Interview with Winton Solberg

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Friday, the seventh of November, 2008. My name is Mark DePue. I'm the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here today with Dr. Winton Solberg. Good afternoon, Doctor.

Solberg: Good afternoon.

DePue: We're here to talk about your experiences during World War II. But I always start with a little bit of background, and would ask when and where you were born.

Solberg: I was born near Aberdeen, South Dakota, on a farm in Brown County, on the eleventh of January of 1922. The area in which I was born was a Scandinavian settlement, mostly Norwegians and Swedes and Danes, but mostly Norwegians. My father was a second generation Norwegian-American. We moved into the town of Aberdeen, South Dakota, when I was about a year and a half old. So I grew up in Aberdeen, South Dakota, which was at that time the second-largest town in a largely rural state. And I went through high school in Aberdeen.

DePue: What did your father do for a living?

Solberg: My father was a policeman. He was elected as sheriff in 1938, took office in '39, and died as a result of an auto accident when he was taking a prisoner to the state penitentiary. I was a senior in high school, at the time. There was some question as to whether or not I would be able to get to college, as opposed to staying home to support my mother.

I was a Depression child. Things were very tough. You can't believe how difficult things were in South Dakota in the thirties. So here's my mother, without very much in the way of a formal education; left with three boys, of which I was the middle one; maybe 1,200 dollars insurance or something like that. And there's a question, where do we go from here? She was a very resourceful woman, very enterprising—resourceful. She was appointed sheriff, to replace my father, at a time when almost no women were sheriffs in the United States.

DePue: You said this was 1939.

Solberg: This was '39. I went off to college, then, that fall, as a freshman at the University of South Dakota.

DePue: What were your parents' names?

Solberg: My father was Ole Alexander Solberg and my mother was Bertha Georgia Tschappat, T-s-c-h-a-p-p-a-t. My father was from the area—or his parents—from the area near Trondheim, Norway. My mother's parents came from Switzerland. So there was no Norwegian spoken in my home, because of the difference between my parents. I can say, "Can das spachen Norsk," "Mange takk," and that's it.

DePue: Which means?

Solberg: Can you speak Norwegian? "Can das spachen Norsk?" and Mange takk, "Many thanks."

DePue: Very good. Well, you don't get much more Norwegian than Ole, though, do you?

Solberg: No, you don't. Right. It reminds me of all those Ole and Lena jokes, which I liked very much! (He laughs.)

DePue: Who was the strongest influence on you, growing up?

Solberg: My mother.

DePue: And why was that?

Solberg: Well, she was a very forceful woman. She was determined that her boys were going to make something of themselves. My father was a gentler soul, I think. For a time, he worked on a night shift in the police force, so that he was not around as much as my mother. But my mother was never in doubt—not always correct, not always right, but never in doubt. She had strong opinions, was not always easy to live with. But she put steel in your backbone, I'll tell you that. And you're going to make something of yourself.

Now her visions as to how you would make something out of yourself were, I think, those of a rather poor woman with not a great education. You want a job that pays a salary. And the idea of my becoming, in time, a historian, just kind of occurred. My younger brother became a medical doctor. My older brother and I were much closer in age than was my younger brother with me. He became a salesman of petroleum aviation for Mobil. She could understand those jobs much better than she could that of an historian. I went on and got a degree at Harvard and became an academic. She certainly respected that. But the average American doesn't view history as important as, let's say, being a medical doctor or maybe a lawyer. My original intention was to be a lawyer.

DePue: Did she think you needed to do something more practical?

Solberg: I think probably, yeah. And for a long time, I had to really convince myself that what I was doing—when I went on to study history—was worthwhile, because it wasn't practical, which is kind of the ethos or the attitude that I had grown up with in the Middle West at that time. You did something that was practical.

DePue: Well, how much of that was the result of the Depression? And I wonder if you could tell us some memories you had about living and growing up in the Depression?

Solberg: Well, I can certainly remember the Depression very well. I was thinking the other day, my parents were Republicans. Why, I don't know. My guess is being Norwegian immigrants, they probably identified with the Republican party and the Homestead Act, and Lincoln freeing the slaves, I would gather. My father was elected sheriff. He was a very popular man, extremely popular. He was elected sheriff on the Republican ticket.

I can remember going to bed, in 1928, at six-and-half years old, during the Hoover-Smith election. I said, "Wake me if Hoover wins. If Smith wins, let me sleep." The first time I voted, I was in the Army on my way overseas. As a result of my heritage, I voted Republican in a presidential election the first time. So I had to kind of overcome that Republican past.

My mother paid quite close attention to politics. She had strong views on various politicians. My guess, if she were here today, that she would have had no use for George Bush at all and she would probably have supported Obama. But I grew up at a time when—in terms of the Depression—I can remember when the banks closed. I can remember being on my uncle's farm when I heard a lot of calves bleating one morning, and wondered why. We woke up and looked out on the road going from the farm into town. Those calves and cows were being taken in to be destroyed because of the agricultural adjustment program. You killed off animals in order to make a shortage and raise the prices.

DePue: That would have been 1933, '34 timeline.

Solberg: That was '33, probably, sure. Roosevelt was elected in '32. I can remember the NRA, these little stickers of, what? a blue chicken or something like that, the…?

DePue: The blue eagle.

Solberg: Blue eagle. Well, a chicken grown up. The blue eagle. Franklin Roosevelt came to Aberdeen when I was a boy and visited the rural areas to see what the plight of the farmers was. He came to a railroad siding near my house, and I went. He got on the back of the railroad car, helped by one of his sons—because you could see that he had polio, was handicapped—and made a little speech. So I saw Roosevelt on the back of the car. But many of the people I knew had no jobs. They had federal handouts. My father always had a job. But I can remember, at one time our grocery bill was twice my father's monthly salary. We had a grocer who was a family friend and he knew he'd get paid, in time.

Then, in addition to the economic distress, there was a dustbowl. I can remember going to seventh and eighth grade; at noonit would be like night, because there was so much dust in the air. You could not see very well. Russian thistles, these big tumbleweed types of things, were blowing along. It was a

rough environment. In the wintertime, it got as cold as forty below. You'd go out to take in a bottle of milk—we had milk delivered—and the milk would have frozen and pushed the cream up through the lid at the top. My mother would wake us and—"Put on your wool underwear, boys. It's forty below." This was no place for sissies. Then in the spring, my mother made us drink IQS. Do you know what IQS is?

DePue: I have never heard that.

Solberg: Iron, quinine, and strychnine. You didn't have much sun. You know, at that time you didn't get fresh vegetables during the winter. At most, you had a dill pickle. So this iron, quinine, strychnine was to get proper health-giving medicines back in your body.

DePue: Vitamins and nutrients you were supposed to get?

Solberg: I guess so, yeah.

DePue: Quinine. The same quinine as you take for malaria?

Solberg: I don't know. All I know, it was IQS.

DePue: Was it tasty?

Solberg: It wasn't the worst thing I've ever taken. Castor oil was the worst thing. They used to put castor oil in orange juice.

DePue: What were your intentions about your future when you were in high school?

Solberg: I think, at some point, I thought of being a lawyer.

DePue: Why was that?

Solberg: I can remember going to a movie where I saw Ronald Coleman in a movie. He was a big actor at that time, was very impressive. He was a Brit, British. But nevertheless, he was a lawyer. And I read magazines like *Time* and things. I was interested in politics and legal affairs. I can't go beyond that. I thought law would probably be a good career for me. If I had had the freedom to go on, to college rather than going to the war, and if I had had the money to go to law school, I probably would have gone to law school. But I couldn't do that.

I was in the Army three-and-a-half years, which was kind of an enforced ripening experience. During that time, watching the war and fighting in a war, I came increasingly to think I wanted to understand how societies worked, how wars came about. So at some point along the line I decided I would apply to graduate school, which I did from Europe.

DePue: Well, we're going to get there. But let's go back to the high school years again—

Solberg: Yeah.

DePue: —because I'm curious. Just because of the profession you ended up with, were you watching what was going on in the world? Were you watching what was going on in Europe, in those late thirties?

Solberg: Oh, yes. I can remember very vividly the various events, Hitler invading Eastern Europe. It was when I was actually in my first year in college at the fall of France. The Munich Agreement. I didn't understand an awful lot about those things but I was quite aware. I was not politically turned off. I was paying attention to what was going on in the world.

DePue: In 1938, of course, with Munich, and the next couple years, were you thinking that, Gosh, looks we're headed towards war, or…?

Solberg: Oh, I think, very definitely. When I entered the university, I had to take an ROTC program. That was an infantry ROTC.

DePue: And you went to the University, where?

Solberg: South Dakota.

DePue: And you started there when?

Solberg: In fall of '39. So the war had broken out. By '41, I had a choice. I could have dropped out of the advanced program. But I knew the war was coming and I thought it better to go in the Army as an officer rather than an enlisted man. So I signed up for the advanced ROTC.

DePue: Did you have a choice of ROTC programs or—

Solberg: There was only an infantry program. This is one of those things that is fate. If I had gone to another school, I might have been in an artillery program or something else.

DePue: Did you have an appreciation, when you were in ROTC, that infantry is a pretty dangerous business?

Solberg: No, I didn't think about that. I was so young, so naïve about many things. The ROTC program was not well conducted. First two years, I remember taking an exam. The first year, a lot of factual types of questions. It was taken in a big auditorium. A tremendous number of students were cheating, and there was no supervision to prevent them from doing this. It seemed to me that it was just a very poorly managed program, the first couple years.

In my advanced program there was a lieutenant colonel, a regular Army officer, by the name of Church. He was very good. Very quiet man; didn't say very

much. But he was a professional soldier. He gave a talk right after Pearl Harbor, when I was already in the advanced program.

DePue: Well, let's talk about Pearl Harbor. You obviously remember that day. Can you flesh out your memories of that a little bit more?

Solberg: I was in my room. I had a room in a private house. I was taking Latin. I was studying Latin that day, when I heard on the radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed. I can remember it very vividly. Then, I think the next day, there was a general assembly at the university. They called all the students together. It may well have been we heard Roosevelt talk about a day of infamy and so forth. Either that day or maybe a bit later, this Colonel Church spoke about these events. I don't remember what he said. But I do remember the events very well.

DePue: What did you think the impact on your own life would be when you heard that news?

Solberg: I don't think I drew many conclusions about what was going to happen to me. I'll leap ahead a little bit. I graduated in '43, went to OCS, Officers' Candidate School, and graduated on May 27th of 1943. I trained troops in this country for a little over a year. I began to think that maybe the war would end before I got over there to do my part. I think I was not atypical of my generation in feeling that, if any war is a good war—and no war is—but Hitler was a menace and Hitler needed to be stopped. The United States had a role in that. I wanted to get over there and do my part. I thought it would be terrible if the war ended before I got there.

When I landed on Omaha Beach—not on D-Day but shortly thereafter—and walked up the hill there, I looked over my shoulder, accidentally, and saw this tremendous array of white crosses and Stars of David. I said to myself, I have made a big mistake. I wanted to be here! Oh! Well, going into combat the first time is hard. But it's nowhere nearly as hard as going in the second time. Because you're innocent, you don't know how bad it can be. And, yeah, I was very innocent.

DePue: Well, again, let's go back to your ROTC days. Pearl Harbor happens. Was that about the time, then, you went into the senior ROTC program?

Solberg: I was in the advanced program in September of—

DePue: Forty-one.

Solberg: —'41 and Pearl Harbor came in December. So I had already made my choice. But following the events in Europe, I think there was no question that we were going to go to war. There was, I can remember, the big debate about American isolationism and the followers of the Nazi party in this country—

DePue: The German-American Bund?[1]

Solberg: —the German-American Bund. I remember those speeches in New Jersey and the tremendous agitation to keep us out of war, of Roosevelt running on a platform that he kept us out of war, and all that type of thing.

DePue: What were your views, at the time?

Solberg: What were my views at the time? I'm not sure that they were clearly developed. I followed the argument. I think I was not an isolationist. Whether or not I was eagerly interested in the United States declaring war quickly, I can't say that. But I think I knew that the United States would, and had to, get involved at some point. I think that's about what I can remember.

DePue: Do you recall what your mother's reaction was when you told her you were going to go into ROTC? You had to go in to begin with, but then you committed in '41 and that means you're going to become an officer.

Solberg: I don't remember any reaction at all. My older brother was a year and a half older. He was a year ahead of me. He was already in the ROTC program. Well, I don't recall her saying, Oh, this is a great thing, or, you can't do that, anything like that. She was not a Quaker. She was not a pacifist. She was, I suspect, a rather typical American who supported the government to a large extent.

DePue: Did you grow up in a religious family?

Solberg: I would say so. We were Lutheran. We went to a German Lutheran church rather than a Norwegian Lutheran church. By a quirk of circumstance, when we moved from this Scandinavian settlement out in the country which was decidedly Scandinavian Lutheran, Norwegian Lutheran and maybe just Scandinavian, we went into town. I'm told that the German Lutheran pastor called on my parents more quickly than the Scandinavian Lutheran pastor. So we went to that church.

I was brought up in a rather strict Christian family, I would say, looking back on it, typical of kind of a rigid adherence to the understanding that people of the Midwest, of most Protestants of that time had, of what scripture said. I can remember going to a confirmation class. Lutherans had to be confirmed, like bar mitzvah for Protestants.

I can remember going to that class with my older brother. We met on Saturday mornings. You had to learn the catechism, and you learned a number of things. You learned about heaven and hell. And at that time, I thought of heaven as a place up there and hell as a place down there. It was kind of a standard Protestant

[1] The German-American Bund (Federation) was an American Nazi organization established in the 1930s with a goal to promote a favorable view of Nazi Germany.

or a Christian interpretation, which many people still have. I realize you simply can't think in those terms. But I remember there was a minister, L. P. Westernberger of German background, telling us that if you were bad you'd go to hell. "How long would you be in hell?" "For eternity." "Now how long will eternity be?" "Let me tell you a story. There's a boulder. It's a big boulder. I mean a really big boulder. And every year in the spring, a bird comes and whets its bill on that boulder. And when the boulder has been worn down to nothingness, one second will have passed in eternity. Be good, kids!"

I was twelve, thirteen, something like that. Why I believed this stuff, I don't know. I was not a rebellious kid. I know a woman who got kicked out of a Presbyterian Sunday school when she was twelve or thirteen because she asked too many questions. I didn't say, "Oh, come on. You can't believe that stuff." You just have an authority figure telling you that. And my parents had sent me there. I later realized when I studied some history this was an old wives' tale. It's an old tale designed to frighten people from the Middle Ages; I found it in a history book later on. But this is the type of background I had. So it took a long time.

To answer your question, I had a religious upbringing, a Christian upbringing, and of course that's determinative in shaping the way I think about many things. I have to a large extent, maybe almost totally, outgrown that simplistic interpretation of the Bible. It's not to say I don't take the Bible seriously, but are there miracles? I was just often to be (unintelligible). I've been reading Spinoza and talking about what Spinoza said about prophecy, revelation, miracles, and so forth. It's pretty challenging stuff, and you have to take it seriously, I think.

DePue: Some of the things you're talking about are the same kind of struggles that Martin Luther went through himself, when he went back and started reading the Bible again.

Solberg: Of course.

DePue: I was wondering if you can take us from the time when you were in the senior ROTC program through your OCS training? Officer Candidate School.

Solberg: We got on the train and went down to [Fort] Benning. It's a detail, but we had to get bedding for the night. It was a cold Georgia night and the sergeant gave us only one blanket and you put that on top of you, but the cold air came in this canvas, caught from the bottom. It was a terribly difficult night. Some guy just being nasty for the sake of being nasty I think. Well, we went to OCS. I was in class 243. A lot of other classes were there.

I can remember the Army: all of a sudden, one or two people in the class, they were there one day, and the next day they were gone. Why were they gone? Almost certainly, I could figure out later on, they had been connected with the anti-Franco resistance in Spain and they were considered security risks, or

something like that. These are people who'd been fighting against Franco with the Republican Army in Spain and somewhat older than the rest of us.

DePue: That whole issue was so complicated in the first place.

Solberg: Very, very complicated. Obviously, the Army had checked on, maybe on all of us. The program was not awfully rigorous. You worked hard. Typical Army thing where you fell in line and did what they told you to do. I can remember, we got on trucks early in the morning to be taken to various places where we had different types of training. You sat in the back of those trucks, and they breathed out their exhaust and you had breathe that stuff. I just remember I practically got nauseated every morning I had to do that. But what could you do? You went along with it.

I must have been a fairly good student there by somebody's reckoning, because at the end of our three-month training period, they chose a class mother. My mother was chosen. They paid her way and she came down from South Dakota as a guest of the class, and she gave a little talk. She was, at that time, very young and attractive, and she rose to the occasion.

DePue: And a sheriff, to boot. Was she still a sheriff at the time?

Solberg: Let me think. Maybe she was still Sheriff. I don't remember. She only served one term and then she was registrar of deeds for a time. I don't know anything about it really. I assume that if they chose her as the class mother it was because I was a fairly good member of the class. Now, the important thing is, that of my class at the University of South Dakota, maybe there were thirty or forty of us. I don't remember how many. About half of the men were not commissioned. They entered the Army as corporals.

The background of this is as follows. My older brother had graduated from the University in '42. At that time, the Army commissioned ROTC graduates on the day they graduated. But the Army's experience with that policy was not awfully successful, so with my class, they decided, "You people have to go to OCS. ROTC is not enough." And so, as I indicated, maybe about half of the people in my class entered the Army as corporals. I suppose that the basic indication was that these people did not have sufficient leadership skills to be commissioned as second lieutenant.

DePue: During ROTC, were you going to summer camps?

Solberg: No, we didn't do that.

DePue: When you were at OCS, was the focus of the training on leadership or in basic infantry tactics?

Solberg: Both. You got a lot of lectures on leadership. I learned a number of things about leadership that are very valuable, some of which I saw violated by major generals in the Army later on.

DePue: I guess as a general you can violate a few rules here and there. Do you think that OCS equipped you to be an effective platoon leader in a combat situation?

Solberg: Good question. Yeah, in a combat situation. I think it prepared you about as well as you could. It didn't prepare us in certain basic things that it seems to me was just lamentable. For example, I went from Fort Benning to Fort McClennan, in southern Alabama. I had been at Fort McClellan a short period of time, and I was made duty officer of the day. That meant I had to go mount the guard for the next twenty-four hour period at about 5:30 or 6:30 in the afternoon.

One of the most embarrassing experiences of my life, I went out to mount the guard, I read a detachment of six, twelve or whatever, a small number of men, and I have to inspect them. Various bugle calls started going. I hadn't the slightest idea what I was to do or when. It was painful. I muddled through it somehow. The men didn't laugh, to their credit. But that's not the way it should be. I had no instruction how to perform a necessary duty and to perform it right.

DePue: The way that's supposed to work in the Army is there's supposed to be some crusty, old non-commissioned officer who knows how things work and takes the lieutenant under his wing, but I suspect they were pretty few and far between, too.

Solberg: Yeah, these were all very, very young people, and probably weren't much more experienced than I was. Yeah, there's an old story: A lieutenant is told, "Lieutenant, there's a flag pole laying on the ground. How would you get that flag pole mounted, Lieutenant?" And the answer is, "I would say, "Sergeant, mount that flagpole."" It's a good way to do it. In a way, a school, OCS, or ROTC program, they can teach you a lot of things about how to fight, how an Army works. But you learn it by doing it, I think. You have to get out in combat.

DePue: What was the nature of the training you got at Fort McClellan?

Solberg: Well, I didn't get much training there. It was a camp for training soldiers who were going to go off to battle stations. We got a new group of recruits periodically. They were there maybe thirteen weeks or something like that. We taught them how to do close-order drill.

DePue: So were you something of an instructor for enlisted troops who were going through basic training?

Solberg: Yeah. That's what we were. We were organized in the Army way. That is, there were various companies and we went out and we taught them close-order drill. We taught them patrolling. We went to class and told them, "This is a Browning automatic rifle. This is how you take it apart. This is how you keep it clean."

Then we went out to the firing range and shot and found out who the good shots were and who the poor shots were.

The commandant at the camp was a man named Philon. Brigadier General Philon. P-h-i-l-o-n, I think. He came around in his jeep from time to time. It's kind of a silly thing in a way, but you learned that you ran up to General Philon, and said all this very quickly. And (Unintelligible), "General Philon, sir. This is Lieutenant Solberg." But, you know, somewhere you picked up the model that you rattled off his name and your name as quickly as possible, and he probably didn't care in the least. You know, a guy like that—he was a somewhat fat guy. A brigadier general who is in charge of a training camp is obviously not your hottest officer, if you know what I mean. I was there a year.

DePue: When did you leave there?

Solberg: When did I leave...?

DePue: Fort McClellan.

Solberg: I was about to be promoted to a first lieutenant and I was very pleased; I was going to have a bit more authority. Then I was transferred. I had to leave and went home and was transferred to Camp House, Texas. I was there about three months, maybe or a little less than that. I went home on leave. When I was home on leave I got a telegram saying, Report to duty. I knew then I was going overseas.

DePue: This was early 1944?

Solberg: No, this was later in 1944. Probably in August. I went back to Camp House, Texas. I got on a train and went from there to Fort Meade, Maryland, where I was in some processing center. From Fort Meade I went up to the Port of Boston, which is a shipping-out center, and we got on boat there. I think I got on the boat in Boston on Sunday, September 10, 1944. Landed in Liverpool a week later on September 17, 1944 and spent the night on the ship. I got up the next day, got on a train and went from Liverpool down to Southampton. I spent the night on the ground there in a pup tent. We were warned to dig a trench or something like that because Germans might come over and strafe, throw a bomb, or something.

So, we were on the ship one night. That would have been the seventeenth. Then in Southampton one night; that would be the night of the eighteenth. The next day we got on a British landing craft, crossed the channel, and landed on Omaha beach, probably on the nineteenth.

DePue: September nineteenth.

Solberg: September nineteenth. Stayed there one night.

DePue: So three months after the D-Day event.

Solberg: Yeah, right. The beach was pretty well cleared then. We spent one night there. I walked up the bluff and I told you, as I mentioned earlier, I looked over my shoulder by chance, and saw this vast American cemetery. I've gone back there once a couple of years ago. They've moved that cemetery since. The landmarks are quite different now from what I remembered. We were there one night and the next day at night, after dark, we got on trucks and went by what was called The Red Ball Express. We went by night because there was still fear that the Germans would strafe. German airplanes would come over and strafe. So, it was done by night.

We got on The Red Ball Express and went at a very rapid pace from the landing on Omaha beach to the town of Le Mans, France, where there was what we called a repo depot, a replacement depot. We stayed in this replacement depot for seven, ten days—something like that. I don't remember how long. Nobody told you anything. You were there and you didn't really know when you were going to go or where you were going to go. I remember going into the town of Le Mans, a provincial town, looking at the stores and so forth. I remember I was with some other lieutenants and we passed some Army major and he upbraided us for not saluting him properly. I thought, poor guy, he needed a lot of attention if he's worrying about that.

DePue: Before we go too much farther, I wonder if I can roll back the clock a little bit here. Because one of the things I've always been curious about, and asked you about before: the quality of the training you got. Here you are for close to a year at Fort McClellan, and you're training new enlisted recruits. But they're only getting up to a certain level of training themselves. During this whole time, I'm sure you're paying attention to what's going on in the war. Do you recall what was impressing you about the nature of combat that you knew you were heading to—the kinds of things that would have been going on in North Africa and Sicily and Italy?

Solberg: I followed those developments. I don't know that I tried very much to relate the experiences that I heard about or particularly read about or saw. You'd go to a movie then and you would get the kind of a TV thing, or what would be on TV today. Action photos of what was going on in Germany or Russia or North Africa.[2] I don't know that I tried to relate it very much to my condition personally. This was going on there and I was here. Maybe I didn't try to anticipate. Maybe I lack the imagination to think, "Gee, I could be there and they could be shooting at me." I don't remember thinking in those terms.

DePue: How about at Southampton? Was there any kind of organized training at Southampton?

[2] TV was not yet a consumer product. All during World War II the movie theaters in America showed newsreels of actions in the various war zones; the announcers were always very dramatic. These were usually five to ten minutes long, shown before the feature movie.

Solberg: I was there one night. We went down to the train. Took most of the day as I recall. We were there. Somebody told us to go out and pitch our tent and stay here tonight. Next morning we got up. Beyond that, the details are a bit hazy.

DePue: We're just about at the point now where you're going to be departing from the replacement depot, the repo depot, and heading up to the front lines. We'll talk about the unit you're heading to very soon. But, did you feel, that once you got up to combat, that you were prepared for that? Prepared to be leading troops in combat against a very determined enemy?

Solberg: I don't think I consciously felt, I'm ready to go. Nor did I feel that, Gee, I'm just not prepared for this. I can't handle it. Looking back now at what I was like then, I probably was a fairly well-put-together, fairly self-confident person. Not overweening in confidence, not arrogant or like that, but, I think I had a fairly good sense of who I was. I don't think I mulled over the question of, Gee, am I ready for this or not. This is my experience. This is my lot in life. I'd gone to a school where I took an infantry ROTC, I've been commissioned. Here I am on my way to battle.

DePue: Well, you've just described what many historians later on said was one of the strengths of the typical American soldier.

Solberg: Really?

DePue: Confident in their own abilities. Not necessarily the best trained, but certainly had an amount of initiative.

Solberg: I think I felt that. There was no knowing sense of, Gee, I'm not going to be able to handle this.

I'll leap forward. For example, I remember, in combat, I had a soldier. He was from Chicago, I remember. His name was—I forget. He was probably from eastern Europe someplace. He had been in combat longer than I had been in combat. He came to me and he was on the verge of a breakdown, I think. And here am I, twenty-one, maybe twenty-two years old at that time. What do you do about this? If you're a Patton, you say, "Oh, come on. Stiffen up and do your job." That's not going to do any good. You tell the guy, "Well, I understand. I understand you're having a…" I kind of steered the middle course and tried to indicate to him that he could do it if he—I forget. Something like that.

But the point I wanted to make is that I never felt I'd been in combat as long as a period we're talking about. I hadn't been in combat yet. But as I went up, I never felt that I couldn't do it. It had to be done and I would do it.

As a boy, on Armistice Day veterans of World War I would come to our class and talk about their experiences in World War I. Then the American Legion had a parade and they had these cars—forty -and-eight's. You know a forty-and-eight car?

DePue: Railcars.

Solberg: Railcars. Forty-and-eight. Forty humans or eight horses. Well, the train came then. A whole string of boxcars—forty and eights. Somebody told us to get in these cars, and we got in them.

DePue: This would have been at Le Mans?

Solberg: At Le Mans. We didn't know where we were going. Just got in the train. You never knew when the train was going to go or when it was not going to go. So, now and then it would stop for five minutes. You'd get out and you'd start one of these little pellets to heat some water to have some soluble coffee, and the train would start going. Another time, it'd stop and you'd be there two and a half hours. You never knew. Nobody told you anything. It was torture to be forty men with all of their arms and their combat gear and so forth. My long legs. So it was a torturous ride.

We're there two or three days on the way towards the front. I remember going through Paris. I remember a guy in an apartment someplace. He was shaving; he looked out. Paris had only recently been liberated and they were so glad to see these Americans going to the front. So we went.

I joined my unit, the First Battalion of the 115th Regiment of the Twenty-ninth Infantry Division on a Sunday. This outfit had landed on D-Day. They had fought very heroically, fighting. They had captured St. Lo. Very important city. Then they had moved over to Brest. They had just come back from Brest, and had not yet been on the line in Germany. So I joined my unit on a Sunday afternoon in southern Belgium—maybe in the Netherlands—I'm not sure exactly which.

DePue: Part of the Hodges First Army?

Solberg: I can't say exactly. At times we were in the First Army. It was either Hodges or Simpson. General Simpson. Now and then we were in the Ninth Army. We came up on this forty-and-eight, this long railroad train, after several days. A very, very torturous ride. I joined my unit on a Sunday afternoon in lower either Netherlands or Belgium, I'm not sure which. Their major general was there. The name was Charles Hunger Gerhardt. My battalion commander was a man named Glover S. Johns. He was a lieutenant colonel at the time, a Texan. Later on he was the American military attaché in Spain, because a friend of mine knew him there. So he had a good military career. On the whole I think he was a very good battalion commander.

Gerhardt had a reputation for being very aggressive and using up a lot of men. At the end of the war, as I recall, he was reduced from a lieutenant general back to colonel or something like that. So he did something that displeased the Army brass.

DePue: He was the commander of the Twenty-ninth division?

Solberg: He was the commander of the Twenty-ninth division. We were in this rest area for three or four days. I remember, I dug a slit trench, and I slept on the side of the slit trench the first night. I heard artillery shells, and I quickly rolled over into the slip trench. We were near Cologne. I didn't yet have the capacity to distinguish between outgoing shells and incoming shells; I quickly learned that. Couldn't they train you to distinguish between outgoing and incoming in training? I don't know. At any rate, I didn't know it. I learned it very quickly. You learn an awful lot of things, because you either learn or you go under.

We then were sent into battle in this German town. I remember one of the most significant experiences of mine in combat. We went into this German town. There was a front line there. I was the platoon leader of a heavy weapons platoon—mortars and machine guns. So, I positioned my machine guns on the front line at two different places. I was there with this insulation here, and there was some sort of a house in the back. The distance from the front line to this little house or hut of some sort, maybe fifteen yards. Something on that order. I was going from the machine gun emplacement back to this little house. I was about half-way back and I could hear a German artillery shell coming in. I knew this was coming in. I knew I couldn't get to the house in time before it hit. I couldn't get back to the emplacement, which is dug in. I hit the ground, totally flat. The shell landed three or four feet away. It was a dud. That was my first real experience in combat.

DePue: What's your thought immediately after that?

Solberg: Well, I got up and my legs were very weak, and I walked back to that little house. I don't know what I thought right after that. I think at some point I developed what almost everybody in combat developed: a certain fatalistic attitude. I'm certainly going to do everything I can to protect myself. I'm not going to get in the way of fire, shrapnel, bullets, and so forth, if I can avoid it. But if I'm going to get killed, I'm going to get killed. There's nothing I can do about it. I don't think you can survive if you don't have that type of attitude.

DePue: Did you think that maybe there is some plan for you, that that wasn't the time you were supposed to die?

Solberg: Well, of course. I thought about that. I thought about that a good deal. Maybe it's that type of thing that gradually led me away from law to something more substantive, namely, history. Law is kind of a technical thing. I don't mean to disparage it. But history deals with really the problem of… Well, it gets into fundamental problems. I had one other experience where I can feel a piece of shrapnel make a wave as it went behind my neck. Another inch and it would have severed my spinal column without any question. You can't help but think is there a providence looking out for me? I don't know the answer to that question.

A boy I grew up with—Robin Stevens—we went to school together; we went to high school together; we went to university together; we went to OCS together.

He went off and fought in France. He didn't come home. I not only came home, I came home whole; I was not wounded. and I don't think I was psychologically damaged in the way that many people have been. In retrospect, though, I think I saw some nasty fighting. I don't think it was as bad as what people had on in Guadalcanal or the jungles of Vietnam. The biggest push I was on was November sixteenth. There was a big movement to go forward.

DePue: Where was your unit at that time? Do you recall? This would have been before the Battle of the Bulge. Were you in the Hurricane force?

Solberg: Oh, yeah, before the Battle of the Bulge. No, we were north of that. I can remember November eleventh. If I had had a better sense of history or had been more imaginative. I can remember on November eleventh, we were not yet engaged in combat at that time. We were waiting for the big attack that was going to come a few days later. It was a German bunker there which we went down into to get away from possible fire. At eleven o'clock on November eleventh, the Germans started shelling us pretty badly. They were remembering Armistice Day. With a good historical sense, one without the Germans are likely to remember that I better get underground. Fortunately, I got to this shelter very quickly and wasn't hit. But they remembered that.

This big attack began on the sixteenth. We didn't get awfully far, and I can remember that night. That night we were held up; we just didn't make very much progress. I went back and looked at the New York Times headline years later and it says, "Big Allied Push on Western Front," or something like that. Big, big headline in the New York Times. The Germans stopped us fairly quickly.

I remember that night; I had dug a foxhole that night. And I can remember, there was a man out in front of the foxhole, fifteen yards away, moaning. The medics had not gotten up to take care of the wounded. There were too many of them, I think. I don't know. At any rate, the medics hadn't got up. In retrospect, I can't imagine why I didn't go out of my foxhole and try to comfort this man who was dying. I didn't. He moaned, and at some point he was silent.

The next morning, when dawn came, there was a very, very slight amount of light. There was another man, farther away, ahead of my foxhole. I did get up and go out to try to pull him back to a safer place, and a German sniper saw me and started shooting at me. That made the war very personal. Because when you're dealing with mortars and machine guns and so forth, you shoot your guns, you don't know whether it hits anybody or not. I didn't get engaged in hand to hand combat or anything like that. But here was a German who was shooting at me. Fortunately, he didn't hit me. I pulled that man back, I think, probably all the way.

The Germans in that area raised a lot of sugar beets. It was fall, and they had collected their sugar beets in big mounds, a big heap. It would be about four and a half feet high. Something like that. So a lot of American soldiers, as they were

advancing, had taken shelter there. The German artillery had zeroed in on them. When I got back there, it was the worst scene of carnage I have every seen. There were men there, bodies there, all dead, that looked as if somebody had taken a great big cleaver and just hacked at them. I remember very clearly, my first thought was to run, get out of here as quickly as I can. Why didn't I run? The military training is part of it. You're in combat. You're an officer. You serve. You do your job. But even a deeper layer, I think, what accounts for the fact that I didn't run is an instinctive sense. Or the development of a character along the way.

You don't form a character over night. You form it over a long period of time and it exhibits itself in the crisis. I realized within a second or two that if I ran, I could never live with myself. You have to stay here and do your duty. So, I stayed. That was the worst sight I saw in the whole combat.

DePue: Was it just a few days before this, though, that you listened to that man moan?

Solberg: Oh, this was the next day. The next day. The night that he was moaning was the night of the sixteenth. The morning of the seventeenth, I pulled this guy back and went back and saw these bodies in back of this heap of sugar beets. That's when I felt, Get out of here as quickly as you can. Save your life. You can't do it.

Then we went forward and I remember we made another night attack. There was a lieutenant from Pennsylvania. His name was Nazarko. He was in my company, probably. He had a rifle platoon, I think. I had a heavy weapons platoon. They were advancing at night. I remember Nazarko saying, "B company over here! B company over here!" I said, "For God's sake, Nazarko, shut up. You're going to get us all killed." Then there was a boy. We stopped at some point. We were advancing but we were held up. There was some sort of a structure there that had several rooms in it, and different soldiers were in different rooms. All of a sudden, one of the machine guns—it would have been one of my machine guns—the gunner accidentally discharged a bullet. It went through a wall and hit a soldier in the head and killed him.

DePue: Do you remember trying to console the machine gunner who made that mistake?

Solberg: I don't remember that. I remember the question of how do I handle this. To whom do I report this? I don't remember how I did that. Almost certainly, I would believe, almost certainly, the Army reported to the next of kin that this soldier was killed in action. He was killed in action.

Then, it was day, broad daylight. An American plane flying over. I don't remember that I saw a plane that got hit. But I knew that it had gotten hit by a German anti-aircraft shell and was falling, probably out of control. I was within a few yards of it. I went over. This plane fell, and here this pilot was dead. I had no means of reporting that to anybody. I don't know what happened.

Another night we were—must have been in a rest area—we were in a chow line. They would bring up food when they could do it. Bring up hot food. I remember there was some American planes going over and you could see German bullets trying to hit these planes. It was just agonizing to see the trace of bullets from time to time as you can see how close the bullets were.

I remember another time, going back a little bit, when I first got there. I don't know where this was. It was some sort of a facility. It may be this train brought us up to the front line. There was some sort of a bar, and there were some officers there who had been in combat. They were having a shot of whisky or something like and talking about how rough things were up front. And I began to realize, Well, it's going to be tough. I made the point earlier as best as I could. You're apprehensive when you're first going into combat, but you're much, much more apprehensive once you've seen it. You know what can happen, and, until that time, and there is no way they could teach you that in school.

DePue: Do you have a sense that you kind of had to suppress some of your emotions to be able to perform and to get through these things?

Solberg: No, I didn't feel that. I repeat what I had said earlier about the fact that if I'm going to get killed, I'm going to get killed, and I have to carry on.

I can remember another time, though. We were in the town of Pier. P-i-e-r. Pier, Germany, a little German town. I was dashing from building to building. There was some sort of a combat going on. I was young—twenty -two years old, or something like that. Twenty-two. In very good health. Vigorous. Athletic. I thought, this is fun. Terrible thing to think. But the adrenaline is flowing. You're being put to the test. You're doing your job. And there was a certain excitement about it. I only remember feeling that thing once. Then it was about that same place and time when the soldier was shot in the stomach. I remember, the bullet went in and out, I think, and his guts were beginning to come out of one of his holes. They put him on some sort of a litter in the back of a jeep and drove him back a bit further back. Turned him over to some Army doctor, who was a captain, I think. He was a Virginian. It seemed to me that he was just not to be rushed to take care of this man. I remember saying something to him rather harshly. You know, "Here's a man that needs quick treatment," or something like that. He was, "Who are you to be telling me? I'm a doctor. I don't take orders from other people." It just seemed to me inexcusable. He was from Virginia, as I recall. Maybe he felt that he was a patrician. Well, n any event…

DePue: Do you recall much about the winter? One of the enemies you faced was the cold and the wet, I would imagine.

Solberg: I can remember one day. We had been on the line; it was snowing and cold. We were taken off the line and we were brought back to… I think the upper brass, the higher-rank people felt that you can't fight in this war. We might as well take them back and let them go into a rest area. We spent an awful lot of time in the

basement of houses that had been destroyed. So I can remember, though, very vividly, it was cold and snowy and gray. Totally unpleasant. And then we'd go back and be in the basement of a house for some time.

There was a sergeant of Polish background. Sergeant Zoch. Great, great big husky guy. A coal miner in Pennsylvania. Good man to have on your side. You know we had liberated chicken or a goose and some pears and cooked some fairly good meals. It had nothing to do with—it had no action. You'd sit there. I remember some place, a Sergeant Schlemmer of German background from Cleveland. He was filled with all sorts of hostilities. Anger, I think. I can remember, here's a very deeply ingrained sense of certain things that are right, certain things that are wrong. Very innocent of the ways of the world. And these guys, some older, some married, they were talking about their sexual experiences. Just a real lesson for a person like myself. This is an education you don't get at either the University of South Dakota or at Harvard.

DePue: Or at OCS, even.

Solberg: Or at OCS. I heard an awful lot of people around, maybe at bed at OCS, where we'd be out camping, and you'd hear people, various Southerners, some guys from Brooklyn, who were very worldly. All this was very, very new to me. But, no, I learned an awful lot of things about the way the world works. And, made me believe that it's not a good thing for anybody to go directly, from say a bachelor's degree, to graduate school. They need some more experience in the world.

DePue: Your unit, from what I gathered, was not directly involved in the Battle of the Bulge?

Solberg: You're right. I can remember very vividly the Battle of the Bulge. We had advanced to the town of Julich. J-u-_omlaut u-l-i-c-h. Julich. On the Roer, R-o-e-r, River. We were there for several days. We lived in an inn, that type of thing. I went back and looked at it later after the war. It was quite a fashionable place. We were on the west side of this river. We were there for several days.

We were pulled back on December sixteenth, in the evening, to a rest area. On that very day—I remember it very vividly for what happened and also that was the day of my mother's birthday—December sixteenth, all of a sudden, all hell broke loose. There were artillery bombardments. German planes were coming over and strafing and bombing.

DePue: You probably hadn't seen German planes for a long time.

Solberg: This was the beginning of the Battle of the Bulge, but we were a bit north of it. The center of the Battle of the Bulge was a bit south of us. That was a very, very bitter battle, as you know. The Army was very good at giving us some relief from time to time. As I recall, on that occasion, we went back to, maybe the town of Huy, in Belgium where we were able to stay in a hotel for two nights. Get a shower and a good meal. Then when we went back on line, we were north of the

center of the Bulge. We went out every day and dug defensive replacements. So we didn't get the terror of the Battle of the Bulge. But, in a sense, I was in the Battle of the Bulge.

I remember going out at night, too. We were told that Germans had infiltrated our lines and therefore if you were in the jeep at night, they will stop you and ask for the password, the counter sign, and all that. They had to make sure you weren't a German with good English. "Who won the World Series last year?" I didn't follow baseball. I thought I might be shot as an interloper.

DePue: After the Bulge...

Solberg: I'm trying to think where we went after the Bulge. Well, then, of course, the Remagen Bridge, and then we went...

DePue: But that would have been south of your unit.

Solberg: It was south of us, yeah. My unit ended up on the Elbe River, looking across the river at the Russians on the other side.

DePue: Do you recall hearing the first words about American and British units stumbling across concentration camps?

Solberg: No, I don't remember that. I do remember seeing people, almost certainly refugees or prisoners of some sort. Not German prisoners of war, but people who had been incarcerated. I can remember vaguely seeing some people housed in a unit like that some place. I didn't think at the time, This must be a concentration camp; this must be Jews who were huddled together, or something like that. But I don't remember hearing anything about concentration camps. I don't think any concentration camps were near where I ended the war. I looked at maps later on, and I think they were elsewhere, but I'm not sure. But I saw an awful lot of refugees, on trains, going someplace.

DePue: What were you thoughts saying then? I'm assuming these were emaciated people, desperate...

Solberg: Well, I don't know they were emaciated. They looked like they—how to describe it?—they'd been kicked around an awful lot. I can't really say who they were or what they were. But I can remember one occasion particularly when I saw something of that nature. But I hadn't heard anything about the concentration camps or Americans coming across them.

DePue: Let's go to the sense once you got to the Elbe and looked across the river.

Solberg: You can see people moving over there. These are obviously Russians. And somehow, the word had got around—I don't know how—that the Russian Army was filled with these kulaks, These peasants who had been put in the Army. You heard these stories, that if they got a watch, they didn't know what it was. They

shook it to hear it tick and so forth. The image that was circulated of Russian soldiers was they're big, brutish, dumb, ready to rape, pillage.

At the end of the war I went to the Nuremberg trials because I was stationed near Wurzburg and had a jeep. There the Russian soldiers were part of the guard. You realized that these are very, very well-trained and very presentable people. But maybe a lot of the Russian soldiers were peasants who fit that other description. Not educated, brutish, and so forth. We didn't stay on the Elbe too long. I was not on the Elbe River on V-E day.

We were moved, somehow, to Bremerhaven. Bremen was a big port, of course, and my unit was in a little town of Vegesack, which is a very upscale community near Bremerhaven. But the town was Vegesack, as I recall. We were there. We learned somehow that the war had ended. Somebody brought a piano out from the house that was there and they played the piano a bit. At ten or eleven o'clock we went to bed. The war was over. What had happened the last several weeks, month or two, when you knew that the war was winding down, you just hoped that you wouldn't get killed at that time. You had made it this far. I think of this all of the time in terms of these guys out in Iraq.

DePue: You remember what they were playing that night on the piano?

Solberg: No.

DePue: Was it Americans that were playing the piano?

Solberg: Oh, yeah. These were men in my unit.

DePue: Bremerhaven is not too far away from Bergen-Belsen, the prison camp where Anne Frank died. You didn't have a chance to go there?

Solberg: I didn't know that.

DePue: I also had been told to ask you about how you got a Nazi flag as a souvenir?

Solberg: Well, there was a German tank that had been crippled. As we were advancing, this German tank was sitting there, and no Germans around.

DePue: Was this in Germany itself at that time?

Solberg: In Germany. This is in combat.

DePue: But while you were moving in Germany. Not in France or Belgium.

Solberg: No, no, while moving through Germany. It was during combat. This German tank had been knocked out of commission. German soldiers in the tank had fled. I got up and looked in the tank. There was a Nazi flag there so I took it out. I only recently gave it away to my oldest male grandchild.

DePue: Do you think he has an appreciation of what that represents?

Solberg: Probably not. It's a very interesting question. I took it to the class in the Urbana grade school where my grandchildren were—on two occasions. They asked me to come and I talked about my Army experiences to some extent. I showed this flag. Some of these kids remembered that. They had seen me a year or two later. But, on the other hand, I had a German visitor here last year, who now is a man about thirty-two or something like that. He's a graduate student now at the University of Vienna. Extremely nice young man. I told him I had a flag. I said, "Do you want to see it?" He wasn't particularly interested.

In Germany, you can't show a Nazi flag. It's illegal. This is very contested merchandise. My son said to me, when I gave it to him, I told this boy I would give him the flag, and he said, "What's he going to do with it?" I said, "I don't know, but someday he might remember, 'Well, grandpa got this out of a German tank during the war.'" Who knows?

DePue: What did you do, then, after V-E day?[3]

Solberg: I was in Bremerhaven for a time. That's a good time when you could drive into Bremen and the Army. There was a *rauthaus*—a very nice restaurant in the bottom of that. We could go there and get a good meal. I didn't have an awful lot to do then. Then I was transferred to a prisoner of war detachment in Muenchen-Gladbach. So, I went down there where I lived in a nice house. I had my own jeep. I was the commanding officer of a prisoner of war detachment. Why these men were still prisoners of war, I just don't recall. They were in an underground bunker. I went down there and inspected it from time to time. The men made me an iron candelabra which they gave me at Christmas time. I don't know what happened to that. Maybe I tried to ship it home and it got stolen. I don't know.

I wasn't there very long before I was able to get an appointment to go off to an American school established in Biarritz, France. I was there two months and while I was in Biarritz I got a letter from a lieutenant general addressed to me by name congratulating me on the excellence of this prisoner of war detachment, of which I was a commanding officer. I kind of said to myself, This is kind of ridiculous; I wasn't there long enough to make any difference at all. But the letter was addressed to me. So I got back to my unit. I was living very well. My men—these prisoners—worked in an Army food depot, so they brought excellent food to my house. I had two cooks in the house, and I would have crepes for breakfast and good meals. I remember at Thanksgiving time, there were some Germans there, and other people; we sat and sang Thanksgiving songs and so forth.

There was another lieutenant living in the house, too. I was a first lieutenant. He was a second lieutenant, as I recall. He was a real scumbag. He was a good friend of my commanding officer when I got back to Muenchen-Gladbach. There

[3] V-E Day stood for Victory in Europe Day.

was a man by the name of Major Peterson. And I must have told this lieutenant about this letter from the major general.

Major Peterson called me to his quarters, his residence; he had commandeered, taken over a very nice house. We were sitting in the living room on the second floor. He said, "Oh, by the way, Captain Solberg." I was a lieutenant then. "I understand you got this letter from a lieutenant general." I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, I want you to turn that letter over to me." And my immediate thought was, Well, okay, it doesn't mean anything to me. I don't really think I deserved it. But then on second thought I began to feel that, No, the letter was addressed to me. It should have come through channels. It didn't. It's a personal letter. It came to me, addressed to me, by mail. I said, "I'm sorry, Major. I don't think I can do that." He said, "You will do it." So I turned the letter over to him. I had no alternative.

As a result, he got rid of me. I had to sign off on the property, and in the Army you were responsible for your property. I think I turned over the unit to this lieutenant. And they really tried to stiff me saying that I couldn't account for a stove or a jeep or something like that. As it worked out, I didn't get those responsibilities. I was sent to Wurzburg, where I lived in a barrack, ate in a mess hall or something like that. Wurzburg had been badly bombed. There was nowhere nearly as nice as Muenchen-Gladbach.

I complained, or appealed, to the inspector general, telling them what happened. The inspector general was in Bad Nauheim. A lot of time elapsed before I finally got a letter from the inspector general saying, "We have investigated your complaint, and we have ordered Major Peterson to return the letter to you." So, this lieutenant then wrote me a seemingly cordial letter. "Well, how are you getting along? I haven't seen you. I hope everything is well. Oh, by the way, Major Peterson says he would like you to have this letter."

It was a very important lesson to me. Young. Impressionable. If the major says, "Give me the letter, I'll give it to him." But it's not the right thing to do. It violates principle, and I'll stand up for what's right. I did. I could have lost. For a time I felt, this just shows you what the Army is. You take what they give you and whether you like it or not. But, I was vindicated. No small thing, I think.

DePue: Do you know why he wanted the letter? I mean, it wasn't addressed to him in the first place. What his motivations were?

Solberg: Maybe he felt that since he commanded it, commander of the officer and myself, who was in the chain of command, that he could get some reflective glory from it. I don't know. I don't know. I didn't know him at all well. I didn't have a very good opinion of him. But that's neither here nor there.

DePue: Do you remember the day that you heard the news about the atomic bomb, and what your reaction to that was?

Solberg: I'm not sure I have a clear memory of the day that it happened.

DePue: When you heard about that later on, did you have a problem with the Americans doing that?

Solberg: It's a hard question to answer in retrospect. In thinking about that question, I have to give some background. At the end of the war, the Army had a point system. If you had a lot of points, based on how much time you had spent in combat or in Germany, you could be discharged from the Army. If you had a medium number of points, you would stay on in the Army of occupation. I was in that category. If you had a lesser number of points, you'd be sent from Europe to the Asian theater. So, as a soldier, I think I knew that the casualties out in Asia could be very, very large. I don't remember having a vivid or strong opinion one way or another. The bomb had to be dropped. This was just totally unethical. I think those thoughts came later. Not so much during the time itself. As best I can recall.

DePue: Can I ask what your thoughts later, especially as an historian?

Solberg: I went to Nagasaki. I taught in Japan back in 1982. And I went to Hiroshima. Of course, it really comes down to the fact, I suppose, that if I were Truman, would I have said, "We have to drop it." Or would I have not have said that. Certainly being at Nagasaki and seeing what it did and reading about it and knowing the aftermath and all that, one feels that it should never have been dropped, should never have been made. On the other hand, if you're an American soldier, if you're the leader of Americans, how many American lives do you think you want to risk? I guess I haven't totally made up my mind. I haven't had to, and therefore, I avoid taking a firm stance on that.

DePue: Let's bring you back to the time when you're in occupation duty. You spent this time frame in Germany itself over territory that had been fought and contested over. Describe the Germany that you saw during the occupation.

Solberg: Well, what one was aware of, the deprivation that most Germans had suffered. That's one thing. For example, I remember there was a German woman who was a clerk in some unit that I had some connection with. She seemed to be a perfectly decent young woman. She was getting married. I gave her a wedding present. It was a bar of soap. Tremendous gift. That was really a good gift. It seems so insignificant. But, to be able to wash decently with a bar of soap is no small thing. Why I did that, I can't remember that.

But, I remember, people had been living in basements, eating potato peelings or potato scraps if they could get anything at all. I didn't see so much of that at first hand, although I was certainly aware of it. But, I was aware of—for example, in Wurzburg, as opposed to Muenchen-Gladbach—rubble. After a time, it was awfully hard to look at rubble. You realize the depressing feeling that you had

when you looked at cities that had once been functioning cities and now all that it is are heaps and bricks or masonry.

The Army had a policy, as you probably know, of non-fraternization. I was young and I felt that I was ordered to enforce that policy. I did enforce it. Therefore, I didn't see much of Germans. I think probably the policy was put in operation for home consumption, to say that our good American troops are not consorting with bad German women. Which they were.

DePue: And of course MacArthur took a completely different approach in Japan.

Solberg: What did he do? I'm not sure.

DePue: Well, he was okay with fraternization.

Solberg: Probably would have been better. It went on anyway. Let people sort it out for themselves. In retrospect, I would say I was fairly rigid to the extent that I was in charge of men. I would say, "You can't do that. You can't do that here. I'm in charge of this unit. You don't bring the woman in here for those purposes." I would be more willing to look away these days. I'm older and more experienced and so forth, but I was a good soldier. That's not necessarily a good thing. For a time I took piano lessons from a German woman. It didn't last very long. But I would take her some gifts of some sort. She was an older woman, and I didn't have a piano to practice on. .

I was burglarized once; it must have been when I was still up near Bremerhaven and Vegesak. I got in touch with the German police. The German police were very tough in terms of what they seemed to be trying to deal with. So, I didn't really see an awful lot of Germans. I didn't travel much in Germany. Well, that's not quite true. I did have a jeep and I went over to Muenchen-Gladbach. I went over to Heidelberg several times. I didn't probably do as much of it as I could have done. When I was in Wurzburg, I went over to Nuremberg for the war trials. I went to Nuremberg over Easter weekend. But, you know, everything was bombed out and I suppose in a way I was eager to get home.

DePue: Can you tell me a little bit about the nature of the economy? One of things that always intrigued me about post-war Germany is an economy that runs on cigarettes. Did you have any experiences with that?

Solberg: No, I didn't. One of the things that I do remember is the way in which a number of American officers, and I knew them, came upon, say, German silverware that a German family had secreted, buried in the backyard, or something like that. A rather ruthless, aggressive, whatever word is proper. They bundled this stuff up and sent it home. I suppose that's what conquering armies do. You spoil the conquered.

DePue: Then I assume that was very much contrary to military policy and discipline?

Solberg: Well, I don't know. I don't remember hearing any orders to that affect. But, you'd think that if that were the case, that the postal system… These people had to send this stuff through the postal system.

Now, I remember, I got a carved wooden plate. One of the really German things. A large plate with figures that stand out, and painted, and so on. Beautiful plate. Somebody gave it to me or I bought it. I know I didn't liberate it. I didn't steal it from somebody. But I packaged that to send it home. It never got here. Whether I didn't wrap it properly or what I don't know. But, I remember there was a lieutenant I knew, his name was Inskeep. He was ruthless in the stuff he took and sent home.

DePue: You mentioned going to Nuremberg. Did you actually observe some of the trial proceedings?

Solberg: I did.

DePue: Can you share some memories of that?

Solberg: I went to the trial, I think one full day. I remember seeing all of the Nazi war criminals. Goering.[4] He was there in the dock. I think—what's his name—I think Hess was there. I don't remember the names of all of them. I was better at the names at the time. Goering is the name I remember I best because he later committed suicide. He had a cyanide pill that he managed to obtain. Yeah, that would quite a dramatic thing.

DePue: What was dramatic about it?

Solberg: Kind of the majesty of the proceedings. Here are people who've been caught by a conquering army or armies. They're going to be brought to trial whether or not this is entirely legal; people could differ over that I think. They did differ over that. You can't do that. You defeat them and that's the end of it. But a new type of law is being created. But to see the justices there from different countries. It was an impressive proceeding. Here was an attempt to bring order where there has only been chaos. I think I was aware of all of that.

DePue: Well, for somebody, especially, who had thought for a long time that you wanted to be a lawyer—

Solberg: Yeah.

DePue: —here's law in action in a very meaningful high…

Solberg: At a very high level. No, everything was very decorous, very proper. You know this is an historic occasion. You get there—I was in uniform of course, I would

[4] Hermann Goering was a senior Nazi, Commander-in-Chief of the German Luftwaffe (air force) in the second World War.

have had to be. Here are these French soldiers, Russian soldiers, American, Brits, and so forth. It was a very impressive day.

DePue: Any other memories that you have of that occupation period you'd like to share?

Solberg: I remember Gerhardt came around early after the war to inspect the unit I was in and he wanted to look at our weapons.

DePue: Were you still then in the Twenty-ninth division?

Solberg: Oh, yeah. I was still in the Twenty-ninth division. This was shortly after the war. It may have happened before I had gone from up near Bremerhaven, down to Muenchen-Gladbach. He looked at our weapons and I think he was not satisfied that they were being kept as all oiled up and polished, and so forth. The Germans might come back at us, and therefore… I don't think he really believed that.

One of the things I did see at the end of the war—again, it must have been when I was up near Bremerhaven—there was a ceremonial capitulation. There was a large gathering of American—I think only American officers, maybe British officers, too—at which German officers were present and they had to go up in a very formal way and deposit their side-arms in a gunny sack. I don't think put them on a table. But, we won the war. You're defeated. There's a ceremony now to show that we won and you lost. So they went up and surrendered their arms. Very impressive ceremony. I didn't write these things up at the time. I wish now that I had done more of that, to say where it happened when.

Growing up in South Dakota, I never had gone to symphony concerts before. It was in Germany. I don't remember if it was near Bremerhaven or down in Muenchen-Gladbach, I went to a symphony concert for the first time. I don't think there had been a university orchestra at the University of South Dakota. If there was, I don't recall it. Anyway, I went to a symphony concert. Great stuff. And I visited a German class. I didn't handle that right. That might have been in Muenchen-Gladbach. I was interested in education; I was interested in history. There was some professor giving a class and I went there and sat in the back of the room. I'm sure he felt, What is this American officer doing here? I should have gone to him and said, "I'm just a visitor. Do you mind if I sit in on your class?" But I wasn't as well mannered then as I am now.

DePue: It strikes me that you're describing—maybe I'm stretching too much—but you're impressed by this concert, by the German culture that you're seeing there, that you're naturally curious. How did you rationalize what you were seeing there with knowing what the Nazis had done in the war?

Solberg: I can't reconcile that today. Looking back, I think I've always had an interest in Germany: German culture, Germany history. In high school, as a foreign language I took German. All of the fashionable people, the girls particularly, took French. French was the language of the upper classes. I don't know why I took German. But I had long been, I think, at sometime in particular, more impressed

with the tremendous contributions to knowledge and culture that Germans have made, particularly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. You name a field, and there was some great German poet or artist or thinker or theologian or philosopher. And yet, the horror of Nazism. I don't think one can explain it. What is there about Germany?

But then, if I may say so, you look at the United States. What is there about the United States that enables us to elect officials that plunge us into a needless war giving false reasons?

DePue: Are you talking about the current war in Iraq?

Solberg: Yes. I'm very definitely talking about that. How can this happen? If you're looking at the United States from abroad, you say, "How can decent people elect a man like George Bush? And let him get away with a needless war?" Over 4,000 Americans lives lost. Thousands of Iraqi lives lost. A tremendous expenditure of treasure that gives us part of our problem now. How can this happen in a country that's supposed to be decent? I don't know the answer to that. I know some answers, but...

The paradox of German high culture: Germans' contributions to world civilization on the one hand, and the bestiality of Nazism on the other. I remember as an officer, I was still in combat, I saw some pictures, snapshots, photo shots, some German had had; maybe he had just been captured. They showed some people being hung. And I thought, We've got take this man and take him to the authorities and have him arrested because—was naïve of course; I don't know where he got the pictures. When I went to Berlin a year ago in March, I went down to this Holocaust Museum, a very impressive place, where there is an archive in the underground that they show the storm troopers and Nazis shooting, often with machine guns, defenseless women—Jews, women and children. Utter bestiality. It's hard to understand. Now who's guilty for it?

When I was in Germany a year ago, in March, I talked with a German woman. A very high class woman. Very intelligent, very pretty. She said she felt guilty about the German past. I said, "I don't think **you** need to feel guilty about that. **You** were not around to vote for Hitler or support Hitler." But as a German, she has a strong sense of a feeling of guilt.

I don't feel guilty for slavery because I didn't participate. I didn't own slaves and I didn't endorse slavery. It was a bad thing, yes. I do feel guilty for Bush. I lived during the time of Bush. I opposed him. I didn't vote for him. I don't like people who did vote for him. I think they made bad choices. But the question of guilt does come up. How much are we guilty for the society of which we are a part?

DePue: Let me ask you at a more personal level:, you're a soldier. People shooting at you are German soldiers. What was your impression of the German soldier who you were fighting against? Not Nazis, just Wehrmacht.[5]

Solberg: Well, that's a very interesting question. I hate to say this, as a human being I hate what I'm going to say, but it's true. I had no problem in seeing dead German soldiers. I saw a lot of them. I did have a problem with seeing dead Americans. After the war I went to Johns Hopkins University in Bologna, Italy to teach. When I went back to Germany for the first time I took a group of students on a field trip to certain European installations, and we went to a NATO[6] headquarters in Belgium. We were on the bus, and a German officer stationed at the NATO place, in uniform, got on the bus. Very hard for me to take that. Because Germans were shooting at me. That war was over.

I went to Germany in March of 2006, I guess a year and a half ago. When I saw big Germans, young, soldier-age people, I still had a bit of this feeling. This is a guy who might have been shooting at me. I was back in Germany in October. I think I'm largely over that now. I think I don't feel that anymore.

DePue: That only took sixty years.

Solberg: It took a long time. Well, of course, I haven't been back to Germany that much. But, on the one hand I had tremendous admiration for German culture and for many Germans. On the other hand, there's no question that Hitler brought out the very worst qualities. And I think a lot of so-called good people thought that Hitler was good for Germany.

DePue: You refer to that one trip that you took from Omaha beach down to Le Mans on The Red Ball Express. Now, of course, the legend of The Red Ball Express is, that was primarily blacks who were driving those trucks.

Solberg: I think that was partly true.

DePue: Did you see much of the segregated army? Do you have any reflections on that?

Solberg: I didn't see much of that. At the end of the war, I remember seeing a group of black soldiers in a unit. Along these lines, I was asked at some point—I think when I was training troops at Fort McClellan—I was invited, given the opportunity, to transfer into a Nisei[7] military unit. I wish I had done it. I didn't.

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[5]The **Wehrmacht** were the unified armed forces of Nazi Germany from 1935 to 1945. Literal translation: defense force

[6] NATO is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, composed of the USA and several European nations pledging mutual defense.

[7] Nisei are first-generation Japanese-Americans. This was the period when people of Japanese descent, whether or not they were citizens and without evidence were interned in camps under suspicion of possible disloyalty to the U.S. The assignment of this storied unit to the Italian theater of war reflected a concern regarding possible collaboration with the enemy.

DePue: I can't remember the unit designation, but it's one of the most storied regiments in the Second World War, fighting in Italy primarily. They have a very heroic reputation.

Solberg: I think… Who knows, I think it probably would have been very good for me. I think I would not have brought any hostility toward Japanese-Americans. I think I would have been quite open about treating them as soldiers, as I would any other soldiers. I think it would have been a great experience. But, I don't know why I didn't do it.

I was given the opportunity also to apply for the regular Army. I went off from Ft. McClellan, I think, over to Ft. Benning to be interviewed. I thought, Gee, I don't know what's going to happen at the end of the war. I thought of law school. I don't think I had yet thought of going into history. What will I do? Maybe I should stay in the Army? I don't know how long I'm going to be there. Either way, I went over, and was interviewed, but they didn't accept me. So I was Army reserve rather than regiment.

DePue: Did you stay in the Army reserve after the war?

Solberg: I did. I came home and I stayed in the reserve while I was at Harvard Graduate School, I went to the Boston army base up at the port for my training once or twice a month or something like that. I went off to summer duty. I was called back into the service during the Korean War. I was at West Point for three years. When I left West Point, I was married and had one child. I didn't yet have a teaching job. Jobs then in the history field were very hard to get. I was invited to stay at West Point. Gee, this is good. I stayed there. By that time, I had six and a half years of service. Get twenty years, I could retire, go off and teach. It would have been a mistake, and I realized it would have been a mistake, so I said, "No, I can't say." I left without a job.

DePue: What were you teaching at West Point?

Solberg: I taught in the department of social studies. They made a bad choice, I think. They didn't teach American history on the assumption that as students who studied American history in high school, they knew the subject. Therefore, they taught European history. They taught American government. They taught Far Eastern history. Those three basically. I taught all three. I think Beukena, who was a classmate of Bradley and Eisenhower, a colonel. Herman Beukena, from the Dutch area around Grand Rapids, felt that Asia is going to be increasingly significant for the United States, so they should know about the Far East. So we had a textbook and looked at it.

DePue: Well, he was right about that.

Solberg: Yeah, of course he was right about that.

DePue: Did you remember any difficulties in adjusting from combat? What we now consider to be post-traumatic stress?

Solberg: No, no, I didn't. As I indicated earlier, I think, while I saw some terrible things, I don't think my war as difficult as some of the people who say, were in Vietnam or maybe in Iraq. And I was lucky, for ultimately, providence was watching over me.

DePue: I'm sure some people listening to your stories would say you saw plenty of combat. More than most people need to see in a lifetime. Or anybody needs to see in a lifetime.

Solberg: Well, I agree with that. But, let's say you're a soldier either in the German army or the Russian army on the eastern front.

DePue: Yeah. A different scale of combat. A different level of intensity.

Solberg: A different scale.

DePue: What was the opinion of the unit that you served with? It sounds like you stayed with the Twenty-ninth all of the way through your combat experience—

Solberg: In combat, yeah, right—

DePue: —of the morale and the fighting qualities of that unit?

Solberg: I don't think we thought much about that in those terms. I think one got up in the morning and did his job. There were no ___(??) about it. We heard stories about—I'm sure it happened—people who shot themselves in the foot to get out of it. A person was injured, went back, and say he was in England in a hospital for a time. For them to come back was extremely difficult because of what I had mentioned earlier. They knew what could happen to them. Therefore, to stay out of combat as long as possible was the name of the game.

DePue: Did you have the opportunity to write letters home and to receive letters?

Solberg: I did, yes. I wrote letters home. I wish my mother had saved my letters, but she didn't. Of course, as an officer, I had to censor the letters of my troops, because I think enlisted men could not send letters home unless they were read and approved by their commanding officer. There were these guys who really wanted to write intimately to their sweethearts, or their wives at home, even though somebody's going to read it. I did receive letters. I don't remember. We had these little aero-grams at the time.

DePue: V-Mails.[8]

Solberg: Right, V-Mails.

DePue: Did you have a sweetheart at the time you were writing to?

Solberg: I did have, yeah. (laughter)

DePue: Uh-oh.

Solberg: Well, yeah. At some point, I got a letter saying she had found somebody else. It was probably all right. It never would have been a good thing. Something had blossomed just before I left. She had been in college when I was.

DePue: So you got the proverbial "Dear John" letter.

Solberg: Yeah, I did. John writes back to that, "Remind me of your name again so I can sort your name out of one of these various pictures I got."

DePue: Well, that's one way of taking some revenge.

Solberg: Yeah.

DePue: Any other humorous incidents that you recall?

Solberg: Nothing in the humorous vein crowds my mind at the moment.

DePue: Let me ask you a different question. Most soldiers know the answer to this one. What was your favorite C-ration? I assume you ate plenty of meals out of a can.

Solberg: I don't remember that I had a favorite among them. I can't remember all of the options. They had C-rations, D-rations, K-rations.

DePue: What was a D-ration?

Solberg: A D-ration was a chocolate bar—very concentrated chocolate bar. A K-ration came in a box like a box of Cracker Jacks. Do you remember Cracker Jacks?[9]

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Solberg: Well, there was a box about that size and shape. It had little crackers and some biscuits, and maybe a tin of meat. Maybe a pack of cigarettes and toilet paper,

[8] V-Mail, V for Victory, was a way of reducing weight for what was then Air Mail postal service. A single sheet of thin paper contained the message. It had flaps and glue for folding and sealing, then the address was written on the outside. Troops overseas were given free mailing privileges; they had to leave the sheet unglued for the censors who used heavy black markers to obscure any confidential information. The folks back home affixed airmail postage and addressed the letter to the nearest APO – Army Post Office for forwarding.

[9] A favorite kids' snack of caramel popcorn with peanuts, and a little toy in the top of the box. The box was about 7" x 1-1/2".

and then something else. The B-ration, though, was about that big, and it was just chocolate. If you had nothing else, that would keep you going for a time.

DePue: Small Hershey-bar-size bar.

Solberg: It was bigger than that. And probably much, much more caloric.

DePue: So lots of fat.

Solberg: Lots of fat, yeah. As a matter of fact, C-rations left me hungry. I'm sure I shouldn't have been hungry, but if I could get a second C-ration, I would eat it. If I could find some of these Army pictures that I had, I've got a face that looks like a silver dollar. I must have weighed more then than I've ever weighed. At times, at no forward movement, you sit.

DePue: You mentioned cigarettes. Did the rations come with cigarettes?

Solberg: Rations came with cigarettes and when you were in a rest area, or they could bring food up to you, you got a pack of cigarettes a day. I didn't smoke at that time. I think we got Camels.[10] I gave my cigarettes to one of the enlisted men. Except just before a big battle, I started smoking. I don't think I felt nervous and apprehensive, but I did start smoking. So, I smoked for a time, but basically, I didn't really like smoking. So, I kept it up for a time, but not awfully long. And then we also—did in combat or not?—an officer got, I think, one and a half bottles of liquor a month. At that time, I didn't know anything about drinking. I would take a shot of it and pass it around. All the men would have a shot.

DePue: Was it whisky?

Solberg: I think it was a fifth of something like Johnny Walker, or something like that. And half a bottle of bourbon, as I recall. Yeah, whisky. Today I would drink it.

DePue: (laughter) I imagine that was great trading material, though, too. For trading around.

Solberg: Oh, yeah.

DePue: Cigarettes, and whisky I would think especially.

Solberg: Cigarettes and whisky, yeah. Of course, during combat, you weren't doing any trading.

DePue: Do you recall your homecoming, when you finally got back home?

[10] Camel was a well-known brand of unfiltered cigarettes. The package bore a picture of a camel in a desert.

Solberg: Very vividly. I was on a boat. Just before I came home, I had a leave. I went to Italy. I went back to my unit, and I think got on a boat at Bremen. I landed at—was it Hoboken?—in early June. Got off the boat and called home.

I had applied to Harvard Graduate School from Germany. I'll tell you, I can't in retrospect imagine how innocent I was. I had been a good student, on record at any rate, at South Dakota. I had decided that I wanted to go to graduate school. I applied only to Harvard. I don't think I was arrogant. I don't think I felt that they had to take me, or anything like that. But it never occurred to me that I wouldn't get into Harvard. I got off the boat, I called my mother, and she came up to meet me then. We'd go around a bit. But, she said, there's a letter here from Harvard, and she had opened it. It said I had been admitted to Harvard.

I later learned that Harvard had been pretty much a New England and aristocrats' school, until the fall of '46 when they admitted more people than in the past. And I think I read that they had had about 2,500 applications for graduate school, and had taken about 400, or something like that. I could look up those figures. I got in. In retrospect, at South Dakota, I had had a Harvard Professor, Bert James Loewenberg, who had been a student of Arthur Schlesinger, Sr.[11] I learned later on that Loewenberg—I didn't know this at the time—but Loewenberg thought I had been his best student. So I'm sure Loewenberg wrote a very good letter, and Schlesinger said, "We'll take him."

DePue: He was a history professor?

Solberg: Schlesinger was a history professor.

DePue: Loewenberg, I meant.

Solberg: Loewenberg was a history professor, right.

DePue: Did you know then when you applied to Harvard—you must have known—that you wanted to go into history and not law?

Solberg: Oh, yes. I knew by that time. Yeah.

DePue: What led to that decision?

Solberg: Life. Living. Thinking about these things. I think basically I had felt, I had fought a war, I had thought enough about, Why do wars happen? How do you account for this? How do you explain? How do you understand these things? History would provide a better means of dealing with those issues than would law. I think, also, that for me, learning is very important.

[11] Arthur Schlesinger Sr. (1888–1965) was one of the leading historians of the 1920s and 1930s. He taught one of the first college courses in American social and cultural history.

One of the great things about my career as a historian is, I've written about law, theology, education, other things. It's a great medicine. This book I'm making the index for is on medical education. A historian, unless you're very narrow, can do an awful lot of learning about different types of things. I love it. I learned an awful lot of new things about the Bible preparing for this talk I gave inTübingen [12]. I put you off because I had to prepare that talk. I worked very hard at that. It's a life of learning.

DePue: I don't know how to say this, except to ask you this. Having that thirst for understanding things is what most people are drawn to history for. We want answers. And yet, there are answers that are still elusive, as you've expressed yourself, and that's understanding what happened to the German people.

Solberg: Well, there are certain things that are not very… You come to a dead wall. You can go so far. And then there's the mysteries.

DePue: Did you go to Harvard on the GI Bill?

Solberg: I did. I'll go on a leap forward and say that I can't really have much sympathy for these people, "Get the government off our backs." The government is not always our friend. But the government is an agency for promoting human welfare, at its best. The GI Bill made a tremendous difference in the life of this country. I, for one, and many others—you could have been killed., As I mentioned, my good friend Robin Stevens' life was snuffed out when he was twenty-two, twenty-three years old. I came home and went to the GI Bill.

I've worked hard. I still work. I've been a contributing member of society. I'm not going to knock the government. This is a great act of statesmanship. I could not have gone to Harvard otherwise. Or ultimately I would have taught for three years and saved my money, and then applied to Harvard and spent one year there. Oh, no. It made all the difference in the world in my life.

DePue: Was teaching at West Point also a beneficial experience for you?

Solberg: Yes and no. You know, West Point is West Point. You know it very well. A lot of people are very impressed, "Oh, you taught at West Point; that's great." Well, it is great. I mean, it's a premier institution. And yet, at the same time I knew, at least I thought I knew, that West Point was not doing what it could and should have been doing to train future officers better than they were doing. Too many of the courses were just at the introductory level. Students learned an awful lot of facts. But they didn't really learn to think much about the facts.

If a poor student could survive the initial year, he would be carried along. I think because the Army felt, We've already got too big an investment. Or some senator or congressmen had put here. Once you make the first year, West Point is

[12] **Tübingen** is a traditional university town in central Baden-Württemberg, Germany 20 miles south of the state capital, Stuttgart,

interested in making sure you graduate. So an awful lot of goats go out. Every profession needs goats, right?

DePue: We probably should mention what goat is. If you've gone to West Point, you know that the goat of the class is the last guy academically in that class.

Solberg: But, of course, the poorer students are generally called goats and the better students are called engineers. My best student at West Point was very bright, very, very good, very good. A number of them went on to become major generals, lieutenant generals. They're top flight. But it seems to me that West Point was caught up in its own rigidity. I think it's changed a good deal since.

I was kind of a liaison. I was used as a liaison between the military world—and I had military experience—and the civilian education world.

So once I would go back, and my boss then, Colonel George A. Lincoln, called Abe Lincoln, of course, was head of the department. He would use me to ask this question, that question, or one time he sent me to talk with Westmoreland.[13] I'd spend an hour with General Westmoreland, who was then the superintendent of the academy. Telling him I didn't; you don't tell Westmoreland, he tells you.

DePue: He was still superintendent in the early fifties?

Solberg: This is later. When was it? Maybe in the sixties. I forget. Later in my career.

DePue: When did you get to the University of Illinois?

Solberg: Nineteen sixty-one. I kept up my reserve commission until I was of retirement age. I retired from the Army in '82, I think. I should have stayed a little bit longer. I retired as a lieutenant colonel. It just got to be an awful chore to have to do these extension class lessons and go off to camp. I got one tour of duty in the Pentagon, which was an illuminating experience.

DePue: As a reserve officer or serving full-time?

Solberg: It was my summer duty, so I was a reserve officer. I was only there two weeks. It took a long time to get a clearance to make sure that I was okay. But I saw something about how that system works. What they call, I carried a few actions. Do you know what means? Carry an action? I took a paper from this colonel up to that general. (laughter)

DePue: I want to get your reflection on teaching history in a university environment. Let's start with what exactly you have taught here.

[13] General William C. Westmoreland failed to lead United States forces to victory in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968 and then made himself the most prominent advocate for recognition of their sacrifices, spending the rest of his life paying tribute to his soldiers.

Solberg: I haven't taught the introductory course very often. What I've taught mostly is an advanced undergraduate/graduate-level lecture course called American Intellectual and Cultural History, which goes from the very beginning, the seventeenth century, with some background material earlier, down to the twentieth century. The idea was the interrelationship between various types of thought—religious, political, scientific, literary, theological, and so forth—carrying the whole story forward. That was my basic undergraduate course. Then, at the graduate level, I taught seminars on selected topics within that field.

DePue: I have the understanding and the impression that one of the things that you taught was military history?

Solberg: No, I never taught military history.

DePue: Can you give me some reflections on how teaching history—not so much the research side, but **teaching** history—has evolved over the time you've observed it here at the University of Illinois?

Solberg: Well, it's changed quite a bit. Historians, I think, follow intellectual trends, is one way of putting it. Or, if you like, they follow fads, just like people in most areas of activity do. Years and years ago, history was essentially political history. They talked about kings and rulers and so forth. It widened out then to deal with social issues. The history of the common man and so forth.

My mentor, dissertation director at Harvard, Schlesinger, Sr., taught a course called American Intellectual and Social History. He talked an awful lot about the development of roads. When bathtubs came in, and libraries. He didn't at all deal with the foundations of American intellectual thought. Nothing about the Puritans or the enlightenment and so forth. He started with the national period. He really didn't do what needs to be done, namely, to relate basic ideas, and how they shape the society in which they worked out. That's what I tried to do in my teaching.

For example, in the seventeenth century, American culture is shaped to the largest extent by the Puritan commitment to religion as the central aspect of human experience. From religion, you can get into law, and the structure of the church, the structure of the state, the literature, and so forth. In the eighteenth century, with the rise of Enlightenment and scientific and rational thought, you have to have an adjustment between a religious point of view and a more rationalistic point of view. In the nineteenth century, you get an emphasis on feeling. You relate all these things to each other. Schlesinger didn't do that. I think that has to be done.

Now, what's happened more recently, is that the women have come along and said, "You boys have not been paying any attention, so we want women's history." And the gays come along and say, "Well, the gays need to be treated, too. So we need gay and lesbian history."

Years ago, I was chair of the department. There was a woman here; her husband taught here. She had a PhD from Berkeley and she was willing to offer a course in women's history. I hired her for a semester to do that. One of my colleagues came up to me and said, "You know, women's history. The next thing you know, we'll be having a course in gay history." And I said, "What would be wrong with that, if you have the evidence to have a respectable course about the history of gays in American culture?" And that's come.

So what's happened, I think, in a way, is that, in my opinion, the solid core of history, which should be… I'm not a political historian, I am an intellectual historian. I don't want to do just history in which you talk about how many bath tubs there are or how many macadamized roads, or paved roads. That type of thing, you just skate on the surface, but you don't get at what the fundamental ideas are that are shaping the culture. That's what's happened. I think to a large extent these newer and often faddish offerings in history have they've risked throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Therefore, you can get an innocent, or unsuspecting student, come to college and he can get specialized courses in various things that are probably good in their way, but you really need to get at what the core of the culture has been doing, rather than having these peripheral things. So, I think, in that respect, things have changed, and not necessarily for the better.

DePue: And the core things as you see it is what you've been talking about—the intellectual evolution, the politics?

Solberg: Politics are really an epi-phenomenon. For example, why does George Bush do some of the things he does. He says because he's a born-again Christian, and God wants him to do those things. How do you explain the rise of born-again Christianity in American culture? This type of approach enables you to understand what's going on with the politics.

DePue: The intellectual approach, you're talking about?

Solberg: The intellectual approach.

DePue: But that's where the synthesis of lots of different things come together, from your perspective?

Solberg: Well, I'm not interested in the history of ideas as such. A history of ideas is like something that walks on stilts. It's not related to the ground on which it rests. What you need to do, I think, is take the basic ideas that are shaping a society at a given time, and relate them to the way people think, act, live, write, go to church, and that type of thing. For example, the lives of Darwinism. The new views about the fact that evolution is here. How do people cope with that? What does that do in terms of a definition of the Bible? In terms of their ideas about biology? Human nature?

DePue: Of who they are, how they define themselves.

Solberg: Yeah. It seems to me, that's the most rewarding part of history. I don't disparage political history or economic history, but I think these other things have priority. You really need to understand where you're coming from in order to deal with these things like political history or literary history or economic history.

DePue: We've been at this for quite a while. And we probably ought to get to the point where we ask some more general questions and to finish things up. This has been a wonderful interview, and you've gotten a lot of insights into this over the last two hours and fifteen minutes.

Solberg: I've learned a lot about myself. (laughter)

DePue: (laughter) Let's go back to your experiences in World War II. Do you think the sacrifices of you and that generation, what we now call "The Greatest Generation,"—some people have an objection to that—but are the sacrifices of your generation worth it? Were they justified?

Solberg: That's a very good question. It's a tough question. You know, I think I've become increasingly pacifistic over the years. I went back to the Omaha Beach and the cemetery near Omaha Beach, the American cemetery there. It's a very moving experience. A very moving experience. But you lay that alongside people who in every war, talk about our brave fighters for freedom who went off to defend their country.

Then you think of what's happened in this country in the last few years, where you have a president of the United States offering these brave words about our heroic soldiers and so forth. I'm very suspicious of not just the politicians, but what the people, in a way, require politicians to say and do in order to get on with the national experience. But, with that said, I'm very suspicious about high-flown rhetoric about the need to sacrifice for the national cause and so forth. Yet, with that said, I think the battle against Hitler was justified. Totally against many of the wars since then. Grenada a few years ago. Totally error, unwarranted. We went into the Middle East, up in Beirut, and so forth. Iraq. I'm even questioning Afghanistan.

DePue: Well, Vietnam. You were here as a young professor during the Vietnam era.

Solberg: Yeah. You can easily understand it in terms of the Cold War and the feeling, We can't let them do anything to us, and all that type of thing. No, I was very, very wary about the interplay between the leaders of the society, the politicians, and the society at large. If you look at this thing from the standpoint of a politician, they say, "Look, I'm not a bad guy. And if I don't do these things, somebody worse than me is going to get into office and do far worse. And the people know that." It's the interaction between what the people want and all of these people who voted for Bush; they are good people, probably. They voted for a bad man. A stubborn, ill-informed man, who had devastating consequences on the United States in terms of the policies he supported.

So, you have to end up being very, very suspicious about military engagements. Of course, Bush doesn't dare say this, because here are all of these mothers, wives, husbands, who have lost a loved one in the war, and you can't rub it in their face by saying that this was in vain.

DePue: This is very much a related question. But, I ask most people this, so I'll ask you as well. Are you proud about your service in the military? Especially in World War II, but also in the reserves.

Solberg: Yeah, I would say I am. I think I am.

DePue: Because?

Solberg: Basically I think that follows from the fact that if there was ever a good war, the war against Hitler was a good war. Maybe we can question that, but basically, as wars go, Hitler, Nazism, anti-Semitism, and all of that was totally evil. And America did have an interest in that. I was part of it and I don't apologize for that. I'm proud of it.

DePue: Next question, then. We've been talking about this a lot, already. But, looking back, how do you think that changed you? That experience in World War II changed your outlook on life? One thing, it took you away from the law and took you toward history. But are there some other more fundamental things?

Solberg: In a way that changed my outlook. But I think what you're asking is something more fundamental about outlook.

DePue: Yes.

Solberg: Well, I think in a way, it may have reinforced in me what Oliver Wendell Holmes, the jurist, said, after he had been in the Civil War battles. He said it later on. And he was a tough old bird. "Life is hard." You don't get many concessions out of the enemy, whoever the enemy is. Life in general. It's going to treat you on its own terms, and you better be prepared to deal with it. Therefore, you better work. You better prepare your own defenses. Don't expect things to be given to you. I think all of those things. My experience in the Depression is a part of that whole type of thing. Life is earnest. Life is hard. It's not fun and games. I guess I'm probably a fairly serious fellow. Whether I was this way to start with, or whether I got that way along the line, I don't know. Of course, I can joke, I can laugh and so forth. But life is real. Life is hurting. That's life. That stands on top (??). And the grave is not his goal. Do you remember that?

DePue: No, I'm not. But what I'm hearing you explain here in a certain respect is that old Norwegian Lutheran pietism that somebody came to places like South Dakota with.

Solberg: Well, there's no question about it. I'm shaped by that. Norwegians are a dour lot. That's why I like—what's his name, Prairie Home Companion—

DePue: Garrison Keillor.

Solberg: Garrison. I know those Norwegians. At least I know something about them, because I'm removed from that experience somewhat. But nevertheless, I was to some extent shaped by it. Some of these answers are very difficult. They're good questions, but I'm not sure of the answers.

DePue: You got the opportunity here, because people are going to listen to this. Hopefully some of the people listening to this in future years are your descendants: your kids, your grandkids, and beyond.

Solberg: (laughter)

DePue: So what advice would you give to them?

Solberg: Do the best you can. (laughter) Maximize your opportunities. Years ago my son said to me—I forget how old he was at the time—he said, "Dad, you know, I used to think you were a genius. But then when I got older, I realized, you're no genius. You just work hard." "You're absolutely right. There's nothing like hard work. Hard persistent work."

Work defines who we are. Work is not everything, of course, but you relate to the world, I think. This is a religious point of view, I think. But all fundamental questions, all ultimate questions about life and human existence are theological.

DePue: Well, that's certainly a wise way of putting things, I think. What would you like to say in closing, then.

Solberg: I just said it! (laughter)

DePue: Very good. This has been very fun for me.

Solberg: I'm glad to hear that.

DePue: Well, I always love to hear these stories from the first-hand experiences and what it means to people. I hope people will take an opportunity to listen to some of your experiences and try to understand the world that was back in the thirties and forties, especially, from a first-hand perspective.

Solberg: Well, it is a different world today. It's a different world. No, but I think to interview almost any human being, their lives are interesting. You know that better than I.

DePue: Everybody has an interesting story to tell.

Solberg: Of course. Of course they do. And what you got to do is bring it out.

DePue: Yeah. Well, thank you for allowing me to bring yours out.

Solberg: Well, okay. I'll be interested to see what happens. Okay. All right.

(end of interview)