Interview with Sandra Dehner-Wheeler

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: This is Mark DePue. I'm here with Sandy Dehner-Wheeler. Today is Friday, July 13th. It's a lucky day for me, though, because I get to talk to Sandy about her memories as a child growing up during the Second World War, and especially with a father who got drafted during the war and sent overseas. So Sandy, why don't you state your name and where your current residence is?

Wheeler: I'm Sandra Dehner-Wheeler. My current residence is 1901 Claremont Drive in Springfield, Illinois. I was born and raised in Lincoln, Illinois.

DePue: Okay, so just up the road about 30 miles?

Wheeler: About 30 miles.

DePue: And what are you doing to keep yourself busy now?

Wheeler: Well, I was pretty busy for 27 years doing the LPGA State Farm Classic, and just recently have stepped away from the golf tournament, and now learning how to be the "R" word, which I don't really enjoy, but that's retired.

DePue: (Laughs) You don't like that idea?

Wheeler: No.

DePue: Okay, tell me a little bit about your background, your father. What was your father doing in Lincoln?

Wheeler: My father and his younger brother Henry, known as Uncle Heinik, being a good German family, owned a packaged liquor store with a stand-up bar that was a

popular after-work stop for a lot of the gentlemen that lived in Lincoln. Daddy and Uncle Heinik had a great thing going there, and actually were in business together for 43 years.

DePue: What was the clientele? Were they industry workers or miners?

Wheeler: Well, no it was – it was everything. You had professional workers, you had lawyers, you had doctors, you had the gentlemen coming from Langellier Motor Company that had been working back in the garage. It was a mix. Lincoln is a small town. It is the same size now that it was when I was there growing up, 16,000.

DePue: That's what he was doing during the tough years of the Depression?

Wheeler: Absolutely. Absolutely.

DePue: And when did you come along?

Wheeler: Well, March 12th, 1939. I was the second of my parents' children. I have an older sister, Sharon, who is not quite three years older than me.

DePue: And your mother, what was she doing?

Wheeler: My mother was a stay-at-home mom. She did not work until all of us were in school.

DePue: Let's get up, then, to the Second World War. You were just a young tyke, very young tyke at the time …

Wheeler: Four.

DePue: …at the time of Pearl Harbor. Do you remember Pearl Harbor?

Wheeler: I do not. I do not remember Pearl Harbor. [Sandy was only 2 ½ at that time.]

DePue: How did your father end up in the military?

Wheeler: Well, there was the ever popular Logan County Draft Board, and because my father and my uncle were in business together, the Draft Board said to them, one of you will go and one of you will stay and support the two families, which created quite a disagreement between the wives (laughs). My Aunt Wilma and my mother were kind of at odds about who would end up going. My uncle was younger than my father, and of course my father was saying," I'll go, I'm the oldest." And Uncle Heinik would say, "But I'm younger, I should go." Bottom line, it came down that my father left and was inducted at age 36. That would have made Uncle Heinik about 34. Daddy thought that they wouldn't take him because he had flat feet (laughs). That was always the Dehner lore, that they

wouldn't take him because he had flat feet. Well, they did, and they put arch supports (laughs) in his boots.

DePue: So was he betting they wouldn't take him and his little brother would be called up anyway?

Wheeler: No. No, they didn't think that they would do that. And I understand, in doing my background research for this interview (I was reading through some letters), the way I'm reading it, Uncle Heinik did try to get in. I don't know what that story is, I really don't.

DePue: What was your mother's reaction?

Wheeler: Horrible. Horrible. I must have been on a play date or something, and I came home – it was late in the afternoon – and my mother was hysterical. I'll never forget it. Interestingly enough, when I was taking Psychology in college, they asked me what my first childhood memory of my mother was, and that was it. I found my mother absolutely out of control with hysteria about my daddy going. I had a very young brother. He was in [her] arms. He was somewhere between three and six months old. So there we were, a four-year-old, a six-and-a-half-year-old, and a baby.

DePue: Can you describe the scene? Did you come in from the outside and—

Wheeler: Yes, I did. I must have been outside playing, or I was at a play date at somebody else's house, but I can remember coming in the front door – we lived in a little house on North Sangamon Street – and there she was, you know. I don't remember Sharon being around, I don't know where my brother Philip was, I just remember Mama and me.

DePue: Was she sitting there crying?

Wheeler: Oh, crying buckets, buckets. Couldn't talk. It was …

DePue: You're four at this time?

Wheeler: I was four.

DePue: What were you thinking when you saw this?

Wheeler: What does a four-year-old do, you know? I didn't know what was wrong. And she could hardly talk. I probably had some knowledge of what was going on because we heard all the conversations while they were trying to decide who was going to go in. The only thing I can remember is there she was and there I was. I can't remember what went on.

DePue: Somewhere shortly after that, though, you did figure out what she was so upset about?

Wheeler: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

DePue: And what was your reaction to find out that your daddy's going to go away?

Wheeler: (Sighs) Well, you know … I was known as Daddy's girl, and … I wasn't old enough, really, to comprehend exactly what all that meant. But just the fact that he was going away, and would be away for a while was – was very, very stressful.

DePue: And exactly when did this happen?

Wheeler: This was … November 23rd, 1943. He went into service at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. He actually was inducted November 6th. I think that's the right phrase. He signed up or was drafted in – actually it was November 23rd, 1943.

DePue: So this is two years after the war started?

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: A lot of the conditions that the American public had to live under are well established by the time your dad went away?

Wheeler: We lived under them, with the rationing and the coupons. I can remember you couldn't get butter. The thing that you got was like a tub of lard, and you got a little red bean that you put in there and made margarine, and it was always a big treat to be able to whip it up (laughs). Just one of those things that I remember. Sugar was rationed, gasoline was rationed. Of course that didn't make any difference to us; we never had a car. We didn't have a car until my baby sister was born many, many, many years later.

DePue: Your dad went into the Army?

Wheeler: Yes. Private in; Private coming out (laughs).

DePue: Great. You probably preferred it that way.

Wheeler: Yeah, probably.

DePue: Tell me a little bit about your father's early experiences in the military, and where he ended up.

Wheeler: Well, he went from Fort Sheridan to Camp Callan, California, a name that I wasn't familiar with. The name that I heard so much was Fort Ord, which, ultimately, I think he ended up at before he shipped out. Camp Callan is where he did his basic training, and reading his records, that took six months. Then he went to a school to learn to be a gasoline generator operator for an antiaircraft gun, forty millimeter. And after he did all of his training, then he was shipped out to Bougainville.

DePue: I thought he became a cook.

Wheeler: Oh, yes, of course! But we have to talk about that when we get to Bougainville (laughs).

DePue: Okay. You're a very young child when all this is going on; you were four at that time. Do you remember how your life changed after your dad left?

Wheeler: Yes. Mother was very, very lonely, and she tried really hard to keep busy and keep things going. We had a dear friend, Mary, who was a dress shop operator, and she and Mother became friends. As a result, Mary came and lived with us while Daddy was overseas. So we literally had another mother. And you know the things that daddies do. We had a coal furnace. You've got to go down in the morning and stoke the furnace and get it ready for the day, and then you have to go take the ashes out. Well, Daddy had arranged for this lovely gentleman – he was black – to come every morning. His name was Davis. And he would take care of the furnace for us. My Uncle Carl, who was the only one in the family that had a car, had no children, so he became a second daddy for us. We had a little cleaning lady that would come and help mother. As I was reading through all the letters that we've been able to keep, Mother would share with Daddy what the expenses were, and how sometimes she would come up short, and he would say oh, I'm so sorry you're short. Of course she was getting an allotment, but it wasn't always on time, and she was also getting a check from Uncle Heinik from the liquor store. She had a lot of support. The tough, tough one that I remember so well were the Christmases that he was gone. I guess it was very hard to get a telephone call through. In reading all of the letters the other evening, I found one that said, "What a surprise, I picked up the phone and Lois said 'Mona, it's Fred'," so they still had the female operators. He would have to get the operator in Lincoln. She actually had an introduction to Daddy calling, and it was a surprise, and it must have been very expensive, as expenses went in those days, because she didn't get to talk to him very much.

DePue: You mentioned a couple names here. We hadn't actually stated your father and your mother's names.

Wheeler: My father is Frederick Vincent Dehner, and my mother was Mona Lutz Dehner. My mother was a native of Springfield, so Springfield was always a part of our lives. And she actually met my father when he was working for Amrhein Bakery here in Springfield, so that's how they met.

DePue: And Lutz, that's a German name?

Wheeler: It's a good German name, yes.

DePue: Did your mother work during the war?

Wheeler: Taking care of us. She did not work.

DePue: Is that the way your father wanted things?

Wheeler: Absolutely. I think that was the German in them. My great-grandparents were born in Germany, and my father was one of ten, and a very close-knit family. We lived two blocks from our grandmother and three blocks from our Uncle Carl, and it was just – we were all one. I remember, especially when Daddy was gone, You know, you didn't lock the doors in your house back then. Everything was safe. Uncle Carl would come over sometimes when we weren't around and we always knew that he'd been there because he'd lean a chair against the kitchen table. That has stayed with us over the years because when I got married, and we got back to our apartment after our short honeymoon, I found the kitchen chair leaning against the table and an empty bottle of beer sitting in front of it (Mark laughs) and so I knew Uncle Carl had been there—although he had passed away during my senior year in high school. We had a great support group. My mother's mother, Lillian Lutz, lived in Springfield, and so did her father. They had long been separated. Phil Lutz was a barber in Springfield at Telford's, and he was John L. Lewis's personal barber. Don't touch the eyebrows (both laugh).

DePue: Is Carl your mother's brother?

Wheeler: No, Uncle Carl was my father's oldest. He was the oldest of ten.

DePue: Okay, so an extended family, and a close-knit family?

Wheeler: Very, very close-knit, and very German.

DePue: I assume that your father had taken a lot of very specific and elaborate steps to make sure that your mother didn't have to go to work, that she was going to be able to be there and take care of the three kids?

Wheeler: And it was never discussed. I knew that … when mother was young she was in retailing and merchandising and was very good at it. She was also a model. She was an absolutely beautiful woman. But once they got married and started having children, that was it. Same way with my Uncle Heinik and Aunt Wilma. She never worked. Until one day my mother said to me, "Well, your Aunt Wilma's going back to work." And I thought – and I said – "What does she do?" (Mark laughs) Well, she was a registered nurse, and a wonderful registered nurse, but I didn't know that because it was home and kids and …

DePue: But if there's ever a time when the nation needs medical and nursing care, this is the time.

Wheeler: She stayed home with the children. She might have done some things that I'm not aware of.

DePue: Did you and Sharon have chores or more responsibilities growing up (Sandy laughs) because your dad was gone?

Wheeler: We always had chores (laughs). We had chores up until we left home. That was the way we were raised. You know, you make your bed, you take care of yourself, and when things didn't quite go as they wanted, then we got in deep trouble.

DePue: This might be a tough question for you to answer, but do you know how your mother felt about the war, about her husband being in the war?

Wheeler: (Sighs) Well, I have a letter here that I found that kind of talks about that, because it's right before he left. She says, "Don't forget, at the first indication that you are going overseas, let me know. I'll leave at a moment's notice. I have to see you once more, Fred, and somehow I feel you are going. I have to see you one more time, Fred." There was a great love affair here. Their letters are beautiful, just … But interestingly enough, you know, my dad was drafted at thirty-six – they called him Pops, which I find totally unbelievable. At thirty-six, man, I was just really rockin'. But all of their letters are "Hi, Mom," "Dear Mom." Sometimes she'd call him "Pappy," sometimes she'd say "Hello, Pop" or "Dad." You know, Mother was 32, Daddy was 36, and it was just amazing to me that that's how they referred to each other. I think that's a little German, too.

DePue: But that's what they identify with, that's what's important to them, that it's not just their love affair, but they've got kids as well.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: You were about six by the time the war ended?

Wheeler: Well, that would be about right. I was born in March and it was over on August 14th, 1945, because that was my husband's tenth birthday, so we always remember that day.

DePue: Do you remember your mother ever saying anything contrary about the war, or wishing your dad was back home, or not supportive of the nation's efforts?

Wheeler: My mother used to go to bed, and before she'd say her prayers – she'd say her prayers every night – she prayed for Daddy to get sick and be sent home. And that's what happened.

DePue: That's what happened? He got sick?

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: Okay, I don't want to get too far ahead of the story yet.

Wheeler: Okay.

DePue: Let's talk a little bit about what you know that your father was actually doing during the war, where he was sent.

Wheeler: Well, he shipped out in December of ’44 on a troop ship. He had some pretty comical stories about being on the troop ship with the seventeen and eighteen year-olds, and them calling him Pops. He could eat anything – he had a cast iron stomach – and he’d go down to breakfast and they’d have eggs, as he said, soft and hard, and he’d go up on deck, get some fresh air, probably have a Lucky Strike, which was his cigarette of choice. And the youngsters would come up on deck and they’d be all green and leaning on the side and then they’d ask Daddy what he had for breakfast, and he’d say eggs, soft and hard, and then you knew what happened.

DePue: (Laughs)

Wheeler: He very graphically described that to us (laughs). So that was his troop ship story. He went to Bougainville, and my dad was a great cook. He could – I always said, you know, Mother was a great cook, Daddy kept the daily things going. We had a chef and we had a sous chef. I mean, the two of them together in the kitchen were absolutely phenomenal. So I guess the word got out that he could fix things out of almost nothing. In Bougainville they used to steal chickens, and they’d bring them to Daddy and he would cook them in his steel pot. We know that story from him. He would be able to conjure up anything. But the steel pot was the cooking utensil.

DePue: He arrived in Bougainville, though, after the initial invasion?

Wheeler: Yes. He arrived there in December of ’44.

DePue: Okay, so this would have been quite a while after the initial invasion, then?

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: But that doesn’t mean he didn’t see any action.

Wheeler: Well, interestingly enough, going through this process I learned things that I didn’t know, that he never talked about. He actually was in combat. His discharge papers indicate that. I thought maybe he was just there cooking chicken (laughs). We bought a dog, or we got a dog while Daddy was gone. We got a little Cocker Spaniel and we named him Bougie, for Bougainville, and he was our little guy while Daddy was gone.

DePue: A little reminder that your dad was overseas?

Wheeler: We called him Bougie, yeah.

DePue: Why do you think, after all those years your dad never mentioned that he had seen some combat?

Wheeler: I don’t know that anybody asked, and I will forever be sorry. Until we’ve gotten so involved with the World War II memorial and working with our senior

veterans, it had never occurred to me what I missed, what I didn't do, why I didn't have the tape recorder out when I, you know. That was easy to come by when your husband's in radio and I'm in the media. Didn't do it! And all of them are gone now. All of my aunts and uncles are gone, so there's nobody to ask.

DePue: You mention that your dad did get sick, that your mother's prayers were answered.

Wheeler: My mother's prayers were answered, and she blamed herself for many, many, many years, as he had to go through a process every year to maintain his disability pay. He actually got a lung fungus in Bougainville which turned into pleurisy, a very, very painful lung condition. And they shipped him to San Diego, and from San Diego they shipped him to a hospital in Georgia, and then from the hospital in Georgia they sent him to a hospital at Camp Atterbury in Indiana. He was overseas seven months, and he got back in the States in December '44. He wasn't discharged until June 22nd.

DePue: Of '45?

Wheeler: Nineteen forty-five. And he was in the hospital all that time. Neither my mother nor the children got to see him. There just wasn't any money to do that. It was really interesting, again, going through all the things that we've been able to save … I'm very disappointed that we can't find the V-mails from Bougainville, because I recall them so well, that there was all the censoring. There'd be the letter and then the big black marks. He couldn't indicate where he was or what he was doing. It all just had to be very common, everyday chitchat. But I came across this. This is a blade mail, and my mother must have found it somewhere, and she's written her letter all over. My mother had little, tiny, what we call backhand writing, and in the mail were razor blades, and then there was one razor blade left in here. I thought that was quite interesting.

DePue: What was the post mark? Where was this sent to?

Wheeler: The postmark – she sent it to – actually, she sent it to an APO, and this is the only thing I can find that was sent to an APO, which would have been his address to get the letter overseas. You never have an overseas address, you have an APO. The date was November 8th, 1944, so it was about a month before he got shipped home, because he was shipped home in December. I think it's interesting to note that he left Bougainville on December 5th and didn't get back in the United States until the 24th. That's a long trip. Long trip.

DePue: On a hospital ship, I've got to assume, too?

Wheeler: Well, I'm assuming that. That I don't know either.

DePue: During the war do you remember much of how the media portrayed the war, the movies, the newspapers, the radio?

Wheeler: Oh, gosh, we always went to the movies, that was a big thing to do. And of course they had the newsreels, you know. (Singing) Da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da-da, and then here'd come the news. Every movie you went to see, there were newsreels, and it was all about the war. I don't remember too much of it other than the fact that they were always there. One of our activities, as a family of a serviceman – we lived on Sangamon Street, and about a half a block away were the railroad tracks – and whenever a troop train came past, Mother would line us up on the walk, and we would wave to the servicemen all hanging out of the windows and smiling and whistling. We did that regularly.

DePue: Did you have a sense of what was going on with the people you were waving at?

Wheeler: I think so. I think that Sharon and I knew that that's what Daddy did. He got on a train and he left, and these are people that are doing the same thing.

DePue: Did they wave back? I'm sure they did.

Wheeler: They did, they did. And of course all the windows – it was summer – and all the windows on the train were open, so they were literally hanging out of the windows, because they had made a stop. We had a depot in Lincoln, so they had made a stop at the depot, so they hadn't gotten up to speed yet. We were only about maybe four blocks from the depot.

DePue: Well, this is a guy kind of question (Sandy laughs) so you have to forgive me, but was your mother there with you?

Wheeler: Oh, yes.

DePue: Were they waving at the kids, or were they waving at your mother? (Laughs)

Wheeler: I think they were whistling at my mother and waving at the kids (laughs). I do believe that. She was a beauty, trust me.

DePue: Now you understand (laughs) why I had to ask that question.

Wheeler: (Laughs) I love it.

DePue: Do you recall how the Japanese were portrayed in the movies that you went to? Did you not even have any kind of sense of who the bad guys were?

Wheeler: I didn't have any sense of who the bad guys were.

DePue: Were you going to school at this time?

Wheeler: No, but my sister Sharon was, and she would have to take her little lunch box every day, and again, we didn't have a car. In the bad weather I think Uncle Carl would come and pick her up but mostly, and even when I started going to school, we walked to school, to St. Mary's School. And every noon we would walk

downtown to the liquor store and get our lunch money and go next door to the café and have our twenty-five cent lunch and walk back to school.

DePue: St. Mary's School, a Catholic school?

Wheeler: St. Mary's Catholic School, yes.

DePue: And how about your playmates while you were growing up?

Wheeler: We had a family down on the corner, the Feldman family, and their son Bobby Joe was a very, very good friend, and then we had some neighbors next door. We had a little circle of friends that we would play with. I read in one of the letters that Daddy had sent us some dolls. I don't remember the dolls. But I read further that we were just overjoyed to have these dolls, and we named them Judy and Trudy, and I can't (laughs) – I can't even imagine. But mother talked about it in one of her letters. Mother and Daddy wrote every day while he was in the States. Not so – she wrote every day when he was overseas, but every day there was a letter. She would try to get it finished by the time the mailman would come, and if she wasn't quite finished, the mailman would wait. Lots of times there was a little note up at the top, "Oh, got to go, the mailman's here."

DePue: I noticed you had a whole box of letters, but you mentioned that you don't have any of those V-mails that your father was sending home.

Wheeler: I don't know why, and it's quite a frustration to my sister and I because we remember them. You know, this is the closest thing to what a V-mail looked like, but even that, it wasn't. But they were written on very lightweight paper. (holds up a letter) This was Christmas Eve, 1944, and my dad is writing from the hospital. And he says, "Dearest Mom" – always Mom – "It was grand to hear your voice last night, also Sharon and Sandy's. I felt so sorry for Sandy. I think she takes after her mother a lot." I must have been crying, that's the only thing I can figure out. "I'm sitting here by my bed and thinking of home. There's only one thing I wish, and that is that they would quit playing Christmas carols. They make me feel kind of blue, although I should be happy to even be in the States. Well, darling, I hope you have a grand Christmas. I'm awfully sorry I couldn't send anything but my love and greetings."

DePue: I would imagine the letter meant everything to your mom.

Wheeler: Yep.

DePue: Did you have a chance to write to your dad?

Wheeler: Oh, I did. Well, actually, I couldn't write. I was four years old. I did sign it, though. But here's the little envelope, and … and this is when Daddy was at Camp Callan, and—

DePue: So that's very early in the war, before he had shipped overseas?

Wheeler: February 24th, yes. And I don't know why it was on kitten paper, because we never had any kittens, but I guess that's what little girls had. And somebody had to write this for me. "Dear Daddy, I wish you could be home for Easter. Maybe we could go out to eat. Can I have a new coat and hat and some new shoes for Easter, Daddy? I want blue shoes with high heels (Mark laughs), a yellow coat, and yellow hat. Daddy, the other day I cleaned the whole house; Mother and she didn't even know I moved out the couch, too. We had Bobby over," – that would be our neighbor, Bobby Feldman – "over for supper last night. He's my boyfriend. We had scrambled eggs and toast and milk and peach pie. Momo stayed with us" – Momo was my Grandmother Dehner, my father's mother – "stayed with us a while. Mother went to bowl."—Both my mother and father were great bowlers—"We went to bed at eight like good girls. Daddy, us kids most every night have been out playing. Last night we had Jeannette, Sonjo, Eleanor and Bobby out to play." And I did sign it. If you can see it, it says Sandy and then a bunch of X's. [See photo # 8]

DePue: X's that are in your handwriting?

Wheeler: Yes, and so as (laughs) you can see, I can't even believe it. I tried to do a little cursive, I guess.

DePue: And your mother wrote that for you?

Wheeler: I don't think so. If Mother was bowling, probably Momo did it, my grandmother.

DePue: Okay. That was probably one of the best things she could do while she was doing some babysitting for you. Did your mom keep a victory garden?

Wheeler: I don't know whether we called it a victory garden, but we certainly had a garden.

DePue: But everybody in Lincoln would have had a garden then, wouldn't they?

Wheeler: Well, I would think so, yes. We also had the little flag hanging in the window indicating that we had a person in service. And the most amazing thing to me is, when our eldest son shipped out for the first time six years ago, we went to the flag store and got a flag to hang in our window, and it was identical to the one that we hung in the window when I was a little girl. Identical.

DePue: You mentioned this earlier, and I'll just allow you to elaborate a little bit more on some of the wartime shortages and what you had to do to cope.

Wheeler: Well, Mother coped, you know. My mother was a great shopper, she always was. It was sugar; that was big, and butter; couldn't get butter. I know she—in one of the things that she wrote to Daddy about—she spent fifty dollars a month for groceries, if you can imagine. Fifty dollars a month. And she lined out everything, the electricity bill was three dollars, and the water bill was this, and the coal cost this much, and they were trying to make ends meet. And she wasn't always certain to get her hazardous duty pay, or whatever they called it then, or the

allotment, since he was gone, and I have no idea what that was. But I know that when he was honorably medically discharged, his medical allotment was $7.70 a month, and he got it the rest of his life. It probably went up. I'm sure it didn't stay at $7.70.

DePue: But during the war your mother was basically living on his pay as a Private in the Army?

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: And?

Wheeler: Whatever she got from the liquor store; that was it. And there was never any talk about going to work – none.

DePue: But there was also never any thought about having the opportunity to visit your dad, either, out in California or Georgia, or even over in Indiana?

Wheeler: No. No. And he was in the States a long time before she got to see him. You know, I talk about his disability and how my mother felt so badly throughout his life, because to maintain that disability pay, he had to go to Chicago once a year. And it was very painful because they'd run a tube up his nose and down his throat and into the lung to check the pleurisy, and as long as he still had the pleurisy, he still got the disability. It was quite an unhappy time, and he dreaded it so; she felt guilty because that's what happened to him due to her prayers. Being in the liquor business, my father loved a beer, and Dehners love beer. I'm the only Dehner I know that doesn't drink beer. He would go on the train up to Chicago and then return to Lincoln. I remember this one trip up for his test; he had enjoyed the bar car a little bit, and slept on to St. Louis (laughs). It's one of our favorite stories about Daddy's trips (Mark laughs) to check his pleurisy.

DePue: You mentioned several times that your mother felt guilty about what happened to your dad.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: And blamed herself because she was praying that he would get sick, not knowing what would exactly happen. How did you become aware that she was even feeling that way? Was that years later?

Wheeler: Yes, she told us. I never heard those words, or maybe don't recall those words, when I was a little girl, but that's exactly what she told us.

DePue: How did your dad react to her feelings?

Wheeler: He was glad to be home. (Laughs) You know, whatever it took. I'm absolutely positive that that was … you know, he was praying as hard as she was on the

other end, I'm sure. Maybe not to get sick; probably not to get shot (laughs), but …

DePue: But he never blamed her?

Wheeler: No, not at all.

DePue: You've talked quite a bit about how they were able to keep in touch with each other. Do you have any more letters that you would like to read from?

Wheeler: Well … let's see what this one is. He wrote it on her birthday, and he sent her a corsage. This is October 28th, 1944, so this was air mail. This was while he was in Bougainville. And somehow he contacted either Uncle Heinik or Uncle Carl or something, and made sure that she had flowers on her birthday, and she loved that. The corsage was so beautiful; she went right down and had her picture taken with the corsage on, which I have hanging on my wall. He says, "I see you went to see *White Cliffs of Dover* anyway. I thought you would." (Laughs) I guess he didn't want her to see that movie. He said he went – this is where he says I'm not feeling—

DePue: Because it's a great love story.

Wheeler: Yeah, yeah. And take the Kleenex, you know. He states in here that he's not feeling well. He says that the doctors don't know what's wrong with him, and that he shouldn't "bother you with my troubles, as you have plenty of your own to worry about." And then he talks about my brother Philip, who was a baby, and he says "that boy of ours is sure progressing rapidly, and he even calls everyone by their name. I see he got the radio bug like the other two redheads, and that's the old music in him. He'll be a good trumpet player." My father was a trumpet player, and …

DePue: The other two redheads, those would be?

Wheeler: Sharon and Sandy, yeah. We were a bunch of redheads. We don't know why Philip, the baby, and Sara Jane, being 12 years younger than me, didn't get red hair, but they had our father's dark hair. But I remember the Christmas Eve that he called from California. I can see the little house, and the front room and the very sparse Christmas tree If you walked down this hall, there was a little niche, and in there sat our – I guess it was called a gramophone, the kind that you wind up and put the record on – and on top of that was the telephone with the old dial on it and an old fashioned handle. And the phone rang, and it was Daddy. And that was a tough one. That was really, really tough.

DePue: Talked to your mother?

Wheeler: Talked to Sharon, talked to me, talked to Mother. And … tough.

DePue: Why was it so tough?

Wheeler: Uh-oh, here I go. Because he was so far away and it was Christmas Eve, and … you know, Mother had done everything in her power. She didn't cry a lot in front of us, and I know that she did cry a lot. (Laughs) But just to tell you how quickly children get over things – of course, we still believed in Santa Claus – somehow she had managed to buy a teeter-totter that Santa Claus, I don't know who, left when he visited in the middle of the night. It was a wooden teeter-totter that went up and down, but it also went around like this. It was in the middle of this little living room. Sharon and I got out of bed in the middle of the night (laughs) and found the teeter-totter, and it made more noise – squeak, squawk, squeak, squawk – (laughs) I can still see us and hear us. And we always left the Christmas tree lights on all night. Mother was up in the front bedroom, and our bedroom was right even where the teeter-totter was, but … Yeah, there were two Christmases without Daddy.

DePue: Do you recall ever having any doubts that America would win this war, that Daddy would win the war?

Wheeler: You know, I was so young. I don't think I ever doubted, because we were surrounded by Americana and Uncle Sam.

DePue: The messages you got when you went to the movies were always upbeat and positive?

Wheeler: Absolutely. Absolutely. I can hear the music. (Singing) Da-da-da-da, da-da-da-da-da-da (laughs) and then here came the good news, you know, and it'd be like an announcer that had a really upbeat voice, you know, and the troops did da-da-da-da-da-da today, and – yeah, always. There was never any doubt.

DePue: Do you know anybody in your close family or anybody in the community who had fathers or brothers or uncles who were killed or were seriously injured?

Wheeler: Well, my husband's uncle, who raised him, was in New Zealand and Australia, and he didn't get shot, but he had some real, real combat duty. I guess he was asleep one night and he woke up, for whatever reason, and he heard some snoring, and he kind of looked over a little hedge, and it was a Japanese soldier, and he had to take care of him. We've heard these stories, and in fact have inherited all of Uncle Joe's memories, including all the letters that he wrote to his mother, because he wasn't married then. As far as the Dehner family is concerned, I picked up, in one of the letters that I was reading, that Daddy's cousin, who was called Nig – all the Dehners had nicknames, but you can't ask me my father's, because I won't tell you, (laughs) that Nig was shot, but he was okay. I don't think any of my other uncles were in the war. I don't know why Daddy was the only one, because he had a much younger brother, Pick, who was in college. That might have been it. He was an All American at Illinois, basketball player. Maybe that's the reason; I don't know.

DePue: You've mentioned a lot of things. Is there anything else about those war years that really sticks with you, a story or an incident?

Wheeler: Oh, of course. The night my father came home.

Well, it was the middle of the night, and we knew he was coming home, but we didn't know what time, and mother put us all to bed, as normal. By this time Philip is almost two, had learned to walk while Daddy was gone, but had absolutely no memory of Daddy. Daddy got home about two o'clock in the morning, and he walked in. Now my father had very dark hair, but he had a red moustache. And my mother took one look at him, and wouldn't kiss him until he went in and shaved the moustache off. I will never forget it. Then we got Philip out of bed, and Sharon and I were running around, and we got Philip out of bed, and Mother was holding him, and he looked at Daddy and he said, "Who's that man, Mama?" (Laughs) So that was the night that he got home.

DePue: How did your mother answer the question?

Wheeler: "That's your daddy. That's your daddy." And see, our youngest sister has no memories of this because my dad was in his forties, and Mother was thirty-seven when Sara Jane was born, so she's been reading all the letters and realizes that she really came at a different time in their lives.

DePue: How much, just growing up, even as a very young child, do you think that affected or changed your outlook for the rest of your life?

Wheeler: (Sighs) I know that my father was a changed man when he came home. I know that the war changed him, all for the better. A thousand percent for the better. He became a better father, he became a better husband. I think he thanked God every day that he lived through it. I think that what I learned while he was gone was how strong a woman can be. My mother talked about "I had a bad day, but I gave myself a good talking to, and I'm back on track". She talked about that a lot. My mother was a chronic depressive, we learned later in life, so I look back at that as being an ultra difficult time for her because of this gene that she had inherited that made things more difficult for her to deal with, especially when things got her down. And I think every day there was that opportunity, but I also know that she was surrounded by a lot of support in my grandparents and her friend Mary that came and stayed with us, and Davis that came and did the coal; Uncle Carl was always there. That taught me a sense of family, and family was always so important to my mother. My mother was an only child, and her parents divorced when she was a teenager, and she was pretty much on her own. So this sense of family, that she was able to join with the Dehners and be embraced by this big German family was passed on. I especially picked up on that during that time when Daddy was gone.

DePue: Well, a big German family and proud of being German, do you have any sense of how the family was reacting to what they saw going on over in Europe with the Nazis?

Wheeler: You know, we never talked about it. Our middle daughter, Kimi, is doing the genealogy. My husband Bill's been to Germany three times with the military, and he'd say, "You need to go with me sometime." And I'd say, "I don't know whether I'm East Germany or West Germany." During that time I had no idea. Kimi is now digging into the German genealogy, and her problem right now is getting an interpreter, because so much of it is in German. I'm sure among themselves my mother and father talked about it all the time, but not to us as children.

DePue: They were not reflecting on that with you even after the war?

Wheeler: There was so much of that that we didn't really know, that hasn't really become known to us until the last twenty years, the last thirty years. History was always my thing in school. Even today, I love history. And I've pretty much immersed myself in this era since we started with the World War II Veterans Memorial. I'm amazed, and I've got a long way to go.

DePue: Well, let's talk a little bit about how you came back to these years. What drew you back to becoming more interested again in that generation, your father's generation, and those experiences?

Wheeler: Well, it most definitely was when a person that was involved in the attempt to build a memorial called me and wanted me to join their fund raising efforts, and I—

DePue: Which memorial is this?

Wheeler: The Illinois Veterans' World War II memorial.

DePue: In Springfield?

Wheeler: In Springfield at Oak Ridge Cemetery. It immediately piqued my interest because of my father, because of being what I considered an elder statesman being drafted (laughs). I mean, that's how he was treated. I couldn't join their fund raising efforts, but I could help them with the media and with public relations. And I nominated my husband, who also had an interest through his uncle's service. Bill's father died when Bill was quite young. Bill was nine years old when his father passed away, so Uncle Joe was it. And he also had a great interest in the war years, so we both got involved. And meeting these wonderful, super-seniors, who just now, in the past—what, eight, ten years—have started talking about their war experiences. It's easier for them to share among themselves than to talk to other people about their exact experiences. But they are speaking out, and thanks to the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, these things are beginning to get recorded. It's very, very important, and it makes me very sad that I didn't talk

to my father, that I didn't get his stories. If he ever would have – he'd probably have said, "Oh, Punkin , I don't want to talk about that." That was my nickname.

DePue: Why do you think that that generation hasn't talked much, hasn't shared those stories with others until just the last few years?

Wheeler: When they came home, all they wanted to do was get their lives back. They didn't want to talk about where they'd been, what they'd done while they were there, how they'd suffered. They didn't want to talk about their war wounds. They didn't care about medals or ribbons. They wanted their lives back. They wanted to be home with their families, they wanted a regular job, and they didn't want to hear anything, or talk about a war. That was the way it was.

DePue: I have to believe that for many of these, not just for the soldiers overseas, but for your mother and others who stayed behind, that World War II, and perhaps the Depression beforehand, were the defining moments of their lives.

Wheeler: Without a doubt, especially my parents. Without a doubt!

DePue: That was their anchor in how they viewed the world after that?

Wheeler: Absolutely, and how it impacted our family.

DePue: How do you think it changed the way both of your parents viewed the world afterwards?

Wheeler: That I don't know. I can't really give you … my personal experience is what I can relate to, and the change in my father.

DePue: Well, how did you know that your father went through such fundamental changes? You were very, very young when he left.

Wheeler: My dad was a happy-go-lucky, outgoing personality (laughs). Liked to go out to the crick on the weekends with the beer and the boys and fish, and it was more about Fred. It was – he was gonna do what he was gonna do, and Mona could take care of the kids. I used to think that maybe he was a rogue (laughs), but I'm not sure that was true. But I can tell you this; he became such a family man. These letters that are so precious to have … my dad was not an overtly physical hugger, kisser, didn't get a lot of that, before or after the war. But when I read these love letters, and the way the love poured out of his letters for her, and vice versa, it told me so much, that when he got away from us he found out what he had. He always called my mother the most beautiful woman in Logan County. And (laughs) the greatest thing she ever did was become Champion Chili Maker of Logan County, (Mark laughs) and boy, did those boys love the chili. So, you know, the war impacted our family tremendously, and all for the good.

DePue: How did you become so interested in talking to the women who were veterans of the war?

Wheeler: Well, in our activities with the committee for the Illinois World War II Memorial, I kind of became their director of special events, and because I ran a professional golf tournament so long, event planning is my thing, and staging and presentation. It was a natural thing that I could do without getting involved in the money raising arm, because I had to raise so much money for the golf tournament. So I had done the groundbreaking, the dedication, which was probably one of the most exciting days of my life, to see that crowd of 5,000 people, and the flags flying, and the World War II planes flying overhead. It was such a happy day. And I remember one veteran – we had to bus people in because there was no parking available for that many people – so we bused them in from the State Fairgrounds. And this one veteran got off, and he had this million dollar smile on his face, and he looked right in the camera and he said, "It's about time." (Mark laughs) And that said it all. That was it. So after doing those events, then I did a D-Day. I did a Pearl Harbor Day; I did a D-Day event, which all kind of focused on the men. And then the president of the board said, "Well, what are we going to do for Pearl Harbor Day?" Those are the two days that the committee has designated that we would try to do a program, D-Day and Pearl Harbor Day. And I thought, gosh, you know, there were women in this war. And so I went to a meeting of the directors, and I said, I'd kind of like to talk about the women of World War II. And one of the veterans there says, "Well, what are you going to do about the men?" I said, "You know, Larry, we're not going to forget the men. It's Pearl Harbor Day. We're going to do everything we need to do to respect that." And I actually got Franklin Delano Roosevelt's speech after the bombs were dropped on Pearl Harbor and played that and recognized that. But I felt it was time that the women, the wives, the mothers, the women that worked in the factories – Bill's mother, my husband's mother, worked at the factory in Illiopolis – the nurses, the ones that went overseas and the ones that stayed here, they were in the Navy, they were in the Army. The interesting part for me, in researching all this, was that the men were terribly protective of their territory in the services. They really didn't want any women. They could be called auxiliaries, but they couldn't be part of the armed forces. And it was Eleanor Roosevelt and a congresswoman whose name slips my mind that really started lobbying for, not only that they be named a part of the armed services, but they also get the benefits of being a part of the armed services. And this went from the Navy to the Army. And a lot of the quotes I've forgotten, but Hap Arnold said a great one about the women that were flying in the airplanes. Of course they were shuttling the planes from where they were built to where they needed to be. Hap Arnold thought those pilots were just the best, and he had nothing but plus to say. And it was George Marshall that finally said, to Congress, this should be and will be done, that women will be incorporated into the services. And so it is … there's quite a story there, and much more for me to learn.

DePue: More opportunities in the future, then.

Wheeler: Yes.

DePue: I'd heard another wonderful story that you recall from the dedication of the World War II Memorial. Something about a gentleman coming in and …

Wheeler: Oh, oh. It was a gentleman in a wheelchair. Now it was December 5th, so it was chilly, but the sky was clear. And he was all bundled up with blankets. He was a Marine because he had his red overseas cap on. And we had, obviously, a special area for handicapped, and actually – the legs were even up. I mean, he was literally lying back in the wheelchair. And the president of the board of the memorial recognized every service. "If you're in the Army, stand up and be recognized, if you're in the Navy, stand up and be recognized." And then he got to the Marines. This man had not opened his eyes or moved since he got there. I could see him; he was right in front, and I'm standing over here making sure everything's going right. And when they got to the Marines, his hand went up. It just took my breath away. Just …

We had Medal of Honor winners there, and we named the ones from Illinois. There are so few Medal of Honor winners. And I believe we have three or four in Illinois, of which we had two of them there that day. And just imagine what their stories are. Just imagine.

DePue: So many of those stories are lost to us now.

Wheeler: We have to work hard, and fast.

DePue: I do recall you had the opportunity to meet Bob Hope, too.

Wheeler: Ah. Well, you know, Bob Hope and golf are synonymous. He loved golf. And when a tournament that was not supposed to survive on the LPGA tour in Springfield, Illinois turned ten years old, I decided, you know, the tournament had no title sponsor, we worked from ground zero every year, we were giving money to charity, and I decided, by golly, we made it to ten—

DePue: Now this is way beyond World War II. This is the—

Wheeler: Oh, this is way beyond World War II. Way—

DePue: Nineteen-eighties?

Wheeler: Yes. Yes. The tournament was founded in 1976, so we're talking 1985. And I kept saying to the board, "I'd love to get Bob Hope to come to celebrate the tenth anniversary". Bob Hope and golf. I wasn't thinking anything about veterans then, nothing. I was selfishly thinking I want Bob Hope to celebrate our tournament. Well, come to find out that a gentleman that was sitting on my board that was one of the prime sponsors of the tournament from day one is John Homeier, Bi-Petro Oil. John says, "Well, I know somebody that knows somebody that knows somebody", and it happened to be the guy that ran the Hope tournament in California. The contact was made, and it went on for six months, but we finally landed Bob Hope for the golf tournament for a pretty nominal fee, for him, but a

big fee for us. But it was worth it. And I picked him up at his plane. We had rehearsal at the Convention Center in the afternoon. And, of course, the newspaper had been printing that he was going to be there, that he was going to be there all day, and the evening and the next day at the golf tournament. And it never occurred to me who would be picking up on that. In the middle of the afternoon, while the orchestra was rehearsing, Bob and I were sitting over on the bleachers, and the veterans start walking in with their overseas caps on, with whatever identity they wanted to have. And Bob Hope was the most gracious person I have ever seen in my life. They told their stories; he said, "Oh, yeah, I remember that…and you were here …and you were there…and I saw you at…" What an experience that was. And again, [I] didn't get it on tape, you know; it was just one of those moments. You might say that he selfishly taped them to show on NBC so he could make money. Not so. It just happened that way. It was great to see what he was doing for the troops, and you could never criticize what he did. And when you saw him getting in his eighties, relating to the seniors who were also there, it was …

DePue: Well, I've got to believe that respect and admiration were going both directions.

Wheeler: Without a doubt. Without a doubt. Or he just would have signed autographs. He had questions, they had questions. I mean, it was very interactive. It wasn't just them getting an autograph. They were relating. It was – it was neat.

DePue: Well, Sandy, we've been at this for a little while here. Do you have anything else you'd like to conclude with, perhaps?

Wheeler: No, I guess I'd just like to say that I am … that my siblings and I are so proud that our father's going to be a part of this history, his small part, but important. He was a special guy. He left with a smile on his face, and he came home with much happiness to embrace his family again. And those memories will be with us as long as we live.

DePue: Thanks very much, Sandy. That's it.

(end of interview)