 2nd Armored
Division to Germany in probably 1951 or ’50. Then the family went over to Germany
maybe five or six months after he did. We stayed over there for three or four years. So I
got to school in Germany for three or four years. I attended school there in Frankfurt
but lived in several other places, Baumholder, Deidesheim, and what not. While I was in
Germany my dad would—let me go back to when we were in Alaska. He had a policy
there, if I ever wanted to go to work with him I could. He’d write a note to school and
say my son’s with me and he won’t be to school today. That was pretty neat because
they did a lot of neat things and that meant that I could run around with the Eskimo. You
didn’t ride the sled, you ran alongside the sled. I found that out the hard way. So I got to
see what the Army was like from a very tender age. I’d watch the guys box and they
taught me how to box. The black guys were really much into boxing, and on and on and
on. I had a very fascinating childhood, and almost thoroughly indoctrinated. As a matter
of fact I almost starved to death when I went to college because they didn’t have any
bugle calls there. I didn’t know when it was time to eat. So, we went to Germany and
while we were in Germany, he’d say, “You want to go with me?” The answer was
always yes because he didn’t ever do anything that wasn’t interesting. Then we’d go visit
a battlefield or what not. I remember on one occasion we went to a battlefield in
Germany and by this time I had to be ten or eleven. There was—we were walking
around just looking at this cratered out battlefield. The trees were pretty well healed up
and everything but you could still tell it was a battlefield. It was kind of strange looking.
I asked him how come some of these craters look older than the others. He said this was
a battlefield from the First World War also. While we were walking, a great big old
Dussenburg or something like that pulled up and a guy got out. He had a Hamburg and a
black like cashmere overcoat, impeccably dressed gentleman. He started wandering
around on the battlefield and I was just a kid picking up rocks and skipping across shell
craters and trying to hit trees and stuff, but I did notice that my dad and this gentleman
wandered closer and closer to one another. I got kind of curious about all that. So I
walked over to get closer. They said hello, one of them said hello to the other one. The
German guy spoke real nice English, but in a British accent. The old man offered him a
cigarette. In those days American cigarettes would get you a lot. As kids we would
pinch a couple cigarettes from our mom and dad cigarette pack, go downtown and Nazi
dress daggers and what not that today on the antiques market go for four and five hundred
dollars, we could pick up for a couple of smokes. For a pound of coffee and three or four
cartons of cigarettes you could buy a silver service, I’m saying a sterling silver service.
I’ve seen it done. As a matter of fact my sister had a sterling silver service that came into
the family that way. Anyhow, back to the German guy on the battlefield, my dad handed
him a cigarette and he lit the other guy’s cigarette and then he lit his own. He looked him
dead off in the eye and he said how did you lose your hand. Well, that just floored me.
First of all, the guy looked perfectly normal to me. He’s got gloves on of course and he’s
smoking a cigarette just normal as anything. Everybody smoked in those days. I didn’t
see anything was wrong and the German guy looks him off dead in the eye just serious as can be and he says, “Well, I lost it right here.” My dad said, “Well, when?” He gave him a date right down to the day and the hour and the time and the year and the month. They looked at each other pretty hard. As it turned out they had fought each other in that same battle was where he lost his hand. He wore gloves and you couldn’t tell that one of the hands in the glove was made out of wood. So he invited the old man to his house. He was from a very wealthy family. What had happened is their family had been in a manufacturing business. When the war came they buried everything. When the war was over they dug it right back up and all the people went right back to work. So he was one of those, and apparently they made something that was valuable to the Nazis, they needed it, but it wasn’t something that the Americans would go to the trouble to try and destroy. It was apparently not in a major industrial center so his factory never got bombed. It was a family business. It had been in the family for some generations, I’m not sure of many of the details, but I do know that he said right after the war we dug everything up and put everybody back to work. He said, “Thankfully, my family’s people,” extended to mean his workers were in good shape. He invited us to his house but the old man didn’t go. So that’s just the sort of thing that I saw as a kid when I was growing up.

SM: Did they walk through the battle together a lot?

WF: Oh, yeah. They walked around, talked for a long time, probably two hours or three hours because I think I remember my mother scolding us for taking so long when we got back. But the German kids didn’t eat well during the war. My sister who was a year younger then me ran over one of the German kids with her bicycle one time and broke his arm. My dad saw that, gathered the kid up, put the kid in the car, took him to the American dispensary, got the kid’s arm set, put in a cast, bought a bunch of good powdered milk or whatever that he could find, took that kid to the house, told his mother what had happened, gave her the milk and said that’s the problem. Your kids didn’t have enough good milk to have good strong bones during the war. He said, “Try to give him this kind of thing right here,” and he said, “I’ll bring you more.” The Americans weren’t really that hostile towards the Germans. On another occasion an interesting thing happened. We went to the PX (post exchange) in Frankfurt. It was about a five lane wide road and we were sitting, waiting for my mother to come out of the PX in Frankfurt.
Across the street was a Gasthaus, guesthouse, whatever you call it. Anyway, GIs were in there drinking and we were there on a weekend. Now, officers could wear civilian clothes downtown and off post, but in those days the soldiers, enlisted men had to wear a uniform if they went off post because, remember this is not too long after the war was over. There was a big, old German guy, probably about 6’4”. The American soldiers were wearing what was frequently referred to as saucer caps, service caps I believe they are. My dad watched a couple of soldiers walk down the street and this guy just reached out and he hit them on the back of their service cap and their service cap tumbled down in the street in front of them. This one soldier reached down and picked up his hat and dusted it back off and looked at this great big, old German guy and put his hat back on and went on down the way. Well, a couple more GIs came behind this old boy did the same thing. I could just see the old man getting hotter and hotter. Finally he said I’ll be right back and he just got out of the car and he walked over. Being in civilian clothes he was just in slacks. He didn’t have on military low quarter shoes or anything. He just walked across the street. When he got to that guy he just cold-cocked him in the jaw and knocked him, the guy just went down like a rock [smacking noise]. Then the old man just kicked the living shit out of him, just as hard as he could. He kicked that man until that man was totally still. Then he stomped on him some more, stomped on his head, everything. The German people were gathered around, but they were gathered around twenty meters back. They didn’t want any part of all this. Nobody wanted any part of all that violence. I mean it was just incredibly violent. It was just almost instantaneous. I’d never seen the old man do anything like that before. He came back, got in the car and lit up a cigarette. He says, “God damn, SS (Schutzstaffel) son of a bitch just pissed me off.” He was much smaller than me, the old man was much smaller than me, but he was just infuriated. Anyhow.

SM: How old were you when that happened?

WF: I was probably like I say about eleven or twelve at that time.

SM: So you got there when you were about eleven and you left when you were about fourteen?

WF: Yeah, that’s probably fairly safe to say. I probably got there maybe at ten, ten or so. In Alaska I was about six, seven, eight something like that. There were about
three years in Anchorage. We were in Germany for about three years, but I think the old
man was there for four. Then we came back from Germany, but anyway I saw all the big
battlefields over there, well, not all of them, but I saw a lot of them, Verdun and places
like that.

SM: So you did do some traveling outside of Germany?
WF: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. We went to Bastogne one time and there wasn’t much
in Bastogne. It was pretty still hickville town, but they had built a monument and they
put an American tank turret on this round monument which probably was about fifteen
feet in diameter. They’d set a tank turret on there. They hadn’t been able to elevate the
gun so the muzzle kind of drooped down. They had nuts on there, you know
McCullough’s on there. Then we saw, there were two or three other monuments to
American soldiers in Bastogne at that time. They were pretty nice monuments too,
sizable. Anyway the old man found a place to stay and we stayed there. Then the word
got out somehow in the town of Bastogne that he was in the Battle of the Bulge. He was
in one of Patton’s—well, he wasn’t in Patton’s outfit, but he was in one of those outfits
with Patton that came up to relieve the 101st. So after that he couldn’t pay for anything.
The Belgians just wouldn’t let him pay. They fed us and the hotel wouldn’t take any
money. The old man got a little upset about it because he was quite prepared to pay. We
were on a holiday and he had money to set aside to do that sort of thing. That’s to give
you an idea how much the Belgians thought of us. Well, then we came back and he was
assigned to Camp Irwin, California. What he did out there was test nuclear weapons. He
was in a tank outfit at Camp Irwin that set up the tanks out in Nevada where they shot the
nuclear weapons off. He’d set up the tanks and help them get it instrumented and what
not, set up all the dummies and this and that and the other. Now I know because I’m a
NWEO, nuclear weapons employment officer, myself so I know now what he did. At
that time I had no idea what he was doing. He still maintained the same policy where I
could go if I wanted. So on one of these treks all the way across Death Valley and
everything I went along for maybe three or four weeks, ate with the GIs. I shot about
probably two thousand rounds of .22 ammunition. I took a little bolt action .22 rifle and
the GIs just used to treat me pretty much just like one of them. They cussed in front of
me and everything. I’m pretty sure that’s one of the reasons he died of cancer because
some of those tests were done. They didn’t really knew the effects of radiation at that
time. He did write a seminal article, which was published in *Armor Magazine*. I’ve
never seen a copy. I’ve only had other people tell me about it. I’m going to have get a
copy one day. He wrote that as a requirement at the Armor school and that article and a
lot of people read it. That’s why it’s seminal because he said if we’re going to survive in
a nuclear battlefield in the tank corps, here is what we’ve got to do. He outlined some of
the tactics that he had conceived of and ultimately a lot of that became doctrine during
the times of nuclear proliferation. We didn't have much else because nuclear testing then
went on to a much grander scale where they were looking at megatons instead of kiloton
weapons and stuff like that.

SM: When did your father write that article? Do you know?

WF: That would have probably have had to have been written, I’m going to say
’54 or ’55. His name is Captain—probably the author if you’re looking for it, it would be
*Armor Magazine* and Cpt. Paul M. Fisher. Like I say, I’ve never seen the article, but I
have been told about it.

SM: Let me take you back to Germany just for a minute.

WF: Sure.

SM: Before we get too far away from it. I was curious about your educational
experiences there and if you learned the language, what the schools were like? Were they
all American or were there American and German kids mixed?

WF: Well, I was in fourth and fifth grade. We studied German. It was required.
We had a German lady that came in and taught it. So for the whole time I was in
Germany one of the class periods was German language. I never have been good with
languages. I’ve always been interested in them, but anyway. But the answer to the other
part of your question is all the students were kids of either GIs or maybe State
Department personnel. I had friends later whose fathers were stationed as far away as
Kuwait and United Arab Emirates in those days or whatever that was, Sudan. Those kids
came up to Frankfurt and they lived in a dormitory there. The teachers were hired by and
paid by the Department of Defense and they lived in Frankfurt, but kids from all over the
world. They stayed in dormitories there at Frankfurt. They flew back and forth on
MATS, Military Air Transportation System. They flew back and forth to wherever their
parents were for the summer and holidays and stuff like that. Most of those kids—
actually, it sounds like it was very confusing for a kid and it might have been, but you’d
see kids here that you might not see for five years. Then you’d see them somewhere else
or at another military post sometimes. Either he was an old friend or an old enemy or
whatever, you know how kids are, but maybe that helps.

SM: How much interaction was there between the American service children and
the German children that might have been in the area? Were there any in the area?

WF: Oh, yeah. My sister and I, when we lived in Mainz Geisenheim—
Geisenheim is a suburb of Mainz. We lived on Kirchstrasse and lived in a great big
house. It was three stories high and had a basement besides, with parquet floors and a
beday and all that sort of thing. We were in the French zone at that time. All the French
people hated my mother because my mother paid Zita, our maid, a decent wage.
Obviously they couldn’t afford to pay their maids that much because French Army
officers didn’t make as much. The French harbored a pretty intense hatred for the
Germans. For example the French major that lived behind us one night killed a German
who had come over his wall to his house and killed him right there on the wall. Of
course the walls all had broken bottles and stuff stuffed on top, poked into concrete to
keep people from easily going back and forth. The walls were maybe, eight, nine, feet
tall, seven, eight, nine feet tall. I remember the French major, he killed him with his
service pistol and not a thing ever said or done about it. I guess the German guy was
trying to burglarize his house. Zita would ask my mother, “Can I give this old man some
food for his pigs,” some old bread, dry bread, too dry to even make croutons. My mother
would always say sure. My mother always sent Zita home with something to eat for her
father. I think Zita’s mother died in the war. Zita was probably forty at that time and just
homely as a mug fence, but sweet as pie and took good care of the kids and the whole
house. God, she worked her butt off. Anyway, one day we had to go someplace and Zita
had just given this guy some old bread for his pigs ostensibly. The family got in the car
and left. Around the corner, round the corner we saw this guy sitting on a bench eating
that old bread. It broke all our hearts. God, there were so many people that were hurting,
you couldn’t feed them all, but it did break your heart. My sister and I got a mark a
week, one mark a week for an allowance. On a mark, which is roughly a quarter because
the exchange rate was just slightly off of four marks to the dollar, for a Mark we could go
buy a couple of ice creams. That would keep us going on the German economy. We did.
We just went around wherever we wanted to. We didn’t have certain German kids we
played with, because German kids didn’t play regular football. They played soccer and
we didn’t know anything about that, didn’t care anything about it. It looked like a pansy
game to us. Later on I was in the German boy scouts. There were no American boy
scouts and I found that all the German boy scouts were like what we would call
explorers, but I still have a certificate at home from a German scout who was so famous
that he formed German scouting and was a personal friend of Big Powell, the guy that
started scouting in England. He signed my certificate and I was in the German scouts for
awhile. Even though I didn’t speak much German, and they didn’t speak much English
because at that time only the upper crust of German people had much intercourse with
England or Britain. So, not very many Germans spoke English. As a matter of fact
German people sometimes are astonished that somebody with the last name Fisher didn’t
speak German. They’re failing to realize that it had been several generations in the
United States. I don’t know. Does that answer your question?

SM: Yeah. It sure does. Did you or your sister ever encounter any angry
German children, angry because they maybe lost their mother or father during the war?

WF: No. The people that were angriest I think were the young university
students and some of the younger people. The older people, this is just my take on it. I
think that university students have a tendency no matter where you go to be idealistic. I
think you would see things on the wall like Ami, A-M-I, Geh Heim in German. It means
American, go home and stuff like that. Most of that—that might be painted on a brick
wall if you could still find one standing (laughs) in whitewash or something. Then you
might rarely, very rarely, see a swastika. Normally that would be painted out
immediately, probably by the Germans. I think the average German realized that they
were doing better under the occupation by far. The best thing in the world that could
have ever happened to them was to have the United States occupy their country. I think
they knew—well, you read the books nowadays you know that so many people came, the
way the Americans were advancing, and literally ran from the Russians. We used to see
the Russians. They had arrangements. They had Germany broken down into different
zones and we’d see the British guys drive around every now and then and look at our zone. We had people that drove around staff cars. We could go over in the Soviet zone and what not until the Berlin blockade took place. We’d see Russians every now and then. They always, they were real uppity people. I think the Americans, the American people and the German people are in almost every respect alike. I think that if you go to Germany you will sense that, Fingerspitzengefühl, a sixth sense will tell you that, what the German’s call spitting on your fingers. Your sixth sense tells you that they’re probably closer related to you than just anybody else. You’ll sense that when you go over there. As a kid I did. I didn’t really feel I wasn’t at home. I just didn’t talk. I couldn’t talk to them, that’s all, but most of the time I played with the French kids next door.

SM: Were there good relationships between the Americans, the French, the British that you saw?

WF: (Laughs) Not necessarily. I remember one time my dad and I went to Gerolstein. Gerolstein is an interesting place because there is a church, a tiny church, probably the size of this room, carved into a side of a cliff. To get there you have to climb many, many stairs up this cliff to get into this church. How that church got there was because in the days when the Germans had barons all over the place, one baron—which the castle is just right up above the church—had two sons and they both fell in love with the same girl. One pushed the other off the battlements of the castle. He subsequently got religion I guess and he went to see the Pope. The Pope told him you can be forgiven, but you must build a church precisely where your brother died. That’s where the altar is to be. You must do it by yourself, with your own hands with no help from anyone. That’s how that church got there, probably in the 14 or 1500s. Anyway, Gerolstein has a river, the Eder River runs right smack through Gerolstein. They cut diamonds there and they cut jade there. They make incredibly intricate mechanical toys there. You drive up the cliff where the same side to get downtown, you approach Gerolstein up the side of the river where the castle and the church is. Then there is a sharp bridge. You have to take a sharp jag and then you go back up on the other side of the river and continue in the same direction. But a French deuce and a half was coming down the other way and he was coming around the
corner. My dad was in our sedan, Chevrolet sedan that he had taken over. The French
driver didn’t give my dad an opportunity to back up. The deuce and a half bumper just
kind of pushed in a long strip about eight inches wide down the side of the Chevrolet. So
my dad just kind of knocked me out of the way and I remember there was only this much
distance between me and the rock wall going straight up with the church right up here.
My dad just got out. He walked around the car. He stepped up on the foot step of the
French deuce and a half. He didn’t open the door. He reached in. He pulled the
Frenchmen down. It was a soldier and he just beat him in the face about five times with
his fist and pushed him up in the truck. He told him to back up because that’s the only
way he could extricate the two vehicles. So in some ways—and he called them frogs all
the time. He didn’t like them. I think a lot of the other officers felt the same way. Of
course visitors back and forth in the unit, other officers and their wives, we were all in the
same buildings and in the same general housing areas going on all the time. So you knew
everybody else’s attitudes and you shared them.

SM: How about the British, British officers and British kids?
WF: Okay. The British zone was way far north. So I didn't ever know anything
much about the British zone until I went myself as a captain to Germany in 1970, many
years later. Then I found out and I talked to some German people, they were happy to
talk to me. They hate the British. They hate the British because see what the Brits do—
first of all, the only people who would treat them fairly, if we run over your pig, we’ll
pay for your pig. Nobody else would do that. The French said, “Hey, look you lost the
war.” The Brits said, “Hey, look we’re sorry you lost the war.” The Russians say, “Hey,
look you started this, now you can pay for it,” but the Americans said, “No. What’s fair
is fair. We ran your hog over, here’s fifty marks,” or whatever. So we’d pay for the hog.
According to the rumor, we pay for some of the hog’s progeny also, I don’t know if
you’ve heard that or not. In other words the other hogs that that hog would have had, if
he had lived. So, the Brits, the Germans particularly hate the Brits. The British zone is
closest to Britain. So they don’t buy anything on the German market. The British
military, they have milk brought over. They have meat brought over from England.
They don’t spend any money there and they don’t cut them any slack. So the Germans in
Paderborn where I was in 1970, as soon as they found out you were American you could
do anything. They were pleased. They just loved to chat with you. They were friendly, 0.5
but British, they weren’t.

SM: That was in the ‘70s?
WF: In the ‘70s.

SM: Now, back when you were there in Germany as a child, when you went on 1
those battlefield train walks with your dad, would he talk about the battles with you?
WF: Oh, yeah. When we went to Remagen for example, this is really 2
fascinating. Some of these things like I say that I remember, I’ve got to stop, is this 3
really real, or did this really happen or what. I’ll tell you. We went to Remagen and of
course we looked at the Ludendorff Bridge and the old man said, “We used to have a sign 4
on it there.” He was usually pretty concise with his statements and I said, “Okay, sir.”
Well, I always called him sir, “What did it say?” He said, “Son, that sign said, Cross the
Rhine with dry feet courtesy of the 9th Armored Division.” Well, sure enough later on I 5
went to Fort Knox and I saw that sign in an Armor Museum, in the Patton museum,
what’s there. He said, “We came from this here. Back up over there, you see that hole?” 6
He said, “They had an anti-tank gun there.” He said, “See that church steeple over there?
They had a sniper in there.” He would tell me what went on where pretty much, as much 7
as he thought I could absorb as a kid. Probably my interest, my—what do you call it—
attention span probably wasn’t that long either and he realized that. Anyway, he told me 8
what he could. This is unbelievable, but you’ll see when you look at that bio sketch that
later on I was in secretary of the general staff’s office at III Corps. For some time there I 9
was the operations officer for the visitor’s bureau. On one occasion I escorted around for
about a week a German two-star general. So, it was in the wintertime when he came over
to visit. Believe it or not, the ice formed and there wasn’t an airplane. We couldn’t get
an airplane. The weather was such that we were sopped in at the airfield there, Robert
Gray Army Air Field, you couldn’t get out to take him to wherever he had to go. We
didn’t really want to take him by sedan because the roads weren’t worth a shit either. So
I was stuck in a BOQ (bachelor officer’s quarters). I have three or four German officers
here, the senior one is a two-star general. So we go to the big BOQ mess hall and we
have coffee. I decide to engage the general in conversation. That seemed appropriate to
me at the time. I’m kind of half ass his aide anyway, his American aide while he was
here as I escort him around. We were having coffee. He had a major I guess and he had his own aide. I said, “General,” I said, “I hope you don’t think this is impudent, but were you in the Wehrmacht?” He said, “Well, of course.” I said, “Well, you were a tanker.” He said, “Naturally.” I said, “Well, what tank unit were you in?” He said, “Well, of course I was in several.” He said, “But at the beginning of the war,” he said, “I was in,” I think he said the 7th Division. I said, “You mean you were in the ghost division?” Then he looked and he said, “Yes I was.” I said, “With Rommel?” He said, “Yes, of course,” he said, “but let me ask you a question captain.” He said, “How do you know these things? How is it that you,” and I said, “Well, sir of course,” I said, “Any soldier is a fool if he doesn’t study his business.” The general said yeah and then of course too I said, “My father is a soldier and so I’ve learned a lot from him.” I saw his eyes just poom, right to that nametag. He says, “And how is Margaret?” That’s my mother. I said, “Oh shit, I can’t believe this.” I said, “Well, my mother’s just fine sir.” He said, “And your father, how is he?” I said, “Well, he’s just fine also.” He said, “I know them well.” I said, “How is that?” I don’t know he must have figured—I looked a little bit like my dad then. So he much have put two and two together like generals can do, [clap] just that quick. So, he said, “I know your dad. I’ve met him three or four times.” I said, “Well, where?” He said, “Well, I met him, named two or three places that are pretty famous battles,” that doesn’t come to me right now. He said, “I met him at Remagen too.” He said, “I can’t say that.” He said, “I didn’t meet him at Remagen because I ran out of gas about fifteen kilometers before I got there.” He said, “I really didn’t meet him there,” but he said, “I met him at these other places.” Then he said, “The last time, and how I got to know your mother, I was part of the new German Army,” and he said, “I came to the Armor school over there.” He was one of the instructors. Well, dad was still alive at that time. After this happened, we talked for about three or four hours then. Finally the weather, it got warm that morning and the ice melted off and he was able to get out, but I asked my dad about it later. He said, “You know that’s a funny thing.” He said, “He used to come to the house all the time.” He said, “I’m really surprised you don’t remember him.” He said, “What happened was he was in the new German Army and I was in the command and staff department teaching tactics.” He said, “I had this one smartass German in the back of the room. I would be teaching a class and I was writing
my own classes based on my own combat experience. Here is this son of a bitch in the
back telling me I made a mistake. When I stop and think about it, the son of a bitch’s
right.” He said, “I couldn’t comprehend what was going on for the longest time.” He
said, “This went on for two or three weeks.” He said, “He wasn’t a, what they call at the
armor school a spring butt, like a spring box, jumps up all the time.” He said, “He wasn’t
like that, but every time he raised his hand I knew I was in trouble. Finally one day I got
pissed off and I said, ‘Don’t sit down,’ I pointed to him. I said, ‘Don’t sit down.’” My
dad was on a platform. You’ve got to understand a class at the armor school in those
days was a 140, 50 people and it’s like taught in a theater, tremendous training aids and
all that kind of thing. If you ever get a chance to go up there, go take a look at it. You’ll
be very impressed. He said, “How is it,” right in front of the whole class, “How is it that
you know more about what I’m teaching than I do? I wrote this and I fought there.” He
said, “The man looked me dead off in the eye and he said, ‘Well, sir I fought against you
there and that’s how come because I have learned some hard lessons.’” He said, “When
he did that,” he said, “I could not believe what happened. The entire class stood up and
applauded that German.” He said everybody from all the different quarters of the armor
school came in, from different departments, communications department, medical
department, all these different departments came and found out what was going on. He
said, “Our class just dismissed and went to the officer’s club. The entire class just
dismissed and we just went to the officer’s club.” So you grow up in that kind of an
environment and when it came time for me to go to Vietnam, I wasn’t particularly scared.
I had a real good idea of what was going to happen already. I didn’t know about the
horrors of combat, but I knew a lot about what the Army was about. I’m sorry to—
SM: No, that’s a great story. That’s a really good story. When you were younger
and went with your father to Germany, did you go to work with him like you did when
you were in Alaska?
WF: Yeah. I could if I wanted to. I never did—I didn’t overdo it. I wasn’t a
particularly good student. My teachers never seemed to think too much of it, but the way
my old man looked at it was like this. It’s okay for you to go school and learning adding
and subtracting and reading and writing, but you also need to learn about what real
people are doing, grown people, what they are doing in life. If you stay in a classroom
and learn this vicariously, by the time you’re an adult you might not have a real good feel
for it. So I think that was probably his motive.

SM: How many other siblings did you have? You said you have a sister?

WF: Sir?

SM: Siblings? You have a sister and—

WF: Well, I have a sister a year younger than me. I have a brother who was born
in Germany, had dual citizenship until he was eighteen. Then he had to pick. He almost
picked being German. His name is Rob. He has a bachelor’s degree in Chinese
Literature from University of Northern Arizona, but he’s a framing carpenter. He builds
six, seven, ten thousand square foot houses. He builds multi-million dollar houses, but
he’s just a carpenter. He swings a hammer for a living. Then I’ve got another brother
who is a ne’er-do-well. His wife supports him, that’s the youngest one.

SM: When you were in Germany and also when you were in Camp Irwin, how
much about the Cold War did your father talk with you in terms of the struggle between
communism, free market capitalism and democracy, that kind of stuff?

WF: Well, of course the men talked among themselves and a lot of what they
talked about was probably classified. At home, they didn’t discuss classified matters at
all, but I think as an Army brat you just automatically grow up by osmosis if you will
with a little more political savvy than your civilian counterpart. Because your parents
are—what’s going to happen to them next is determined by the worldwide political
atmosphere. So you’ve got a pretty good idea what communism is. I hate to have to say
this, but I do remember as a kid, when the Korean War started there were several of us
that got really stupid one day and said, “Well, the United States has won too many wars.
Maybe the North Koreans ought to win one,” but we were being dufus. We didn’t have
enough sense. Then we figured out what we'd done, none of us felt good about it. But
the whole affair didn’t take five minutes from beginning to end. That’s the one anti-
American thing I ever did as a little kid.

SM: You mentioned earlier the Berlin airlift, Berlin blockade?

WF: Yes.

SM: How much of that do you remember? Did your dad talk with you about that
type of event when it was unfolding?
WF: I cannot remember honestly if I was in Germany when the Berlin thing took place or not. I don’t think we were. I don’t think my family was there, but everybody in the Army that I knew was most concerned about it. We knew the Russians had the nuclear weapon. I mean the kids on the street knew that. We knew what destruction had been wreaked on Japan with that weapon. A lot of us knew probably quite a bit about it. We knew maybe some of the nuclear effects like shock and the heat and the flash and this and that. We’d heard our folks talk about it, so we knew a little bit about it. We knew it was a terrible thing and we knew the Russians had it. So we took it rather seriously. Beyond that I can’t remember too much.

SM: When you were at Camp Irwin and your father was working with the atomic or the pentomic divisions, when you went out in the desert with him, do you remember much about the tactics and the training or what they were engaged in?

WF: Well, for that, the guy really, I don’t know if he’s still alive or not, but the battalion commander at that time was a guy named Gray Wheelock, who is a retired two-star general. That would be a good source I mean for you to talk to if you really wanted information. All I can do is give you the kid’s point of view, the tactics no. I don’t remember anything about it. I didn’t study any of that until I was a captain at the career course in ’70 myself. I knew very well that what he was doing was extremely important. Part of that time I went to seventh grade or whatever in Barstow, California, but lived at Camp Irwin at that time it was. Now the National Training Center is there. But no, to tell you about the tactics or anything, I couldn't do that. I don’t remember. It wasn’t until I went to the—studied nuclear weapons employment myself, all that started to come together for me.

SM: Where did you go after Camp Irwin?

WF: After Camp Irwin we went to Fort Knox. That’s where I graduated—I spent four years at Knox. I graduated from high school there. My dad first went there as a student, officer. He went through the advanced course there as a captain, a very senior captain by this time. Then he taught at the command and staff department, they’re the ones who teach tactics. They’re the ones that teach the real meat at Fort Knox. He taught
there in the command and staff department for, I don’t know, three or four years. Then I
left and went to Morehead to go to college. Then shortly thereafter my dad went to
Leavenworth to go to Command and General Staff College. I went to Morehead for five
years, or five and a half years. My dad had come back from Vietnam and everything.
One day—I pretty much worked my way through school, but he also financed some of
my education. I never did take a student loan or anything like that because frankly he
made a little bit too much money for me to qualify for that. If I could have finagled it I
would have. So a lot of times in college were pretty hungry times for me, but anyway I
stayed on there and hung it out. I kind of lost track there, explaining about some of the
difficulties in school. Anyway I went to school for five years at Morehead.

SM: When did you graduate from high school?
WF: ’59.
SM: Did you know when you graduated from high school that you were going to
go to college and then go into the Army?
WF: I was a jock in high school. I wasn’t a football player, but I was on the track
team and I was co-captain with a guy named John Cushing on the swimming team. I was
a gold medal winner in Kentucky high school athletic association in fancy diving in the
Class C schools. Fort Knox is a tiny school. Fort Knox is to this day, probably one of
the top ten high schools in the nation. In those days it was ranked about number six in
the nation among top-notch preparatory schools and what not. It’s a first class school.
So I had no idea what I was going to do. I met a guy when I was a junior in high school
at the library one time and he was listening to Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture. He’d just
come back from Germany. He was going to be a senior in high school and I was going to
be a junior. I was over at the post library, one of the post libraries doing some research
for a paper I had to write for school. Anyway, he was in the listening room listening to
the 1812 Overture. So I struck up a conversation with him and he said, “Yeah. Listen to
this. This is Antal Dorati doing the 1812 and they’re using the cannons from West Point.
They’re shooting them off.” I listened to that, that was nice music. I got to thinking, you
are just sadly deficient in your knowledge of the arts. You’re a meathead when it comes
to music and art and that kind of thing. That’s not right. So I went to see the band
director. I was a junior and I said I’d like to play an instrument. He said, “What
instrument do you want to play?” I said, “Well, I don’t know. What’s the hardest one
there is?” He said, “Well, one of the hardest brass instruments is the French horn.” I
said, “Well, that’s the one I want to play.” Well, at that time I had an orthodontic where I
had a tooth knocked out in a fistfight with an Army kid. I wore this little denture. I had
no idea how difficult it would be to play the horn like that. I started playing the horn and I
started out with all these sixth grade kids. All the guys on the track team and the swim
team, they used to laugh at me because I’d go play with the sixth grade kids. Then I’d go
right on to varsity track and this and that. They thought I was crazy. I had a motive for
what I was doing and I liked music so much that I just studied it in college and did. I still
want to write a ballet real bad. All the music I’ve ever written and I’ve only written
several pieces, but they’ve all been geared toward children. Because composers, they’re
such meatheads, all of them, without. Prokofiev may be the only and Benjamin Britton
may be the only two that weren’t boneheads because composers write music for
themselves and other composers. They don’t write music. That’s where the rock and roll
people are smart. They write music for kids and consequently everybody loves rock and
roll, or you know modern music. See if composers wrote for kids, then they’d have
listeners God damn it. I played in brass quintets and the Austin Civic Symphony, and
University of Texas Chamber Orchestra, on and on, and on and off for forty-five years.
Hell, I’ve gotten nine or ten French Horns. It didn’t bother me the last one I bought to
pay close to five thousand for it. I’m pretty serious about playing. I’m just not any good
at it. I didn’t really begin to make any progress until I got out of the Army and just
before I got out they put a permanent bridge in. So my teeth are all straight. I can play
much better. I don’t have to worry about something wobbling around while I’m trying to
hit a high C.

SM: Okay. This will end interview number one with Mr. William Fisher.