

COLD WAR PROJECT

RECORDED INTERVIEW OF GEORGE WALLOT, PART 2
(Reviewed and revised by George Wallot, September 2, 2015)

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IN ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

SEPTEMBER 4, 2014

GEORGE WALLOT: The people -- all the people in Anchorage were all affected very dearly, personally by it.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Yes.

GEORGE WALLOT: And they didn't know what was going on at Fort Richardson and up on the mountain at those missile sites. They didn't know. They would have really been scared had they known.

KAREN BREWSTER: And then with your job, were you able to tell people what you did on your job or you had to do the top secret --?

GEORGE WALLOT: No, I haven't talked about this except casually to anyone except Donald Dukes. Or -- and the people that I worked with, of course. I've told family, of course, about what it was like. And they put a little blurb in the newspaper. I'd written my mom and dad a letter and told them how bad the damage was and how everyone was out of their homes. And there were certain areas of Turnagain in the sea instead on the sea. It was pretty ugly. It was a really bad experience and -- what was good about it was the Alaskan people. And the Alaskan people, I assume they're still this way. But back in those days, if anybody needed help the first person came along would give 'em help. That was very unusual. I had never seen that before. The time my car -- my car broke down once two hundred miles from Anchorage, and the next person that come down the road stopped and brought me back. That wouldn't happen in the Lower 48. But it happened there and it was normal. People concerned about each other. And the earthquake was -- was a time when people were at their best.

KAREN BREWSTER: But I was thinking, your work in general, when you were here in Alaska and, let's say you met somebody at a party. Could you say, "Oh, I'm working at the Nike site"? Or you had to tell them something else?

GEORGE WALLOT: No. We were able to tell people what we did. But not the details of what we did. Everybody knew the missiles were there. There were stories in the paper about it all the time. And every time they fired one, you know, that was big news. And we did fire a few from that site. After that, the guys had to -- every -- every site has to actually live fire, I think every year and to stay qualified. And there was only a few places you could live fire, and Site Summit was for a while. And White Sands,

New Mexico, was where they would go. The whole crew would go down -- the firing crew would go down there -- and they would -- they would actually fire one or two missiles.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Because you were here with your family, George, did you have a lot of involvement with the community then? You lived off base.

GEORGE WALLOT: Most of our friends were military people. Air Force and Army. There were as many Air Force people. At that time there were -- what were there? Sixty thousand of each more or less? A lot of Army, a lot of Air Force here.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, you were living on Fort Richardson?

GEORGE WALLOT: No, I was only on Fort Richardson before my wife came. When my wife and baby daughter came then we moved into an apartment across the street from the airport.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, okay.

GEORGE WALLOT: And we were literally -- you could throw a rock into the -- over the fence to the airport. It was Merritt Field, I believe. And there were planes going in and out Merritt Field day and night.

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, Merrill Field.

GEORGE WALLOT: Merrill Field. Merrill Field. They never -- never stopped flying in and out. You know, if they wanted to go get somewhere far away they had to leave in the night so they could see to land. It was dark all the time, except for an hour or two sometimes.

KAREN BREWSTER: So, since you were living off post and you were in ordnance, were you ever on hot status, twenty-four hour shifts, like, actually on the sites?

GEORGE WALLOT: I was on call almost every other weekend. And I had to be reachable. If I wasn't at home, I would call and tell them a phone number. This is where I am. And they would not hesitate to call me out and send me up on top of that mountain.

KAREN BREWSTER: So you obviously were called out. What -- can you give some examples of what they called you out for? What was the big emergency?

GEORGE WALLOT: Well, I got called out to -- I got called out to go up to Battery B on top of the -- Site Summit, and I don't know what their problem was. It didn't take -- there was a switch in the wrong position was what the problem was. I mean, I think maybe they wanted to take a break. But I didn't ever say anything about that. I went out there and I turned the switch on and that system was up and goin' in a few minutes. But usually it was a real big problem. Sometimes the system was -- like, I was at Site Summit a lot because we were having this trouble I mentioned to you earlier with the target tracking radar just giving us fits. And that was very unusual -- a very unusual problem. It took quite a while, several months before we got smart enough to outsmart that one. That had never happened before.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: So after the cleanup after the earthquake, things got back to normal, you were here for another year then after that?

GEORGE WALLOT: Mm-hm. Yeah.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: And sort of, did things sort of return to normal after?

GEORGE WALLOT: Yes, they -- Except for the aftershocks. The aftershocks kept us scared us all the time, but we were forever vigifull -- or vigilant. There was a lot of damage that was caused by the earthquake that eventually, you know, some was critical. I mean, I had to get that target tracking radar back on the pedestal and get it working again, and that was done -- dispatched in a few days, and -- but it was always some kind of a problem. Particularly at the twin battery. I got a really nice letter of commendation from the battery commander at Battery A, which was a dual site at the time. And I went out there and there was a problem. Both systems were down. And I went over and I said, "Well, this system's got this problem. This system's got that problem. I can get one of these systems going if I could take the part from this one and put it in that one. I'll get one of them going, and then we can get the parts in a day or two and get the other one going, too." And I went in and I talked to the battery commander. I don't remember what his name was. And I told him this is the situation and I described it in detail and I said, "This is what I can do. I can get one of your systems working, but you're gonna have to let me take this part from the other system and do it." And he says, "Go for it." And I went out there and I did it, and I had it up in a flash. He wrote me the nicest letter to my commander that I've ever received. And -- but that was what it was like. We had to make do with -- do with what you had, and sometimes it was combat-like situations where you didn't have everything you needed and you did what you could do. And it was exciting work. It was a lot of -- it was interesting. Very interesting work for those that like that kind of stuff. And it was enough interesting to me that when I got out, I went back to college and started all over again and went four more years.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: I was just going to ask you, when you left here, what -- were you then out of the Army or did you continue in the Army and what happened next?

GEORGE WALLOT: I went on reserve status and I didn't have to go to any meetings or anything like that. I got out early -- three months early so I could start at the end of a quarter, and they allowed me to do that. So I went back and started school in the second year of a five-year program, and --

LESLIE McCARTNEY: And was this, too, in electronics then, George?

GEORGE WALLOT: Yes. I earned a degree as a bachelor of science in electronics. In electrical engineering at Ohio Northern Univ. And I -- ever since I graduated in 1969 I have been involved with a variety of types of businesses and a variety of types of jobs. I started out as a design engineer for General Electric and I ended up as a -- through the way I had all types of jobs and I became a quality control manager. A VP of quality is the highest level of position I -- at least title-wise I had. And manager of

engineering in numerous places. And my last job was with Boeing. And I worked as a Senior Electrical Engineer at Sea Launch, where we were launching satellites from the sea. Very interesting and unique. There was no one else doing that. They're still in business. But I worked there six years and I enjoyed it tremendously. I wasn't the manager, but they paid me really well and I -- my partner and I pretty well owned the place. Anything that needed to be done or we wanted to do that was important, they would fund it, and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience. What a good way to enjoy -- to go into retirement. I really enjoyed that and I've done some consulting from them -- for them -- since, not recently. But it was a wonderful career and it all started with my training in the US Army and the ordnance schools. And it was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I was going to ask you what the experience of working here at the Nike sites meant to you for the rest of your life.

GEORGE WALLOT: It meant an awful lot. The experience I gained and the responsibility -- I had a lot of responsibility for a E-3 and I got out an E-5, a sergeant. And that's -- most people don't get out of one unless they're an NCO, but I was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time and do the good stuff and get that. But it was a great experience. I learned a lot. I learned how to get along with people really well. I -- as a younger man I was selfish. And then I learned to work with teams. And I learned a skill. And I really, really enjoyed being in the Army and doing what I did. It was wonderful experience, and I've recommended to a lot of other younger people as time has passed that going in the Service can be a good experience. Try to enlist for something that would do you some good like I did. But I enjoyed it. The majority of it was good. There was still -- you know, being in the service has its amount of -- troop harassment we used to call it amongst other things that are not mentionable. But it made men out of us boys and it was good, and I am glad that I did it.

KAREN BREWSTER: And were you aware -- did you feel the stress or this pressure of responsibility of, you know, these are missiles -- and these are nuclear missiles? That -- that could be very stressful to have to be thinking about and dealing with all the time.

GEORGE WALLOT: Well, fortunately I didn't know there were nuclear missiles 'til the last year.

KAREN BREWSTER Well, even the high-explosive ones.

GEORGE WALLOT: They were pretty nasty, the high explosive ones. Now, when I worked around them, they did not have warheads. When they came into the shop, the warheads were not in them. So most of the time, I -- I didn't have the threat of being annihilated by an accident. But on the site they had a lot more stress in that respect than I did, because they were living with those -- those weapons. They were obviously very safe, 'cause if an earthquake didn't set one off -- even though, you know, the fact that that did not blow up and cause -- at least kill a bunch of people, that's a miracle in itself. And with a certain amount of luck and I'm sure

God had something to do with that. And the training. But there were some really brave men.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Did anybody from the Lower 48 end up coming up here because of the earthquake, or was that all dealt with just with the people who were here?

GEORGE WALLOT: No, there were -- the people came from Western Electric because there was so much damage. And then they sent extra crew so there would be people at each site.

KAREN BREWSTER: So nobody from the Army came up?

GEORGE WALLOT: Well, if they did, I didn't know about it.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Okay.

KAREN BREWSTER: So Dukes was sort of on his own as battery commander to deal with that problem?

GEORGE WALLOT: Yeah. At the time, from what I understand in the talk with Don, that they decided how they were gonna do it -- where they were -- as a group -- the Western Electric guys, the missile guys, the ordnance guys, everybody that knew anything about the launcher area. They all got together and they talked about how the best way to handle that was. They didn't know what to expect when they went inside that building. They knew it wasn't good. But didn't know how bad it was either. And the consensus of the group was that it was best handled by the people most familiar. The people that had to handle those warheads and everything and knew how to put the missile together and take it apart because they had done it with their hands, that they were the best people to do it. Now they talked. They talked to them and they made suggestions and everything. They didn't know what they would see when they got in there, but they went in there pretty much on their own and very -- they were very brave. They were very smart. And they worked in very dangerous conditions with gas masks on. And I don't know what they had. They probably had oxygen tanks and all that. But it was a very, very dangerous -- very dangerous situation. It was about as dangerous as you could get.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah, I think when I spoke to you on the phone and you told me about having talked to Mister Dukes, I think you implied that he sort of felt some post-traumatic stress as a result of all of this.

GEORGE WALLOT: Yes. I talked with him just a few days ago. We get together on the phone every once in a while and I wanted him to know that I was coming and if he had anything he wanted me to say for him. And he never -- as I was talking to him, he -- I think he would like to forget about it, but can't. Because he had -- Don was in a terrible situation here, as were all the people that dealt with that disaster. But his didn't end here. He went on to Korea, where he was on the kill list by snipers.

KAREN BREWSTER: Korea or Vietnam?

GEORGE WALLOT: Vietnam, I'm sorry. Vietnam. He went to Vietnam. And he knew that his life -- he was a marked man. And he knew that. And that's a lot of stress. And they didn't know about it and then they had the Agent Orange stuff, which didn't help either. And he's been -- he's had the

treatment. The Army has provided him treatment of it. I don't know how good the treatment has been, but he has at least qualified for some kind of treatment.

KAREN BREWSTER: But it's interesting that it was so traumatic, this experience for him here in Alaska. That he's had to live with.

GEORGE WALLOT: Yes, that was -- unusually. I don't know if that helped him deal with the war or not, but in any case he's been under more stress than most of us would ever conceive to be under. But he's a good man. He's a wonderful person, and he's good friend.

KAREN BREWSTER: Well, you had mentioned just learning to work together with each other, and I was wondering how your teams worked together and you got along? And you interacted with the battery crew and the launch crew and your ordnance guys, right? You dealt with everybody. Did you guys socialize together or --?

GEORGE WALLOT: Not much. Sometimes you'll get stuck at the batteries. I got stuck in C Battery for three days. One Sunday I got called from home to get my toolbox and go to the airport. Fort Richardson. That they're having a problem over at C Battery and they needed me over there right away. So I got my stuff and I went down to the airport, and an officer -- an Army officer came to pick me up and help me carry my toolbox. And the biggest helicopter you ever saw. It was a Chinook helicopter. That thing was forty-foot long. I don't know, it was just a big banana helicopter. And me and that toolbox and that pilot got in that thing and away we went across Goose Bay and landed. And he helped me get my stuff in there and that night it snowed three foot. You couldn't get in, you couldn't get out. And eventually -- (interruption)

KAREN BREWSTER: But we're finishing what we were just talking about.

GEORGE WALLOT: Where were we? What do we want to talk about?

KAREN BREWSTER: Oh, working with other people. And you got stuck at Battery C with three feet of snow.

GEORGE WALLOT: Yeah. Okay. Did I tell you how I got out of there?

LESLIE McCARTNEY: No, do tell.

GEORGE WALLOT: Okay. I did get stranded at Site Bay at Battery C and -- one time for three days because of the snowfall. Flew me out there in a helicopter and I did -- I got my problem solved pretty quickly, and then it snowed so bad they couldn't -- I couldn't get out of there. And I stayed there for three days. Without any provisions or anything. I just kind of faked it out. And finally they got it plowed out to the point where they could actually come and get me. And some guys came from company and took me out.

KAREN BREWSTER: The guys who were stationed out there, they only stayed out there? They didn't rotate around the different batteries here?

GEORGE WALLOT: No. No, each battery was self-sufficient. And people -- now there were people that would do -- sometimes they would transfer someone from one battery to the other because for personnel reasons. But -- and there were some people that lived off post and they weren't on

duty all the time. But I don't know exactly what the schedule was on the site, because I didn't -- that wasn't part of what I did. But I do know that they would -- they would go on a hot status and they would be on duty for twenty-four hours. And it was -- they didn't get much sleep and they would sleep in their clothes because, you know, if they were suddenly to go hot, they would have to be up and the system would have to be operational within fifteen minutes or something like that. So it was always -- always was a state of alarm. Plus, you know, the Russians just loved to come and harass us. They would fly -- they would fly partway here all the time. You know, at the same time we would -- I mean the planes from Elmendorf, the bombers, our bombers were leaving Elmendorf every day flying toward Russia. And their bombers from Russia were leaving, flying here. And they -- I think they'd just wave and turn around and go back at some point in the middle out there. And it was a state of stress at all times. You never knew when somebody was going to do something stupid. And there's, of course, all the nuclear weapons that they were carrying. That's all they had.

KAREN BREWSTER: So in terms of who you socialized with, you socialized with other ordnance team members or the launch guys or the battery guys?

GEORGE WALLOT: Yeah. My -- my friends were mostly people in my outfit. They lived nearby me. I mean, we all lived more or less the same place and -- or at least within fifteen minutes of each other -- all lived in Anchorage and commuted to work. But there was a lot of camaraderie between the married guys.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: And then how did you become involved in the Nike reunions? Then how did you come to be here?

GEORGE WALLOT: Well, we had a lot of esprit de corps. I like to see some of the people that I -- that I either knew in the Service when I was here. I have friends that are here. And just to get back together with people that had shared a common experience that was -- I mean, we were really gung ho and into what we did. We were probably some of the proudest people in the Army, I believe. We had -- we were all specialists of some kind and we had extensive training no matter who it was -- even a guy that pushed a button on the -- to fire these things. Those people who worked at the site, they were trained at a different level. And they went through a lot of harassment, because they had to be on twenty-four hour status all the time. My job was more like a job. I didn't even have to wear combat boots. In fact, I had to wear safety shoes that were anti-static. As they didn't want me setting off that powder keg either. But --

LESLIE MCCARTNEY: Did you keep up with people over the years or --?

GEORGE WALLOT: A few.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: A few -- you did?

GEORGE WALLOT: Yeah. Most of them are scattered all over the place. One of my best friends I haven't been able -- I went to visit him twice since we got out of the Service. And he's still alive. I've been trying to get a hold of him

lately, and I haven't been able to roust him. I talked to his sister. So in any case --

KAREN BREWSTER: Did you think about staying in Alaska after you were discharged?

GEORGE WALLOT: Not more than a second. No. My plan when I was discharged, and I got discharged early, was to go to college and become an engineer, an electrical engineer. And I had enjoyed so much my work and the training I had as a technician that I knew I could do more than that. I had a lot of confidence and the Army gave that to me. And I am really thankful. The Army was very important in my life and despite there was a certain amount of harassment -- troop harassment you get in any military. But life in the Ordnance Corps was pretty good. It wasn't -- we were not constantly harassed like the other guys were.

KAREN BREWSTER: What do you mean by troop harassment? Can you give an example?

GEORGE WALLOT: Troop harassment. Get everybody up in the middle of the night and have them go do something. Training for emergency. And sometimes troop harassment's when they take that to an extreme. Yes, you need to do that. It's part of preparedness. You have to practice it. But it doesn't have to be -- I mean, fun for the -- someone that likes to harass people. And in the Ordnance Corps most of the -- there wasn't much of that. There was -- we were very professional. We were all highly trained specialists in various areas. And we didn't have much of that -- we call it gung ho stuff. We had to wear uniforms and we had to do our sleep-outs and we had to qualify on the rifle range and that kind of stuff. But other than that we had a normal life. And, you know, and we went to a regular job in a regular place and we had work that we had to do and we did it well. We were well trained and well equipped and it was fun. I enjoyed it. And it was more like a civilian job than it was a military job to me personally, except for all the KP I had to do. KP or kitchen police. That was interesting. There was so much rank in my organization that all the guys that didn't have the rank yet had to do all the KP. And even though I lived off post I was on KP almost once a month. It was all day long -- four o'clock in the morning till seven o'clock at night. I didn't like that, but that was the way it goes. That came with the territory.

KAREN BREWSTER: Can you quickly explain the difference between ordnance and artillery in the military? Because they serve different functions, correct?

GEORGE WALLOT: Absolutely. There's several functions in the Army. There's the fighting force, the infantry. There's maintenance people, which are often known as maintenance battalions, and their job is to keep all the equipment going. And then the Ordnance Corps. The Ordnance Corps, their job is to keep all the weapons working, whether they be pistols, rifles or guided missiles. And so when my rifle quit working, I had to take it to ordnance to get it fixed. A different group and they give me a new rifle. And the ordnance people, what really separates them is the echelons. I

mentioned that earlier. That first and second echelon is the stuff that regular army people take care of. And third and fourth are ordnance level maintenance and repair. And testing and checks and adjustments and troubleshooting and installing modifications. We installed a lot of changes. Some were done by Western Electric and some were done by us. And sometimes together we would do --

KAREN BREWSTER: And then artillery -- artillery is the actual ammunition?

GEORGE WALLOT: Artillery, their job -- artillery are the people that actually did the shooting, whether it was a cannon or a guided missile. That was all part of the artillery. And their job was to shoot things out of the sky or shoot things on the ground. Their job was -- just the word artillery is weapons that fire things from the ground to something else to destroy something. And there are a lot of people in the artillery. It's a major fighting force that supports -- it supports the ground force. And in this case, the artillery was protecting the -- the two military bases here in Anchorage.

KAREN BREWSTER: So on the Nike sites, were the guys on the launch -- doing the launching -- were they considered artillery?

GEORGE WALLOT: All the people on the site were artillery people. There is one exception to that. They also had some people that were in what they call -- oh, I forgot the name of the group. There's another group in the Army. I'll think of it when I don't need to know it. There's another group that maintains generators and equipment.

KAREN BREWSTER: And that's different from the maintenance?

GEORGE WALLOT: It's different than maintenance.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: I think George -- or Howard --

KAREN BREWSTER: Roger and Ed?

LESLIE McCARTNEY: -- mentioned that name last night in their interview.

GEORGE WALLOT: Engineers.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Engineers.

GEORGE WALLOT: That one come back when I didn't need to know it. Yeah. The engineers, the Army engineers. We had several -- our group was about a hundred people and out of that group there were launch people. There were the radar -- the integrated fire control people like myself, IFC people. And there was a large warehouse with parts and --

KAREN BREWSTER: So your ordnance group was about a hundred people?

GEORGE WALLOT: About a hundred people, mm-hm. And we supported four firing batteries at that time.

KAREN BREWSTER: And did you also support other things at Fort Richardson?

GEORGE WALLOT: No.

KAREN BREWSTER: You were just supporting the Nike sites?

GEORGE WALLOT: Just the Nike. We were all only Nike.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Is there anything else, George, that you'd like to tell us that maybe we haven't covered at all? Something?

GEORGE WALLOT: Um. Can we shut the camera down and I'll answer that?

TERESA WALLOT: Just make it very short.

GEORGE WALLOT: It's not very long. Okay.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yep. Go ahead.

GEORGE WALLOT: Okay. I am going to read a little section here. A quote about -- from Donald Dukes, who was the captain that led the team that cleaned up the problems, the major problems at A Battery as a result of the earthquake. And this is his account. "We went inside the first launcher section of the fire unit on "hot status" after prying open blast doors. It was a big mess. No complete missile round was intact on the tracked launchers or handling rails. All yoke structures had been sheared. The skins were gouged open; fins bent in all directions. Solid propellant cracked and the rocket motor covers were off. Strong stench from the exposed rocket propellant. Arming lanyards were pulled, energizing the on-board battery-operated electrical power systems, and gyros were spinning. Large components strung across the handling rails and launchers and on the floor, in all directions. Each missile representing upwards to five tons of high explosive just waiting for the initial spark to set off the entire lot. We were looking around the launcher section by light of spark-proof flashlights only. The loneliest and scariest seventy-two hours of my life was just getting underway. Even more than some of my later times in Vietnam. Personnel worked under extremely stressful and dangerous conditions to render the battery safe. As explained by one munitions expert, "Since no fire and subsequent explosions ensued, it can be assumed that they did their tasks expertly and with more than a modicum of safety principles correctly employed."

KAREN BREWSTER: And why seventy-two hours? What--?

LESLIE McCARTNEY: It took them that long?

KAREN BREWSTER: It took them that long --

GEORGE WALLOT: It took them that long. And they did it without stopping.

KAREN BREWSTER: Yeah. You said he didn't sleep for three days. And I was trying to think, what were they do --? But it was just that cleanup took that long?

GEORGE WALLOT: It took that long. It was really a mess. And this is -- this is the abbreviated censored version. Don told me the whole thing.

KAREN BREWSTER: Right. Well, you can tell just from that just how powerful an experience it must have been for him.

GEORGE WALLOT: Yeah. It was incredible.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: And how powerful the experience has been for him to share that with you and for you to share that with us.

GEORGE WALLOT: Yeah. At least he's had somebody to talk -- I believe I'm the only one he's ever talked to about it.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Wow.

KAREN BREWSTER: We are honored that you are sharing that with us. We appreciate that. And hopefully he will, too.

GEORGE WALLOT: I -- I hope that he can get some help. And he's supposedly going to get some help or is in the process of getting some help. But he was a brave man. He's a good man.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: Yeah.

KAREN BREWSTER: Anything else about your time here and your work and your experiences that you want to share that we haven't asked you about?

GEORGE WALLOT: Well, it was a great experience. The majority of time it was also fun. It was certainly challenging, and I'm glad that I had the opportunity for the schooling and the experience and the comradeship. Even the earthquake, as awful as it was when it happened and as awful as it was trying to straighten out that mess, it was a chance to do something significant -- really significant. And I enjoyed the opportunity, and everybody was -- worked together -- was an incredible task. And everyone must be commended for their part. And I appreciate that I was able to experience that and I didn't get hurt and it worked out well for me, and I went on to have a great career.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: We appreciate you. And really wanted to thank you. Thank you so much for taking part of your afternoon to speak with us.

GEORGE WALLOT: You're welcome.

LESLIE McCARTNEY: And we've learned a lot and really cherish and value what you've had to tell us. Thank you. Thanks.