

OHNR: OH-2002-03

DOI: 25 Jan 2002

TRSID: [redacted]

DTR: 29 Apr 2003

QCSID:

Text Review:

INAME: WAMPLER, Margueritte **Text w/Tape:**
(with daughters Sandy Sehman and Margie Cohen,
and friend Sara Anridge)

IPLACE: [redacted]

PL 86-36/50 USC 3605

VIEWER: COLLINS, Jimmie A.

[Tape 1, Side 1]

Collins: Today is Friday, January the 25th, 2002. I am chatting with Ms. Margueritte Wampler, who worked in SIGINT codebreaking at Arlington Hall Station during World War II. I'm Jimmie Collins, the Oral Historian for NSA's Center for Cryptologic History. Also here this evening are Sandy Sehman and Margie Cohen, Ms. Wampler's daughters, and also Sara Anridge, a close family friend. We're in Sandy Sehman's home [redacted] is Oral History 2002-03. The overall classification of this session will be UNCLASSIFIED//FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY unless otherwise noted at the end of the recording. The topic for today's interview is Ms. Wampler's experience at Arlington Hall Station. Ms. Wampler, would you like to share some of your early years with us, where you grew up, where you were born, your family life?

PL 86-36/50 USC 3605

PL 86-36/50 USC 3605

Wampler: Well, my father's family and my mother's family also were from a little place called [redacted] in Pulaski County in Virginia. We were all English people with backgrounds from England. My Grandmother [redacted] was a [redacted] and my grandfather was [redacted] and my daddy's mother was from England. Granddaddy was one of four boys that came from England. In their early days, they came from Norfolk and migrated to Pulaski. They came across in a boat and they were given land by the Queen of England. When they came over here, they were given an estate that joined... And now I think there's about three acres of it left but the rest of it was covered by Plato Lake, which is in the...

Collins: The area, yes.

Wampler: So, I sent up all the kids that were in Pulaski. I went to school... I started to school in Radford, Virginia and I later went to Salem when I was in the fourth grade, fifth grade. I lived there until I finished a year of college and I had 18 months of nurse's training in Roanoke. Wait a minute... (B% Lewscale)? (B% Lewscale) Hospital in Roanoke. Of course, that's moved to Salem now that it's (1G) Hospital. And I came... After nurse's training, I was sick and couldn't finish my nurse's training [redacted] So I went down and took an exam - a government exam - and I got a CAF-3... My

PL 86-36/50 USC 3605

Aunt Margaret came and took me to get the exam, and she insisted that I come to Washington right away.

Collins: What is a CAF-3?

Wampler: That was my status with the government on the exam. There was CAF-2 and CAF-3 and CAF-4, and the "4" went into the professional.

Collins: Okay.

Wampler: Aunt Margaret was a CAF-2, and she had been a principal of a high school in Rich Creek, Virginia. So we moved into Idaho Hall, and Idaho Hall was one of several big government buildings that were 500 civilian employees in that... government employees in Idaho Hall. Shortly after we were there, they opened up Maine – which was another big building with (1G) full of, well, (1G). Later, there was Idaho and Maine and Arizona, and there were several others. I don't remember the names of those but I think Arizona had the WACs. It was either the WACs or the Marines, but there was one for the WACs, one for the Marines, and one for the WAVs. Our civilian one was the first one that was open...

Collins: What year was this?

Wampler: That was 1943, in June.

Collins: So you never worked at the munitions building on Constitution Avenue in Washington?

Wampler: No, no.

Collins: Okay.

Wampler: We lived at Arlington Hall, I mean at Idaho Hall, and that was right at the... between the cemetery and the Potomac River by south coast of Fort Myers. It's harder than you know to remember all those things! But there were, you know... South Post was a very important military institution. I dated a couple of boys from there. I say a couple because they were real good friends and I dated one of them. The only time I introduced him to one of my girlfriends, but his friend Charlie liked... I was dating Walter and I introduced the friend of mine to Charlie, but Walter liked her better so we switched. (laughs) On that date, I went out with Charlie and also with Walter. So it was a long-time friendship. We were good friends for years. Even after I left there, they came to see me once-in-a-while. The last time I saw them, they came to see me in a truck. That was about three years later and I lived over on Belmont Road in Washington, D.C. I left Arlington Hall about a year... about two years after I went in because of the fact that we didn't have a good place to eat. We had the... We could eat breakfast and lunch at where I worked in Arlington Hall, but for supper, we couldn't do that. So we came back and, since we had a good lunch, we didn't really need much for dinner so we tried to work out to just use the PX because we could get sandwiches in there. That's what we did most of the time, but when we wanted dinner we had to catch a bus and go over to the... over there on the highway, Lee Highway to... I've forgotten... the Hot Chops. So we'd go over to Hot Chops and get a Shoppes Shoppes

bucket of chicken or something, but that was kind of expensive on our salary. We didn't do that often.

Collins: What were the living conditions like in Idaho Hall – in the barracks?

Wampler: Well, there were 500 in the building and they had big, long corridors. I don't remember exactly how many, at least 10, and up at the end of the hall was the bathroom and the laundry room. There's a different laundry room from the bathroom and we had to share that. But it was clean and it was well-kept. We had a WAC at the desk to check us in if we came in too late or something like that. We had to be in, we had a curfew and we had to really obey it, because they got mad at us if we didn't. I never did it because I was scared (chuckles). I mean, they really read you the riot act. They treated us like we were military, but I never did get in trouble because I kept the rules as best I could. But we had a good time. We would have a dance on Saturday night quite often – once a month I think it was – down in the main lobby. It was a great, big place and they had booths on each side of it and we'd get a... I don't know who sponsored those things but we always had a good band to dance by. Nobody took a date down there. You could imagine how it was with all these women living there. Some of them dated and some of them didn't. Fort Myers was right next door and we invited them, or somebody invited them over so there was usually a bunch of soldiers there. So once in a while, the girls – if we had the date – we would walk all the way across a row of (2G) and leave. We'd get home about midnight, and we had to be real careful on the curfew hand because he had to get in by curfew. They finally did build a cafeteria there, but that was after I left. It was sort of on the, the way they did the Army cafeterias. You know, you had to... It was a cafeteria style. You got what you wanted to eat and after you got out... (1B/phone rings in background), but you had to get in line for the thing.

Collins: Was the food any good?

Wampler: Yeah, it was very good, and especially at Arlington Hall. We had delicious food there. We had for our own meals, and the soldiers could come in and eat for nothing, you know. We had Army food, but it was delicious. We had macaroni & cheese. And we had beef. We had chicken. We had quite a variety of food, fish. The food was very good. I missed it. You could always get a lot of fruit, too.

Collins: What was the work environment like at Arlington Hall Station?

Wampler: Well, when I was working on the machines, I had a desk at the right of the front door. I kept tabs of all the big people who came and went. They signed in and then signed out. They were all (1G)... I guess they signed out, but if they didn't, if they didn't go out at the right time they had to sign out. I kept up with the personnel that worked in there and the people that were on (1G) machinery. They were assigned a certain machine for the day, and usually the same one every day. I'd go around and get a job report from each machine and take it back to my boss, my lieutenant who was in charge

of the wing. He had the desk behind me at the front of the wing.

Collins: Do you remember the lieutenant's name?

PL 86-36/50 USC 3605

Wampler: Wallace, William Wallace. I don't remember the girls names that worked in there. I've got a list of people that I knew there, but... Let's see, what else?

Collins: Did you have to work shift work?

Wampler: Yes. When I first went in there, [REDACTED] I had and I told them I couldn't stand on my feet all day. So they assigned me to a school for two weeks to learn IBM machines. I went to that course, then they assigned me to the IBM machines for a while. Then they put me in this personnel job, and I was in that for about a year. While I was working on the machines, though, they assigned me to night shift, and I ran a sorter, and a computer curator, yeah.

Cohen: Key punch?

Wampler: Well, everybody used key punch. Yeah, everybody knew how to use a key punch. That was to have them make these cards that... come here a minute... (TR NOTE: Ms. Wampler is rustling through a large envelope)... (2-3B) but I'm just looking through it. That's not it. These were put on our IBM machines. I don't know why I found them in these. These are from pay grade and things. Then we had... I had overtime on some of them. We have to look at the dates on those. This was my efficiency rating when I was an editorial clerk in the cryptographic branch.

Collins: What was the relationship between the service and the civilians there?

Wampler: (TR NOTE: Ms. Wampler continues to rummage through her items) Well, first, the soldiers lived there and we didn't. We had to have our own place to live, but as far as the work was concerned, they were sort of in charge, I think. Usually there was a sergeant around somewhere that worked on the machines. You know, we had key punch machines that punched the cards and then they were put in the machine, and you had to wire a board for each machine. The sergeants usually took care of that. We had to learn how to do it because we worked on the machines, but if we had any problems then we called this sergeant and he'd come fix them.

Collins: Was there any friction between the military and civilians, or did they all get along?

Wampler: No, we got along real well.

Collins: Could you describe a typical day at Arlington Hall Station for you? What time did you get up, what time did you report to work, that stuff?

Wampler: Well, I got up at 6 a.m. I think, and went to breakfast at 6:30. I lived in the boarding house all the time, and one time I lived in (B% Wesley Hall). (1G) lived on P Street. I lived there for a long time, and I lived with a friend, a girlfriend. We had moved to several different places, but when I lived there – which was really one of the best places I lived – we had to go up to our main house for our breakfast out of our house. We were in one house and

(B% Wheeler House) is on each side of the street and everybody went up to this one place. Well, there were Marines just across the street from us in one building and there were Navy people lived in one building. On my floor in my building there was a Navy commander... What are they called? An officer. Had a room on the 1st floor, and I think there were some other men that lived down there but I'm not sure. Then on the 2nd floor, there were girls and on my floor, there were just girls. Each floor had to share a bathroom, and we had a telephone in the hall that we shared. As for work, I had to be at work at 8 o'clock, and I had to wear a badge all the time when I went in. I would walk from Wesley Hall up to Dupont Circle and get a bus to K Street or a streetcar. Rather, it was a streetcar to K Street and I got a bus from there, K Street to Arlington Hall, then we went through Rosslyn. There were times when I had to catch the... When I lived on Belmont Road in Northwest, I had to get the Mount Pleasant Street car line to K Street or downtown, go up to Washington Circle and that way to Rosslyn and we'd get a streetcar to Rosslyn and then get a bus from Rosslyn over to Arlington Hall. I did that for a long time, too. And then one time, I lived in Bethesda with my aunt. My mother's sister lived in Cabin John, and I'd have to ride a street... I walked a mile almost to get on a streetcar, and then I rode the streetcar to Georgetown. I can't remember where... I think there's one you got to Georgetown and went on over to Rosslyn, then I got a bus in to work. Then I got a ride from Cabin John and I used to get a ride to a mall bridge, and down under the bridge I met a guy who picked me up – another man who I used to ride to work with when I used to live at Wesley Hall – and he picked me up and took me the rest of the way. So transportation is kind of a hard thing to do because I liked to live in the District and it was quite a haul out to Arlington, especially if we had a snowstorm. One time we had a real bad snowstorm and we had to take a truck to Rosslyn to pick us up. We got in the back of this open truck and went from Rosslyn into Arlington Hall.

Collins: Goodness.

Wampler: We did that for about a week. It was something. But they wouldn't let us off, you know, if it was just slow. They wouldn't let us off from work. We couldn't get off from work very easily.

Collins: What type of training did you receive while you were at Arlington Hall? You mentioned the IBM machines.

Wampler: Just the IBM machine, that's all. The rest of it was on... Well, we learned it on-the-job, you know. We had supervisors that would come in and tell us what to do and what we were supposed to do and how to do it. When I was the cryptographer I had to... This is the different section so we sit at long desk and we had a pile of stuff that would come in like this and they'd put it down on the first desk, and then they'd pass it along to you. They were messages that we had to decode, and sometimes you could pick it up real quick, you know, what the code was because they tried to put them in sections so we could work with them quicker. We'd sit there all day long and decode messages, and it was very hard because you'd have to find...

The first three letters usually had the code to the message, but it wasn't dependable. It was on the first line somewhere and we had to find it. We had methods of doing it, and I don't... I've forgotten what we did but...

Collins: Was this PURPLE? The Japanese Prime Minister... ?

Wampler: I never heard of that name.

Collins: Okay.

Wampler: So I think this was later, see. That was in '40, or something like that.

Collins: Do you remember what messages you were working, what the source of them were?

Wampler: They were Japanese.

Collins: Yes. Did you get any feedback on what you had done?

Wampler: No, no.

Collins: None? You just...

Wampler: We didn't even know whether we got it right or not, but we'd do what we could on it and then we'd send it back. I think we'd work with the Navy Annex, but I never was sure of that. I had a friend that worked there and he seemed to do the same kind of work that I did, but we didn't know because we were afraid to ask each other questions (chuckles).

Collins: So you really didn't... you didn't know at the time what systems you were working, what Japanese systems you were working – whether it was the Foreign Minister's communications or someone else's?

Wampler: No.

Collins: Now, was there another layer above you? Once you did what you could, did it go to somebody else for analysis and reporting?

Wampler: Yes. And they had one section in the place where they got ticker tapes all the time from the stock exchange. We would look for messages through that. I don't know really what they were looking for. I was assigned to what they called "The Salt Mines." When we were sent over there to work when they needed, or when our work ran out or something happened, you know, between jobs, really. I went over there to work one day, and I really didn't catch on to what they were doing (chuckles). But you were supposed to pick up things from different (1G), you know, like... Well, we got some from Chicago and some from New York... I don't really remember.

Collins: Well, it does sound like foreign ministry traffic then. Who, but why would you say... ?

Wampler: (2G).

Collins: Oh, okay. Why were you selected to move into the cryptographic branch?

Wampler: I really don't know. I guess it had to do with what I was capable of doing. You know, they came in and they were really intense on getting job reports from us and... I know from, when I was working night shift I know when I got

off of night shift I had an appendectomy. I went to (1G), got my appendix taken out, and came back. They (1G) me to day shift, and I guess that's when I was assigned that personnel job. Then I went from that personnel job to the cryptography.

Collins: When did you do that? When did you move into that branch, the cryptography branch?

Wampler: It must have been in '45. I may be able to tell from this. You want to stop that a minute?

Collins: Who was your supervisor in the cryptographic branch?

Wampler: A Dr. Nelson, and there's something funny that happened about Dr. Nelson at the end of the war. After the war was over, he came in one day all dressed up in an Army uniform. He was a general, and he was sent out on a mission. He had been – like so many people I worked with – he had been in Japan before the war as a missionary. They sent him back to Japan, but I don't know where, and he was killed in a plane wreck on the way. I heard, you know, (1G) linguist, Dr. Nelson, and I don't know if it had anything to do with the war or not, but... (3-4G/ fades). But he was the grandest old man you ever saw, just too old to be working anyway. But he hung right in there (2G). I don't know what we'd get done without him, because he knew the language. He was indispensable. And he had another guy in there, that... He didn't work in our branch, but he worked... He came in every once in a while to confer with Dr. Nelson and some of the people who were in charge. He couldn't walk straight. One leg was much shorter than the other, and he couldn't talk right either. You had to *really* listen. And he had had two strokes, and I don't know how he ever got over them because they really left him in bad shape. But that guy never slowed down. I never saw anything to beat him. He had more energy than anybody you could imagine, and he was real old. He worked all during the war, but I think of him quite often because you'd just wonder what kept him going, you know?

Collins: Take me through a day at your desk as a code breaker. You'd come in the morning and sit down. Did you have a pile of traffic in front of you? Was it already there?

Wampler: Yeah.

Collins: Did you know where it came from?

Wampler: No.

Collins: Nothing's changed. It's amazing. It just appears on your desk, doesn't it? What happens... ?

Wampler: It was in... Some of it was in Japanese, you know. Well, I guess it was in Japanese. Anyway, we had to break it with the Japanese code, and...

Collins: Was there any priority assigned to it? Or did you determine that? Or did you just go through whatever was next in the stack?

Wampler: Well, you'd get good at one particular thing and you could pick up on it, you

know? And somebody else would pick up on something else. The machines picked up on a lot of stuff, you know, and we got our stuff from the machine...

Collins: Right.

Wampler: To sort of finish [what] I had started, and then we'd have something to work with.

Collins: Did you work together as a team or was this strictly an individual effort?

Wampler: No, it was individual effort. We didn't even have a supervisor as far as working on it was concerned. We had to work on it by ourselves. You know, you'd find something and you'd have to look down to the body of the thing – the message – and see if you could pick up on what the letters showed you.

Collins: Were there any externals to the message? Message externals... I mean things like "To"s or "From"s or sign-offs or anything like that?

Wampler: Not that I remember. Probably were but I don't remember.

Collins: Did you ever see the codeword MAGIC attached to anything? Do you know... ? If you're getting a lot of feedback you probably don't know, but were you aware of any successes that you had with what you were decrypting?

Wampler: They would tell us what percentage that we had broken.

Collins: On an individual basis?

Wampler: No, as a group.

Collins: Okay.

Wampler: I'd say it was a group. But they would come around every once in a while if you did something that they thought was good. They'd tell you about it and tell what you did that was right – and then you could... That helped you with your work because, then, you'd know what to look for next time.

Collins: Sure. What was the most difficult part of your job?

Wampler: The eyes. It was awfully hard on your eyes.

Collins: (laughs)

Wampler: I don't know. We got messages printed up on the bulletin board every day about the airplanes that didn't come down and the people that were killed in them, and the names of them, and where they were from. We always kept up with that. We always looked at that bulletin board sometime during the day. Then, every once in a while, they would show us a restricted movie that, you know, for the soldiers, but they'd let us civilians go watch it. So we knew pretty well what was going on on the battlefield.

Collins: Did that translate into a feeling of urgency?

Wampler: I guess it did. Yeah. You didn't have to press down, but you know you wanted to. You saw how important it was to break that code because I was

there when the bombs went off in Iwo Jima (sic) and Nagasaki. [TR NOTE: Ms. Wampler probably means to say Hiroshima vice Iwo Jima]. We were always very aware of how many people were being killed all the time, and there was a... Nobody knows how those (1G) Japanese were, you know? They were (B% mysterious). They'd (B% tear) up in those planes and they'd run into you if they could do it. It was an awful thing so we could see how important it was for those bombs, Hiroshima. People don't seem to understand that now, but it had to be done. Something had to stop them.

Collins: How long did you work at the cryptographic branch?

Wampler: I don't know for sure.

Collins: Did you move on for work or something else?

Wampler: I think I was in there when the war ended, because I remember we came in and we have a machine and we had put a big "E" on it, for efficiency. We'd got a lecture about how important our job had been and how that had helped, how those machines had helped. It was what we worked on.

Collins: What did you do when the war ended?

Wampler: I stayed at Arlington Hall, and it became the Defense Department.

Collins: It eventually became NSA, in fact.

Wampler: I guess it did.

Collins: And how long did you work there?

Wampler: Until 1948 or '49. Wait a minute, it was '49 because I was... (laughter)... [TR NOTE: She addresses her daughter:] I was [redacted] pregnant the year you were born, then I quit.

Sehman: Blame that on me.

Wampler: This is [redacted] That's an 8. '48... I think it was '49.

Collins: '49?

Wampler: June '49.

Sehman: Mom, you were married – Margie and I were just talking – that September. September of '48. You were working there and Margie was born in

Wampler: June. I think it was June of '49.

Collins: And that's when you left federal service?

Wampler: Yeah.

Collins: What did you do next?

Wampler: Took care of my children, took care of my family. Margie was born and I started working as manager of Trailways down in the District of Columbia. Then, it really was in the District down in the apartment. Then in 1953, we moved to [redacted]

[redacted] Then she got in kindergarten. The year she went to kindergarten,

PL 86-36/50 USC 3605

my husband became ill. He had stones in his pancreas and he was very ill for a long time. He retired on disability, so I had my hands full taking care of him and the children (1G) after school.

Collins: So you've really stayed in this area, the Baltimore-Washington area?

Wampler: I worked for 25 years – I think it was – in Landover Hills... for Ben Sturgis). And then when Sandra and Chuck moved out here, I came out here with them and we bought a farm together that had two houses on it.

Sehman: For eight years.

Wampler: For eight years we lived there. Then they bought a new house and I moved in with them for a year until we got the settlement on the farm. Then I bought a cond[REDACTED]

PL 86-36/50 USC 3605

Collins: What was your most satisfying achievement when you were at Arlington Hall station?

Wampler: (chuckles) Let's see. To begin with, I was very pleased with becoming a CAF, CS, what was it? I was hired as a "3" and my Aunt Margaret was just a "2". I was real proud of that because she had been principal of the high school, but that was a good start. Then, I don't know my achievements at Arlington Hall. It was hard to keep up with because I changed from one thing to another. I have a lot of changes, personally and at work. It was exciting and thrilling, and I had a lot of fun. To get into that, this is a picture of "trial by jury" that we did at Arlington Hall. We made \$200.00 on it the first night, so we had it the second night and it got around. The Pentagon found out about it and the Navy Annex found about it. They all wanted to come see it, so they cancelled it (laughs). They decided it (1G) gotten too much publicity.

Collins: And having too much fun, obviously.

Wampler: Yeah. We had a good time doing that. And we had some oh-so-very talented people in that show. That (B% division) for us was just wonderful. Can you find me, Sandra?

Sehman: Yeah. So you sang?

Wampler: Yes.

Sehman: In the choir? When you were in the Choral Arts Society, is that why you worked there?

Wampler: Right. There. No, this was different. That was the National Choral Society I was in. And I was in the National Choral Society. Yeah, I don't look like I looked then.

Sehman: No.

Wampler: These are a couple of pictures we took. This is the way it looked when I first came up here. That was taken a year before I came to live up here. I came up to Washington before I came to (1B)...

Collins: Has Washington changed much since? I'm just curious.

Wampler: Oh, yes, I used to get on the bus and go anywhere I wanted to in the District. My roommate and I used to go down to the old armory to roller-skate, and we had a wonderful time. This is the people that I worked with. This guy right here, the one in the middle, is the one that drove the car. This is the car pool. We drove to work for years together. Now, can you (2G)... ?

Collins: Can you recall some of the names of the other folks you've worked with? You mentioned L.T. Lawless and...

Wampler: And Dr. Nelson.

Collins: Dr. Nelson. And you mentioned another person, too, before we even began the interview.

Wampler: Well, these are just the people I knew. This is Bill Blumenhagen, worked for the Navy Department. This is... He was stationed at Fort Meade it says. I don't know why I scratched Fort Meade on there. I think that's a mistake because he was at the Navy Annex and that's not Fort Meade, is it?

Collins: No, not Fort Meade.

Wampler: (chuckles) No. That is down on F Street. And that's one of the girls I worked with, but I don't remember her name. Isn't that awful?

Collins: Now...

Wampler: And this is me when I lived at 21st and P Streets. That's when I had to go down to take a streetcar to K Street and get a bus at K Street to Arlington Hall.

Collins: What are your plans? You mentioned genealogy before we began.

Wampler: What are my plans?

Collins: Yes.

Wampler: That deal with that?

Collins: Yes.

Wampler: I just want to get it all together in a booklet... put pictures, with the family history. I've got a lot of history because I have the Marshall family and the [redacted] family and the Walters family. My grandmother Cathy was a Walters, and her mother came from England. She came over with her mother and met my grandfather. My daddy's brothers – he had three brothers – they had come up to England in the 17th century. I don't know just when it was. The [redacted] and Marshalls came over in the... at the beginning of the 17th century. We were already on. General Marshall was a relative of my Grandmother [redacted] Grandmother [redacted] was a Marshall, and her father was the half-brother of General Marshall. Or something like that. I don't remember just how he is, but...

Collins: Now, are there any other comments that you'd like to make? Any other stories before I turn off the tape?

Wampler: Well, I have something but I can't remember what it was.

Sehman: Mom... This is Sandy. Did you have a list of the people you worked with at one point?

Wampler: Well, I... Al Cole... those pictures... Al Cole and...

Sehman: Was he a serviceman?

Wampler: Mike (1G)... What?

Sehman: Was he in the service?

Wampler: Yeah, they were all in the service, in the Army.

Collins: We'll give (1G) a (B% few minutes) in fact. We'll go through those. Well, you have nothing else to say for the record? I thank you very much for your time, Ms. Wampler. It certainly has been interesting.

Wampler: Well, sorry I couldn't be of more help. I just don't remember some of those details.

Collins: Well, who does? (chuckles)

Wampler: I'll be 80 years old next July.

Collins: Well, thank you very much. I certainly do appreciate it.

[End of interview]