

RBRL OHD 007**The Oral History Documentary Series****Pete Wheeler**

Pete Wheeler Interviewed by: Bill Stueck and Jim [James C.] Cobb

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STUECK: Good Morning. It is June 14, 2006 we are in the Floyd Veterans Memorial Building in Atlanta, Georgia to interview Commissioner of Veterans Services Pete Wheeler. My name is Bill Stueck and I am a historian at the University of Georgia, and my colleague Jim Cobb is also a historian at the University of Georgia. We will be asking Commissioner Wheeler questions. The oral history interview is for the Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies which is on the campus of the University of Georgia. Good Morning Commissioner.

WHEELER: Good morning and welcome. We are happy to see anybody from the University of Georgia. It brings back many fond memories. I lived in a little town down there near the University of Georgia, Crawford. The original Crawford; much bigger than the Crawford in Texas; we got a stop light there and they have a blinking light in Texas. You remember Crawford; let me give you a little about Crawford before we move onto anything else. I am so proud of Crawford. William H. Crawford, you two professors know who he was. He was an ambassador to France and he is the only man that Napoleon Bonaparte ever bowed to. He was a great American. And we have other Crawford's now down in Texas, and I have had an opportunity to kid the President about it. We have twelve more people than they do in Texas, and we are the original. We are

proud of Georgia. We have a stop light and they have a blinking light down there. I can go on in detail on that, but that ain't why we are here this morning.

STUECK: Can you tell us your date of birth and you have already told us your place of birth?

WHEELER: I can tell you this: I am going to quote something from Douglas MacArthur. He had on his wall, while he was over in Tokyo and we occupied Japan following World War II, and I am not going into details, but he had this on his wall. He said, "You are as young as your faith, and as old as doubt, and you are young as your self confidence." And "you are young as your faith and you're young as your self confidence. You are old as your fear and I have no fear. You are young as your hope and you're old as your despair." I don't have any of them. I am very happy where I am and I have enjoyed every minute of the work that I do here. I was born in Albany, Georgia, Dorothy County, but I grew up and I was raised in the great city of Crawford, Georgia where I just told you a minute ago.

STUECK: Can you tell us the schools you attended?

WHEELER: Yes, and I might say before I do that, I attended Crawford High School, which doesn't exist anymore. I was president of the Senior Class in 1939. Living there, near the University, I had the opportunity to attend the very first football game played in Sanford Stadium when it opened, named after Chancellor S.D. Sanford. He was

Chancellor of the University system when I was there. Harmon Caldwell was president...and living in Athens also gave me the opportunity...Franklin D. Roosevelt came down on the stadium once. A car drove up, he and Governor E.D. Rivers who was governor of Georgia at that time.... And I had the opportunity to see the President then and he went on to Barnesville by train and came out against Walter George, who was a U.S. Senator then, and the reason he was against Walter George was he wanted an enlarged Supreme Court in the United States of America...add more numbers so that everything he'd do would be Constitutional. Senator George opposed it. I can remember that day when he endorsed another candidate against Senator George and Senator George said these words, "Mr. President, I accept your challenge," and Senator George won. Senator George was a great man. He lost a son in World War II and is very sympathetic to veterans and very responsible for starting the GI Bill which educated many World War II veterans who would not have had an education had it not been for the GI Bill and education.

STUECK: So you graduated from High School in 1939?

WHEELER: That is correct.

STUECK: And you went straight to the University of Georgia?

WHEELER: No, I didn't. I went to Emory at Oxford and then Emory at Valdosta which does not exist anymore. I think they closed it when I left. I transferred as quick as I

could to the University of Georgia and graduated there in 1943. While I was there of course World War II started, December 7, 1941. I was at the University and I was taking ROTC and I was in the Cavalry, riding horses with boots. In fact, I fell of a horse in front of the ROTC building over there when we dedicated a memorial to veterans and others fairly recently. It has been a great honor to have been at Georgia. While I was there I was [in] ROTC and in order to remain there we had to sign up to the Reserves in 1942 to complete our education, there at the University. When I graduated in 1943 we were immediately called to active duty. And at that time I went to active duty for the U.S. Army. I had gotten out of the Calvary and I had enough of horses. I remained in the Army until 1946 and then I was in the Reserves and the National Guard and I remained there until 1978. And I retired from the military in 1978.

STUECK: Can you tell us what your major was at the University of Georgia?

WHEELER: Well, you might say it was ROTC. [All chuckle]. We had to maintain a certain average to stay there, otherwise we would go right into the service and I wanted to make sure I finished ROTC first. It was education, B.S. in education, and later I went to law school here in Atlanta. And while I was working with the Federal Government I went to night school, John Marshall Law School at night. First job I had in 1946 after getting out of the service was with the Federal Government. A government agency known as OPA: Office of Price Administration. That was part of World War II because keeping prices under control ... you had to keep ... everything was control: price control. I was in lumber enforcement and I had eight states from Florida up to Virginia where we

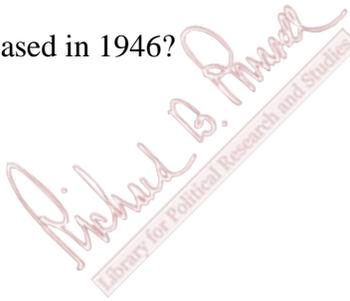
visited and tried to check and make sure that the price of lumber did not exceed the amount that the government allowed. Then when that ended, the price control on lumber and other things ended, we still had rent control. And I was made area rent director for northwest Georgia out of Rome, Georgia, where I lived in a hotel four nights a week and then back in Atlanta that night. And then of course I came to the Department of Veterans Services. I had a good friend that was Governor at the time. I knew him when I was a student at Athens. He was not a student. He was practicing law with his father then. Herman Talmadge. I knew him well and I became associated with his administration then and I have been here...this is my fourteenth term and I am enjoying every minutes of it and I enjoy it because we are helping people. If I was collecting income tax I would have quit years ago or retired, but I am helping people. There is an old hymn by the way that I remember as a child, and I still have it with me and I give it to new members of the staff when they come in and it is "Help somebody today, somebody along life's way." No, I picked up the wrong one, got the right one now. "Look all around you find someone in need. Help somebody today though it is a little neighborly deed, help somebody today. Many are waiting [for] a kind and loving word. Help somebody today." Some veterans we are unable to help, but we can listen, and that is very important and try to get them all the benefits to which they are entitled. And no veteran's benefit is automatic. You gotta apply for them and it is our job to help them apply and let them know about it where they can apply for all the benefits they are entitled. We like to point out the fact that we have done quite well in Georgia on veteran's benefits. Compared to other states we have fewer veterans, but we are bringing in more money than five other states that have more veterans.

STUECK: Can you ... before we get too far away from World War II, can you tell us where you served in World War II?

WHEELER: I served mostly in California, training men for combat, and if it hadn't been for the atomic bomb I am sure I would have been in the South Pacific. But we were training people for combat missions, and that was my job in World War II.

STUECK: Now you were released in 1946?

WHEELER: That is correct.



STUECK: Do you remember when in '46?

WHEELER: I believe it March of '46.

STUECK: Ok. But a lot of folks were released earlier than that.

WHEELER: We were released at different times, yes. That is correct.

STUECK: So, why were you a little later?

WHEELER: Well, there is an old Army saying that we used to teach our people, “Yours is not to ask why, but to do or die.” I did not ask why I went out when I was supposed to go out, and I didn’t question anything about it other than I wanted to remain in the Reserves, which I did, and I became a member of the National Guard when Governor Vandiver was the Adjutant General. Governor Vandiver, by the way, was a senior when I was a freshman at the University of Georgia, and we were close friends. And he was the campaign manager along with Roy Harris when Talmadge was elected Governor, and Vandiver was Adjutant General when I transferred over into the Guard and remained until 1978. Also, when I was in the University of Georgia Carl Sanders was a freshman, and he was Bulldog Williams’s freshman. Sanders was there on a football scholarship his first year, and the freshmen had to wait on the upperclassmen, and he was Bulldog Williams’s freshman. Bulldog was a good friend of mine. We would send Carl down to get the Coca-Cola’s for us to drink. You notice I did say “Coca-Cola” ... holy water.

STUECK: Can you talk a little bit more about what the Commissioner of the Veterans Affairs did in 1949, and I assume it is an appointed position?

WHEELER: No, it is an elected position.

STUECK: Elected Position.

WHEELER: Elected by a board, a constitutional board. We have a seven-person constitutional board. You have to be a resident of Georgia and a veteran, a wartime

veteran. And the board elects the Commissioner. And I have been fortunate enough to be elected fourteen times by different board members through the years.

STUECK: So it is a four-year term?

WHEELER: That is correct.

STUECK: And how is the board chosen?

WHEELER: The board, the Governor gets one appointment each year, and is chosen the same way as the Board of Regents is chosen, by the Governor. The Governor gets one appointment each year and there are seven members of the board, and it is a constitutional board. And it's working out very well and we think we have the best operation in the nation because we go out and make sure the veteran gets the benefit. Since I have been here, we've had one major project a year that we have worked on. When I first came in there were ten thousand patients in Milledgeville. It was called then the "insane asylum." We knew there were many veterans there at Milledgeville, but they were scattered out among ten thousand people. The first thing we did when I got here was to make sure that we identified all the veterans in Milledgeville and then moved them into one building where we could work with them and get them the benefits to which they might have been entitled. As soon as we were able to do that through the Legislature, going through the House and Senate and Governor, we set aside a building at Milledgeville where we did that, which is now a most beautiful facility, one of the

beautiful facilities. We have about five or six hundred veterans there now receiving nursing home care and domiciliary care, and we also have the most beautiful Alzheimer's unit in America. The Alzheimer's people designed it where you can walk all you want to walk inside and outside the building and it doesn't look like a prison -- it looks like a Ritz Carlton Hotel lobby with beautiful shrubbery outside and there is an entrance where you walk in and out. The Alzheimer's people who are bed-ridden ... they can be cared for in a nursing home, because they cannot get out of bed to harm somebody. The walking man or woman with swinging arms could hit someone in the nursing home, and therefore that is the most unmet medical need I think in America today, is the care and treatment of the walking Alzheimer's person, [who is] in a hurry to get there, not knowing where they are when they get there, and then hurry to go on. We have a beautiful unit there in Milledgeville that we are very proud of, and we have recreation for them and we have an outpatient medical care treatment -- the VA does that -- they come in there to the doctor once a week and we are very proud of it. Now in Augusta during the Sanders administration and then the Maddox administration, we opened the first state veterans nursing home in America, operated by the state to treat the veterans, with federal and state funds to build it. And it is built right across from the Medical College of Georgia. And you get more care there than you get in any VA, well, any hospital in the world, I guess, because the Medical College operates it for us by contract, and the top specialists in that field are through that nursing home every day. It is right across the street from the Medical College of Georgia and we are extremely proud of that. We're also proud of the fact that Georgia is the only state in the Union that does not charge veterans anything...Georgia residents, they have to be from Georgia, legal residents of Georgia

and veterans. We don't charge a veteran anything for care and treatment. Every other state does get something out of the veterans for their care and treatment, but we don't in Georgia and most of our funds that we appropriated in the state go to Augusta, where we have about two hundred veterans down there and over five hundred in Milledgeville.

STUECK: So your job...

WHEELER: That is one phase of it.

STUECK: In many ways, is to use both state and federal agencies, so we have what we call GI bills that are passed periodically by the Federal Government.

WHEELER: I am glad you mentioned the GI Bill. The Georgia Department of Veterans Services is a state approval agency for all veterans' educational training, and it may come as a shock for you to know that the University of Georgia ... where you represent the University of Georgia ... we have to approve the University of Georgia and we check there once a month to see that you are doing ... we have a check list and we check if you are training veterans at the University of Georgia and any other school in Georgia that trains veterans. We have to approve that and check on it to see that they are getting what they are entitled to. The reason we have to do that, some schools, I won't name any of them now, but they have been prosecuted because the veteran wasn't required to go to school, they would just give them the money. Some people were sent to prison for that. We have a state-approved agency. We are number one in the nation for veterans' on-the-

job training. We train businesses, we approve businesses all over the state to train veterans and the veteran receives this GI money for being trained for the position. So we are the state approval that is one of our functions here in the Department of Veteran Services, in addition to the nursing home and the domiciliary and the Alzheimer's unit and, as I mentioned a minute ago, we always have one project ... at least one big one a year. We built the most beautiful cemetery I think in the world in Milledgeville, a state cemetery with federal funds, one hundred percent federal funds. The land was transferred from the forestry commission over to us. It is on the Carl Vinson Highway near our nursing home in Milledgeville. We have a chapel there with stained glass windows in it pointing up. The architect brought it up to me and it had square windows and I said "No, we want them pointed up, give some people an idea where they ought to be trying to go" -- although we can't tell them -- we can point the direction and make them think about it. We have a beautiful lake behind the cemetery, we have a coliseum area, we have an office there and we have a clarion that plays a hundred hymns, and "Amazing Grace" is the most requested of all hymns to be played during the funeral. Since we have completed that, many veterans have been buried there everyday in Milledgeville. We are now working on a new cemetery, establishing a new cemetery at Glenville, Georgia, near Fort Stewart. Fort Stewart as you know is a very active military base and there are a lot of retirees there. And we are establishing a state cemetery there. Last Sunday afternoon, the Secretary of Veterans Affairs and I had the honor of dedicating a new cemetery, about forty miles north of Atlanta, [at] Canton. Seven hundred seventy-five acres of land was donated by a wealthy Georgian who served and landed in Normandy on D-Day, Scott Hudgens. Scott came to the office one day and

said, "I landed in Normandy on D-Day." He's a billionaire by the way, and he said "I went back over there recently to visit the graves of those who were killed the day we landed," which was sixty-two years ago June 6 this year. And he said, "I had a vision while I was there and looking out you can see the English Channel, and I have land in Georgia that we can do the same thing with overlooking Lake Allatoona. Seven hundred seventy-five acres of land. Nobody has ever lived on this land, not even Indians. There are streams running through there. The river ... the water is as clear as the water you drink." It is a beautiful place, we dedicated that last Sunday. It is a beautiful place. We have a project all the time that we are working on and that is what makes it very interesting to be in this work. We are helping people and getting them what they deserve. As I mentioned a minute ago, no veteran's benefit is automatic. You got to know about it then you got to apply for it. That is our job: to make sure that every Georgia veteran gets every benefit, state and federal, that he may be entitled to, and we have been very successful in doing that.

STUECK: We try to be a little more specific on the distinction between a federal benefit and a state benefit. Now, you talked about Georgia being the one state where all the expenses for a disabled veteran are covered.

WHEELER: That's in a nursing home situation, the state nursing homes, which the federal government pays part of the cost, and we have a contract with them to pay part of the cost, and the state pays part of the cost for the operation. Every other state has one and we just happen to be the only state that doesn't charge.

STUECK: Ok, now the Federal Government is when we talk about the GI Bills. We historians tend to focus on education and housing, low cost mortgages and so forth. Can you talk about where the state kind of picks up from what the federal government is doing in terms of funding?

WHEELER: Well, we have the same tax exemptions in the state for homes and wholly financed a hundred percent by the VA. One hundred percent disabled veterans ... there are many statutes on the state law books that give us the right to give them certain things like hunting and fishing licenses. The driver's license for example, to drive an automobile or a truck, the veteran gets the benefit of a free driver's license in Georgia if you are an honorably discharged veteran in war time service and we approve it. And then the state, they have changed several times who issues the drivers licenses. It used to be the state patrol, but now it is another agency. We approve it and they get a free drivers license. There are many other benefits they get, if you are disabled in any way, as much as ten percent, you are entitled to go into state parks for a reduced fee, and many other state benefits.

STUECK: When you talk about all the buildings that you have had a role in being built, were those built predominantly from federal or state funding?

WHEELER: Both state and federal. The building as I mentioned before in Augusta, we had Carl Vinson, Congressman Carl Vinson, a great American and Congressman,

introduce the legislation and gave state money. We got half of the appropriation for building nursing homes in Augusta and he was expecting that to be built in Milledgeville, his home. And he called me one day and he said, "I got the legislation through." First, when he called you on the phone, I am talking about Carl Vinson the great American Congressman from Georgia, when he calls you on the telephone, the first thing he would say is, "Are you for me or against me?" I said, "I am for you Mr. Vinson." He said, "Well do so-and-so then." That was the way he started a conversation. If you called him, he would answer the phone, "Alright." That is the way he would answer the telephone: "Alright." But anyway he was very upset with me because we went ... Carl Sanders was Governor by the way and he wanted it built in Augusta across from the Medical College. Vinson wanted it in Milledgeville, but the governor controlled the state funds that are necessary, so it was built in Augusta. But I told him that the first one we built after that would be in Milledgeville, and we did, we built the Carl Vinson building there where we house the veterans that need nursing care and then later we dedicated one, the Richard B. Russell building. I think the last picture that the Senator had made, when we took him a copy of that, I mean a picture of that building up there to show him. Mr. Vinson passed there one day and passed by it one day and looked at both buildings and called me on the phone said, "I passed my building and passed Russell's building this morning and I noticed that my name is in smaller letters than his. Why is that?" I said, "It will be changed, Mr. Vinson. We will get them both the same size." And we did right away, made them both the same size. He was a great American and so was Richard B. Russell and this state benefited from the service of both of these great men. I am happy to say that I am old enough that my uncle went to school with Richard B. Russell at Gordon

Military Institute then. The first inauguration I attended was Richard B. Russell's inauguration as Governor. Governor Hardman was going out, a doctor from Commerce, Georgia, and Richard B. Russell had been Speaker of the House and that's the first time I went into the Governor's office and I have tried to remain close there ever since. One Governor told me that he thought I came over here with General Oglethorpe and we established the Veteran's department then, but that wasn't correct, it's been since then. I have enjoyed every minute of it.

COBB: Because of that, your long tenure here, could you give us an idea of how large this place was when you came, and some sense of the expansion?

WHEELER: Well, this building that you are in now, the twin towers building, was a railroad station when I came here, and the train ran from here to Augusta once a day, went down to Augusta and came back here to this spot. The Capitol at that time was un-air-conditioned, and we worked half a day on Saturday, and we had no merit system, and no retirement system. A lot of things have changed for the better in the years that I have been here and it has been a great pleasure. I enjoy being here everyday because we are helping somebody when I go home at night, I think about how many people that we have been able to help today, get what they are entitled to as a veteran from the federal and state government or their families. And we are losing about five hundred to six hundred veterans a month, passing on. That creates work on our field officers. We have field officers all over the state, they cover every county. A hundred and fifty-nine counties and we go into every one of them at least once a month, or at least [we] are available to

them. We assist the veteran's widow and we assist with the funeral arrangements. I told you a minute ago about the cemeteries and they have a beautiful place to have a ceremony and we have grave liners already in the ground, and put the marker up after they are buried. And those that want to be burned, I am going to let the Devil do that if it is done at all. I am going to go out the regular way.

STUECK: Can you talk about the various veterans of various wars that you served when you first served, when you first came in 1949?

WHEELER: Well, it took a long time for the World War II Memorial to come about. It was the last memorial of any importance, just about, built for veterans in Washington. The Vietnam Memorial was built and the Korean Memorial was built there before our World War II Memorial. We just dedicated it last year, which I was very fortunate to be the chairman of the Advisory Commission for that. And we were able to bring in Bob Dole as chairman of the Campaign Committee to help raise money. And I want to tell you a little story about that while I am thinking about it. The first man Bob Dole called was a former Marine from Memphis, Tennessee. When he got out of the Marine Corps, he decided he wanted to get his masters degree in business administration at Harvard. So when he went to Harvard the professors told him he had to do a thesis on how to start a business. And he worked on it hard and came up with it and the professors laughed at him and said, "No. You're going to have to redo this, this is impossible you're going to have to redo it." He said, "No, I am not going to do it, I am not going to rewrite. I am going to go back to Memphis and show you." FedEx, Federal Express was the thesis and

Fred Smith started the Federal Express and he wrote us a personal check for two million dollars and says “I will help you raise the rest of the money.” Now Fred didn’t tell me this, but I understand, and being two professors you can understand this too. I understand slowly every day a double trailer FedEx truck slowly rides around the Harvard campus. [All chuckle] So he helped us get started well and he helped us raise 192 million dollars and we have a beautiful monument there and I just learned the other day, I have a picture of it in there somewhere. [Gestures to conference room.] Kilroy, somebody discovered, he is there on the backside of the monument, for World War II veterans. For anybody familiar with World War II, “Kilroy was here.” He [Kilroy] is overlooking. It's inside, I will show you it in a minute. Somebody discovered he is engraved in the Georgia granite that is up there right behind the Washington Monument facing the Lincoln Memorial. Kilroy is part of the World War II Memorial. The state of Georgia contributed a dollar for every veteran that served in World War II toward the purchase of this, establishing this memorial. World War II was a great victory for America. We wouldn’t have a Washington Monument today or Lincoln Memorial, either one, if we had lost World War II. We freed a lot of people and the German people are now our allies and the Japanese are our allies today thanks to people like George Marshall, to me one of the greatest generals in World War II. General Vandiver, Governor Vandiver now, had the opportunity of spending the afternoon once with General Marshall. It might interesting to people from Georgia to know that General Marshall, before World War II, was stationed in Georgia heading our Civilian Conservation Corps, CCC camps, where young men went to get three meals a day and they established parks and did a lot of work improving the conditions of our state. He was in charge of the CC camps in Georgia before he went

up as Chief of Staff. As a sideline I understand, he had a photostatic memory by the way, he was very proud of the fact that he could remember everything that ever happened and everything he ever looked at. He could name every county in Georgia and every precinct and every county just by his photostatic memory. President Roosevelt heard about his photostatic memory. He had met General Marshall. He had called him -- this is George Marshall, later Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense -- he called General Marshall into the Oval Office. And Roosevelt had a cigarette holder [and said], "Hello, George, old boy. Have a seat over there George." General Marshall stood at attention in front of the President, at attention, and looked him in the eye and said, "Mr. President, my name is General Marshall." He [Roosevelt] said, "You are exactly the man I am looking for. You are exactly what I want." General Marshall, although he was not given the credit he should have gotten, he led us to victory in World War II. He was Eisenhower's boss, MacArthur, all the rest of them and he was a great American and he didn't go to West Point either.

STUECK: VMI?

WHEELER: That's correct. You are correct, he went to VMI.

STUECK: Well, he has gotten plenty of credit from historians.

WHEELER: It is about time. He deserves every bit of it. After the war the Marshall Plan, which helped bring our enemies ... making friends out of them and they are now

our allies, thanks to General Marshall. He was a great American. I don't think you can give him too much credit. He was great.

STUECK: I take it from your response to the question about the veterans from various wars that you dealt with, that basically you started with World War II.

WHEELER: Yes, we can go on if you want to.

STUECK: That is, you didn't have much to do with say veterans from the Spanish American War.

WHEELER: Yes we did, in fact something to do with the War Between the States. My buddy there from Connecticut, I tell him the War of Northern Aggression, but it's really the War Between the States. When I came in here we were paying pensions to the widows of the War Between the States, The Civil War. I didn't believe we had that many and I made sure our people went out and checked to make sure. We sent the money to the Ordinary of the County, and the Ordinary of the County delivered the checks to the widows. We had a confederate nursing home when I came in here, and it was for the widows when I was here, or got here, and we took care of the widows even if they were not entitled to anything from the federal at that time. Actually, this department started with the pensions part long before I got here. When I got here there were a lot of veterans of the Spanish American War of 1898 in Spain, when we freed Cuba and we got the Philippine Islands straightened out at that time. We had a lot of veterans from 1898

that were living a long time after I got here. In fact, we had one employee who was a veteran of the Spanish American War. One of our distant relatives, I am told, was an Army Officer in the U.S. Army before the War Between the States and then he became a Confederate General. After the war was over, [he] got his commission back in the U.S. Army and went on to fight in the Spanish American War, General Joe Wheeler. I understand he got excited once when they were fighting the Spaniards and he said, "Come on boys, we got the Yankees on the run." [All chuckle] But we kind of lost a little interest in him. He was from Georgia, but he moved to Alabama and became a Congressman in Alabama and there is a little stop over there, Wheeler, Alabama where he lived, beautiful place still open to the public. But I don't think that I was in the active National Guard during that time. I was in the Korean War and also the Vietnam War and I can remember very well, being in uniform and members of my staff being with me in a Howard Johnson here in Atlanta having lunch one Sunday and we were actually insulted. If you walked down the street in uniform people would make fun of you. During that war, they were not treated right when they returned home. Vietnam veterans were never honored as they should have been, but we made sure they got all the benefits, and [are] still making sure they get all the benefits to which they may be entitled.

STUECK: Could you compare a little bit your dealings with veterans from the various wars, say since World War II, in terms of particular needs and services?

WHEELER: Well, we have a lot of lady veterans now and of course the VA hospitals are now in the process of being remodeled to have more private rooms, new bathrooms, more

female doctors. We have a lot of outstanding women who have served in the military. In fact, we have a lady who has been chairman of our board who is in the military and we are very proud of her. She was a sergeant in the Marine Corps. The service has been the same to all of them. We try to treat everybody equally: veteran and non-veteran, veteran and his family, or her family. And we try to do all we can for the widows of all wars, and we have been able to do that.

STUECK: Did you have any responsibilities in relation to women who served in the WAC [Women's Army Corps] or the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] in World War II?

WHEELER: Well, my wife. My wife was an Army Cadet Nurse in World War II, she is right there. [Gestures] I met her in a hospital and we have been married since 1949. I think we'll be married until one of us pass on. She is a beautiful lady and we have been in love for many years. We've been married since 1949 and I think it will last forever. I know it will. She was an Army Cadet Nurse in World War II and her father was active duty military who served the country during that time.

STUECK: Did veterans benefits apply to her at that time, in 1949?

WHEELER: Yes, but the war was over before she actually got her commission. World War II was over before she got her commission. She worked temporarily with the VA after that, and then she went into public health nursing after that and than our first child

was born she has looked after our kids. We have three children. My son is a graduate of the University of Georgia, and also Mercer, and also Georgia State. He has three degrees. He is a general counselor for the Gwinnett Hospital system, [unintelligible] Chip Wheeler. He is an attorney and represents the hospitals in Gwinnett County. There are two large hospitals there, he is their general counsel. We have a daughter, Francis that graduated from Georgia State and Oglethorpe University and she attended the University of Georgia and was a Tri Delt there. She is a teacher in Gwinnett County. She is married to son of Bishop Bevel Jones of the Methodist Church, and they have three fine children, all boys, three boys. One of them is in college, and one is in high school, and one is in grammar school. Then we have another daughter, Jane, who is a teacher also. She was a Phi Beta Kappa at the University of Georgia. She was a Pi Mu, and she has passed on. And her son is over there now as a student at the University and he'll get two degrees this fall, all he needs a PE course. He has an A.B. degree and a B.S. degree, and he plans to go to law school. He was accepted to Oxford, but he is going to go to law school in Athens. And we are very proud of our children and our grandchildren. All three [children], [and our grandchildren] we have five boys and one girl and she is in charge. She is going to Georgia State this fall, Joanna. Veterans of all wars are all veterans, and they are all great Americans as far as I am concerned. We show no partiality to any. You may be interested in this, and I am sure it will be one of your questions perhaps. We are very proud of the fact that the Department of Veterans Service recognizes African-American soldiers, and we were the first state agency to equalize and join together the races in our home in Milledgeville, Georgia. Georgia War Veterans Home in Milledgeville was desegregated. We ended segregation, and we were

the first agency even before the University of Georgia. We ended segregation in our department, the first one and I am very proud of that.

STUECK: Do you remember the date of that?

WHEELER: Not exactly right off hand, I can look it up and tell you, but it was before the school system was desegregated. We desegregated our people first. We are very proud we did. I had four or five members of the NAACP from Milledgeville, Georgia, nice guys, came up to see me one day in my office. They said, "We don't want to cause any problems or any trouble. We think that our veterans ought to be treated the same way in our home in Milledgeville as others. We would like to do more for them." And I said "I agree with you." I got the approval of our board to do it, and we were the first ones to do it, and we are very proud of that fact. And I point that out to a lot of people that we are so proud of the fact that we took the first step. Now also the man that introduced the legislation that desegregated Armed Forces was Carl Vinson from Milledgeville, Georgia. He deserves full credit for desegregating the Armed Forces and I was real proud of him for doing it.

STUECK: I don't quite understand that point.

WHEELER: He was chairman of the Armed Services Committee; he was also, before they established the Armed Services Committee, chairman [of] the Naval Affairs Committee. In fact, he was chairman of Naval Affairs during World War II and so was

Roosevelt, at one time, chairman of Naval Affairs. Vinson was able to do many things that many people don't realize he was able to do. For example, he went in to see Roosevelt one day, President Roosevelt, who had been Secretary of the Navy, and he said, "Mr. President, I want to build a Navy Hospital in Dublin, Georgia." The President, who was Secretary of the Navy said, "Well Carl, what port is that? I don't recall that being a port." And he [Vinson] said, "It's not it's in my district." He [Roosevelt] said, "Well, how are we going to get ships in and out of a place that doesn't have a port?" He [Vinson] said, "We are going to have an airport there. You are going to build an airport for the Navy Hospital and we are going to fly them in there. It's in my district." He was smart enough to include in the legislation -- not may but shall -- should the Navy ever give that facility up the Veterans Administration shall establish a VA hospital there. And we have a VA hospital in Dublin, Georgia because of that. It was a Navy Hospital first, and they have an airport there in Dublin, GA because of Carl Vinson. I could tell you many more things about him, he was a great American, so was Senator Russell.

STUECK: Could you tell us, in dealing with the segregation issue in terms of benefits to African-American veterans in Georgia coming out of World War II, were they administrated...?

WHEELER: The same way. Everybody is treated equal on the benefits.

STUECK: But is that administrated through the federal system of government completely?

WHEELER: Federal and state. Maybe I ought to make myself clear. The state has certain benefits, but our main job as far as benefits are concerned...no veteran is benefited automatic. You got to know about it first and then you got to have some assistance in applying for them. And that is our job; we have a claims staff that represents veterans before VA rating boards, they have boards. We actually act as their attorney, or representative, before these boards. And we try to convince the board that they meet all the requirements of a certain law, that they are seeking compensation for service connected disabilities or anything else related to federal benefits. We also assist on state benefits, getting all the benefits that they may be entitled under federal and state. But the VA doesn't go out looking for people to give them money; we do. It is not a gift, they earned it. We want to make sure that the people who earned the benefit that they receive it. We have offices scattered out all over Georgia that actually assist veterans first hand to make sure veterans get all the benefits to which they may be entitled by the federal and state government. And, by the way, we [are] just getting back quite a few new veterans who went overseas last May and they came back this May. We got several thousand new veterans in Georgia. We are meeting with them to see [that] they receive all the benefits to which they may be entitled, in about twenty seven locations over the state. After they have had the opportunity to come home and relax and spend time with their family, we'll attend the first drill and be available to assist them in getting all the benefits to which they may be entitled. The Georgia National Guardsmen who have been in Iraq, and a lot of them have been under a lot of pressure over there, it is very hot over

there and twenty-six did not make it back. Of course, we try to assist their families in any way we can for the fact they didn't come back.

STUECK: Before the veterans' hospital in Milledgeville was desegregated was there a veterans' hospital for African-American veterans?

WHEELER: Yes.

STUECK: There was? Where was that?

WHEELER: In Milledgeville. Well, there wasn't one for any veteran when I came in here, as I told you earlier in our conversation. When I came in, there were ten thousand patients in Milledgeville and the veterans were scattered out among the patients. I sent in team of about four people there and spent months there trying to find out who was a veteran, and who wasn't a veteran, and where we could help them. We went in to all veterans regardless of race, class, or anything else and made sure they got all the benefits to which they may have been entitled. We got them separated from the other ten thousand patients where we could see that they got all the benefits they were entitled to. Then a short time afterwards we asked for and received permission from our board to integrate the two together, which has worked out wonderful in Milledgeville [and] of course our other facilities also.

STUECK: Can you tell us about the size of your office in 1949 compared to the size of it today?

WHEELER: Well, it was probably bigger then than it is now.

STUECK: Well, I would be very surprised if it wasn't, but how many people were there?

Well, where was your office in 1949?

WHEELER: It was in the Capitol, the State Capitol on the ground floor. I had offices around the Capitol here and an office across the street over on seven hundred street. At one time, we had offices in what is now the Georgia State University. In fact, the State Retirement System was started in the lobby of my office.

STUECK: How big was your staff in 1949?

WHEELER: Larger than now. We had a lot larger staff. I don't recall. I can look it up. We operate with fewer people now than we had in 1949.

STUECK: Why? I mean ... why has there been a reduction?

WHEELER: Because we are getting more service out of the people that are working. We are training them better, and they know what they are doing, and we demand more from them then when I got here.

STUECK: Are they, in terms of people...?

WHEELER: They have to pass a certain test and all merit system tests ... not merit system tests but ... before we can represent a veteran before a VA rating board, you have to be certified to do that so we have to train our people to make sure they understand the law and the regulations.

STUECK: When did your employees come under Civil Service Regulations? When was that change made?

WHEELER: I don't recall the exact date, but I am glad we are under it. We were not under it when I came here ... there was no merit system when I came in. I think that the first department of the state government to have any merit system was maybe the Department of Labor at that time, that's mostly federal funded. We get federal funds for our education division. They pay a hundred percent for that. The state approves and we check the schools and on the job training sites. We get federal funds for our cemetery and we also receive federal funds for our hospital, our nursing home and domiciliary operation and Alzheimer's unit. So we have a very close working relationship with the Veterans Administration in Washington. I have had the honor of knowing every head of the VA, meeting them one time or another. We have had many good people heading the Veterans Administration, and it has been an honor to work with them, as well as the Presidents we've had, and the Governors we've had. Beginning ... you can see over

there on the wall the various governors I have been with, all of them great Americans and interested in veterans. Most of them are veterans themselves.

COBB: Commissioner, historians are just now starting to realize how important World War II veterans coming back were in terms ... they seemed to get much more involved with politics after the war, and I know Herman Talmadge was a veteran..

WHEELER: He was in the Navy. He was in the Navy.

COBB: And so was Marvin Griffin and Earnest Vandiver too, for sure.

WHEELER: Carl Sanders, Jimmy Carter

COBB: So that hopefully translated into a lot of sympathy for what you were doing and your capacity.

WHEELER: They are all very cooperative. I have...we have never had a Governor that I didn't work closely with. We got much done for veterans through the years and I am in my fourteenth term now. I expect, good Lord willing, to serve it out.

STUECK: Could you talk a little bit about...

WHEELER: I will have sixty years state service at that time and before that, I told you, I was in the federal government.

STUECK: Could you talk a little about your relationship with voluntary association such as the American Legion, the VFW?

WHEELER: I don't like to refer to them as voluntary. They are a hard working group; a lot of them are voluntary of course. They devote their time free of charge to hospitals and all.

STUECK: How about NGO's?

WHEELER: We represent the American Legion in Georgia before the VA rating boards that decide on claims. The State Services Officer for the VFW is a member of our staff and the American Legion also. And we represent other veterans' organizations and work with all them. All of them are great organizations. I don't think we would have any benefits today if it wasn't for the veterans' organizations all over the country working to see that we maintain them, and lobbying for veterans. All of them are doing great jobs: the American Legion; the VFW; the Am Vets; the DAV: Disabled American Veterans; Paralyzed Veterans Association; all of them are doing great jobs for the veterans. And then the Old Reserve Officers Association is called now the Military Officers Association Enlightenment. I'm a member of that. I have been a member of the American Legion for sixty years. That is my sixty year plaque over there. While I am looking over there,



[gestures] you might see that is Winston Churchill III along the wall with General Myers. Churchill [III] was there for the World War II Memorial dedication when we dedicated it. He was there and he said it was the first time he had been back to America since his mother ... her funeral. She was married to Averell Harriman, of course, and her funeral was there in the National Cathedral in Washington.

COBB: Commissioner, you were talking about Carl Vinson and of course Richard Russell, just two great advocates for the state and for their constituents, but how has the fact that Georgia does have, lets say, a pretty good share of military installation, used to have more, how does that ... has that affected the work your office has done? Does that mean that we actually have more veterans who live in Georgia because we have more military installations than some places? Does that make for a more supportive environment for the military?

WHEELER: Well, we rank number nine or ten in the nation in the number of veterans. You mentioned the name of two great Americans when you mentioned the names of Russell and Vinson. I have told you a little earlier I attended Russell's Inauguration when he was Governor. Through Russell I met Lyndon Johnson who was later President of the United States. He established the first steady commission that went in-depth studying the Veterans Administration and the needs of veterans. And we held ... he appointed me to that position when he was President ... and we held hearings all over the United States trying to find out in what direction we needed to head in the future for the VA. I gave you a copy of the annual report that we presented to the President at the

conclusion of that study. I can remember meeting Carl Albert, who was Speaker of the House then, from Oklahoma and others. We held hearings in Oklahoma City and all over the country, New York and other places, Philadelphia. It's been used as a guide since then for veterans' affairs. Senator Russell really had a lot to do with making Lyndon Johnson majority leader and later President ... a close relationship there. Carl Vinson was one of the greatest men I think that we've ever had from Georgia. They were responsible for having many military bases in Georgia; Warner Robins for example wouldn't be there if it hadn't been for Vinson and others all over the state. So, it has been a great trip and I have enjoyed every minute of it, knowing these great people. I told you a minute ago about President Johnson driving a limousine once from Austin down to Johnson City. He decided to tell the Secret Service he was going to drive. So he was driving this limousine fast and State Trooper pulled up next to him, didn't know who it was and came up. Johnson let window down, he said, "Oh my, God." And he [Johnson] said, "Well at least you know who I am." [All Chuckle]

STUECK: You mention that Georgia is ninth or tenth in total number of veterans.

WHEELER: Yes, that is right.

STUECK: What number would Georgia be in terms of population, in other words, do we have a disproportionate number of veterans?

WHEELER: No, we do not.

STUECK: So, it is about average?

WHEELER: That's right. Keep in mind we got the largest state east of the Mississippi River, the state of Georgia. We used to go all the way to Louisiana ... had Alabama and Mississippi. And if they don't start acting better we gonna take them over again. [All Chuckle]

COBB: People have discovered that Georgia is such a great place to live. We get a lot of retirees who come in as veterans.

WHEELER: A lot of them are moving in and we are happy to have them. They are good people. It is an honor to work with them. And some of them are now reaching the age where they need the disabilities increase as they get older. And that is what our officers are out in the field are for, to assist them in getting the benefits to which they may be entitled from the federal and state government. And then once the office fills out the application, we have trained people at the VA Regional Office that represent the veteran before the rating board and make a decision on what the disability should be. We have offices located in each of the VA hospitals in Georgia, and there are three of them: one in Augusta, one in Dublin and one large hospital here in Atlanta. And since you mentioned hospitals ... we are talking about hospitals. We have the first hospital in America, VA hospital in America, only one up until now where we are taking active duty people who have been wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are taking care, I say we, but the

Veterans Administration Hospital in Augusta, Georgia is taking care of wounded active duty people who haven't been discharged from the services, all branches, Army, Marines, Navy, and the Air Corps., and the Coast Guard, the rest of them all of them are there. The way that came about, about two years ago Secretary Principi was Secretary of Veterans Affairs at that time. It came to our attention that at Fort Stewart there were soldiers there waiting as long as six months to see a doctor, who were in un-air-conditioned barracks without running water. When we heard that we called Secretary Principi and he immediately got with the Secretary of Defense and his people and made available a beautiful place in Augusta, Georgia. Beautiful grounds, beautiful hospital, available only to active duty people of the Armed Services. First it was Army and now it's the others. I had an opportunity to call Secretary Principi and tell him the situation and he immediately acted on this. We helped cut the ribbon for that facility in Augusta and I highly commend the VA of the great job they are doing for these wounded troops down in Augusta. I saw a Lieutenant who was totally blind ... had been blinded without legs, without arms, and with other disabilities. I am so proud of the fact that the VA has been able to take active duty people and give them the care and treatment that they certainly deserve. And they are getting good care and treatment there down there at Augusta, Georgia now, and that is a great facility. Once they are discharged, they go back to other parts of the country probably. Some of them are Georgians, but not all of them. [They are] from every part of America because they are all branches of the Armed Forces. That is the first hospital in America, first VA hospital, and the only one now that takes care of active duty people that need hospital care, and they are doing a great job. It

is pitiful to see some of these young men that they are having to take care of. But they are getting good care I am glad to say at last.

STUECK: We've talked about a number of personalities in the interview; Russell, LBJ, could you talk a little bit about your relationship with Jimmy Carter?

WHEELER: Jimmy Carter is a good man. I liked him very much. We disagreed on some things. We didn't agree on everything, but I think he probably thought I needed it. We always had a lot of meetings and he was always calling me to pray, and I appreciate that. He wanted to ... he did reorganize the state government and the original plan was to take the welfare department, which was a separate department, the public health department which was a separate department and the veterans department which was a separate department and join them all together. And in a very friendly way I told the Governor that we would have to oppose that because we didn't feel that a veteran should be in the lobby with a welfare person. The veteran earned his benefit and he was entitled a special service and special department. I am happy to say that Governor Carter, after giving it much thought and after many people talked to him about it, agreed with us and we maintained the Department of Veteran Services which is a constitutional department same as the Board of Regents ... constitutional board rather. The Governor gets one appointment each year and they serve for seven year terms, [they] have to be a veteran of course, and a legal resident of Georgia. We have had very excellent boards, constitutional boards, that govern the Department of Veteran Services and they in turn elect the commissioner to a four year term, which I am in my fourteenth now. I have

enjoyed every minute of it and looking forward to ... now ... we have always had one project underway at all times. We are now working on a cemetery in Glenville where we will open it and have a dedication ceremony approximately next September of next year, '07. We have new projects going on all the time improving the care and treatment of our veterans and our facilities.

STUECK: Would you talk a little about your relationship with Joe Frank Harris?

WHEELER: Joe Frank Harris is a great American. I remember when he first came to the Legislature, as a member of the Legislature. I was a close friend of Sloppy Floyd, James Sloppy Floyd was chairman of the Appropriations Committee and was also a full time employee of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. He was Quartermaster [unintelligible]. We were very close friends and I used to spend a lot of time with him, particularly when we had a session legislature. He controlled a lot of the money really. A young man came in one day that had just been elected to the Legislature in Cartersville, Georgia. And I never will forget Sloppy Floyd saying, "This boy is going to amount to something one day" and sure enough he did. He became Governor and was a great Governor and served two terms. And I served with him eight years and he was a great Governor. His son and my son went to law school together and we are good friends, even today we are close friends. All the Governors have been great people and I have enjoyed my work with all of them. Zell Miller and I are close friends and have been since he was in the Senate. He got elected to the State Senate and I knew him at that time. He was of course Lieutenant

Governor, and then Governor, and then Senator, a great American. All of them have been great.

STUECK: Could you talk a little bit, in being in the job of Commissioner for so many years, decades, there obviously are peaks and troughs in terms of funding. Could you talk a little about some of ...?

WHEELER: We have always managed to get along. You have to know the people that make the decisions, and I made it a point to know the people that made the decisions. Most of them very fortunately have been close friends of mine that make the decisions. Even today we are happy to know that the people over there are our friends and most are very sympathetic, all of them are sympathetic with veterans. And we are very proud that we get what we need to operate efficiently and operate the department as it should be operated. We are not extravagant. I am extremely conservative, very conservative on money and other things that are unnecessary to protect the tax payers' money. We get full value of the dollar. Our people are well trained out in the field. We have field officers, 41 field officers, over the state and each one receives the training where we can make sure that the veterans in their community get all they are entitled to. We report that to the House Members of that area that he can ... that we have isolated ... to say ... there is an area with a man in Athens for example, at the University of Georgia. He would send letters out to the Senators in that area that he covers, and representatives, telling them how much we were able to do for the veterans of that area during the past year. And tells them also how we compare with states that have more veterans than we do and

are getting less than our veterans. Showing him [the Senator or Representative] that the money the state spends for our department is money well spent. We brought in altogether ... helped bring into Georgia last year over two billion dollars in federal benefits. That includes hospitalization and education and everything, but over two billion dollars last year. Two billion as compared to about thirty two million in state funds spent. That is spent mostly for nursing home care for our sick and disabled veterans. We never ask for a bonus in Georgia. We've always thought the money should go to the sick and the disabled, not the well. We have never paid a bonus, and probably won't pay one because we think the money should go to people who need nursing care, who are Alzheimer patients and people like that deserve it, and then a beautiful place to rest when they pass on which would be beautiful cemeteries. We are working on that now.

STUECK: During the 1970s there was a transition from essentially a conscript army to a volunteer army. Could you talk a little bit about the significance of that from your perspective in terms of the people that you serve?

WHEELER: Veteran is a veteran as far as we are concerned. I can't see any difference really other than one is a volunteer and one is ... a lot of volunteers in World War II, not all were drafted. In other wars, they were not all drafted. We had a lot of volunteers in all the wars that we participated in and I commend these young men and women that are volunteering to go into the service. And we are happy to serve them as we were their fathers before them and their grandfathers before them and make sure that they get all the benefits they are entitled to. We don't show any distinction between one war to another

war. A war is a war whether it is declared or not. The war in Vietnam for example back in ... the first Calvary division was the first large group of soldiers going into Vietnam. They went in from Columbus, Georgia. At one time in the early '60s, in the early part of the Vietnam War ... Vietnam was affected ... I mean the Columbus, Georgia residents were more affected by the Vietnam War than any other city in America. We got together with the mayor, and the newspaper down there in Columbus, and the veterans organizations, and the agencies that dealt either directly or indirectly with veterans' affairs, about thirty agencies federal and state. We got them all under one roof, not to make speeches, but to bring in ... we had the secretaries and the farms there and we had over five thousand people show up one day and we started there the first supermarket of veterans benefits which is now spread national. We have had one a year since then. The reason we had to limit it to one [is because] we have to invite these agencies and we cannot force them to come. We can get them once a year, all agencies and this gets the person called a procrastinator. Pronounce it for me professor, procrastinator.

STUECK: Procrastinator.

WHEELER: You are right, and a lot of people are procrastinators. For example Social Security Administrator has an office in most of these cities where we go. People put off going there, but if you go just one day between certain hours you get that procrastinator out of his house and he comes over and the social security does a lot of business even though they have an office located in that location. It gets that procrastinator out seeking his benefits. We now give flu shots and blood pressure checks. The VA hospitals have a

place for that. We give ... drivers licenses have been issued in the past at our supermarkets. The Game and Fish Commission issue fishing and hunting permits. For the veterans who are seeking jobs, we have the U.S. Department of Labor and the Georgia Department of Labor there who assist in that. We also have what used to be the Civil Service Commission which is now Personnel Management, and the federal government has a Navy surveyor assisting veterans in obtaining employment. So that's the reason it's called a supermarket of Veterans Benefits. It goes from hospitalization ... we have people from the cemeteries there talking about burial benefits. We have people from the insurance there talking about the veterans' insurance matters. We have people from the schools and universities in the location where we go talking about education. We have our state approval agency people there. We have all together about thirty federal and state agencies that are set up to do business in one day, and we always have at least three to five thousand people present at these.

STUECK: Who came up with the name Supermarket of Benefits?

WHEELER: I give it credit to a fellow who later became ... we discussed it together since we are bringing in all these different agencies not just in the field of education, but jobs, hospitalization, burial benefits, insurance, various licenses and all. Later he was editor, one of the assistant editors, of the paper in Columbus. He later moved over to a little insurance company in Columbus which is now known nationally: AFLAC, the duck. I give him credit for helping me get started in the right way with this. And he was with the Columbus paper and shortly after we held the supermarket, he went over with

AFLAC, just a small company. It was started by a close friend of Senator Talmadge, John Amos who was from Alabama originally and went to law school. He was a city attorney for Fort Walton Beach before he moved to Columbus to start that little insurance company. John Amos and his son are still there and [his son] is President of it I think now. It is a nationally known company now.

STUECK: You sponsor an annual golf tournament?

WHEELER: Yes, we have a golf tournament every year to raise money for the homeless veterans. We usually raise forty thousand dollars or more each year. We have been in several locations, right now we are playing in Fort McPherson and before that we were at Eagles Landing, beautiful course there. The VA hospital has a group of people who work with homeless people. They locate them. Some of them are under bridges and doorways. First of all, you need to give them hospitalization and get them well. We give them care and treatment and encourage them to take it. They get them in good shape [and] once they are rehabilitated enough to have a job, they are assisted in finding one and they use this money to pay for transportation to and from their first job, and to pay for clothes, clean clothes, and workable clothes to work in and a place to stay and a place to eat until they are out on their own. About ninety nine percent of them have jobs, otherwise they would be in doorways. We are very proud of this program, Homeless Veterans Program, operated by the VA hospital here in Atlanta. We have another one; we usually have it in October. I usually hit the first ball, if I don't miss it that's the reason they got the name "play it again"; I missed the first ball. You have to keep your eye on the ball never look

up ... you gotta keep your eye on the ball and then look up and see how far it went, but I make a mistake and look up to see how far it went before I hit the ball, but I play it again.

STUECK: When did your golf tournament start? How long have they been going on?

WHEELER: About ... I'd say about fifteen years something like that, twelve or fifteen years. I've forgotten. I can look it up.

STUECK: What gave you the idea?

WHEELER: Well, the people at the VA hospital and I were talking about how we could raise money and help veterans, and I agreed to help them sponsor a golf tournament. I was interested in golf back then. I don't play golf much anymore; in fact, I don't play it at all. To do it right it's a full time job, and I don't have time to do it right. I am able to hit one down the fairway. One a year, I can still do it. We got a VA hospital, I think as a result of a golf course in Augusta, Georgia. At the time George Sancken was mayor of Augusta. He was a member of the Augusta National Golf Club. At that time a Senator from South Carolina, I won't call his name he is gone now, a good man, but he had the hospital set to go, a new VA hospital for Columbia, South Carolina. We knew that the people [who] had made the decision in Washington were big golfers and George Sancken was able to set aside the golf course one day and we brought down the top people, the decision makers, from Washington. We visited Eisenhower's Cabin, he was still living then, but he was living in Pennsylvania. He is still there. They kept full time staff there

in his cabin. We went in there and around the mirror were ... he and Maimie every place they had ever lived ... around the mirror ... and bridge tables, he played bridge. His room was a little cubbyhole with one bed in it and a telephone and a mirror overlooking the par three course at the Augusta National. And we went in there and around there was the pictures made all around the time they were married all the way until the time he was in the White House. And then the people that were down there, we played the course, Augusta National. We had lunch and dinner down there. Thanks to George Sancken, who passed on last year I believe. He was mayor of Augusta who was a member. We wound up getting the hospital in Augusta rather than Columbia, I don't know whether that had anything to do with it or not, but we certainly encouraged it during that golf match. So we'd be talking about golf and we would go into that.

STUECK: Part of business in America just as much as in Japan and Korea, right?

WHEELER: I am not familiar with Japan or Korea, but it certainly helps to know the people you are dealing with. It doesn't hurt to get acquainted with them on a name basis, if you want to get anything done.

STUECK: I am kind of curious about any thought you have about an incident that occurred in 1995 around the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II; the controversy over the historical exhibit over the atomic bomb at the end of the World War II at the Smithsonian. Did that...?

WHEELER: Saved my life. I was ready to go to the South Pacific and I praise the Lord, I should praise Him every night for dropping it. Harry Truman did the right thing and he saved a lot of American lives and a lot of Japanese lives by dropping that bomb or we would still be over there fighting today. It saved my life and I wouldn't be here today if he hadn't dropped it. In my office I have a picture of the man that dropped it, Paul Tibbets. He was a great American. And he visited here not to long ago ... and Paul dropped it and I am proud to say he is a great American in my book and he ought to be honored in every way possible. He is an unusual fellow; he's a great fellow, a great American. But I'm glad he dropped the bomb. Thank God we had Harry Truman there that dropped it. One thing that tickled me about Truman was it took Mrs. Truman ten years to teach him, to teach Harry, to use the word manure rather than the other way.

STUECK: There are some other words too; she had to work with him.

WHEELER: He was a great American, Harry Truman was. Thank God he was the President of the United States. Alvin Barkley was a great man from Kentucky. Very few people know that Alvin Barkley, who was Vice President during that some of that time, graduated from school here in Georgia. Did you know that? He went to Emory at Oxford before it became Emory Atlanta. His wife passed away and he remarried. I can remember when five dollars was just a tremendous amount of money. On his honeymoon he spent the first night at the Ansley Hotel in Atlanta and then went down to Sea Island. He tipped the bell boy five dollars and it made the front page tipping so much money.

STUECK: Wish we could get away with that today.

WHEELER: He graduated from Emory when it was at Oxford, Georgia, well it still is Emory at Oxford Junior College now, but he was a graduate of Emory University. A lot of people don't know that. That is where he got his training, in Georgia. He is a great American, Vice President.

COBB: I am curious about the War in Iraq and the obviously the much increased reliance on National Guard Troops. Do you foresee ... I mean ... back when I was in the National Guard unless you served I think it was six months on active duty for purposes other than training, you weren't really eligible for veterans benefits. Obviously a lot of National Guardsmen are now eligible for benefits they [otherwise] wouldn't have. Would you foresee that because we are clearly going to be relying on these people more, that there is a likelihood that all National Guardsmen will be eligible for more benefits?

WHEELER: I would hope so. We would be in bad shape if we didn't have a National Guard and I am very proud of the fact that they are now going down to the border to stop illegal's from coming into this country, some of which could be terrorists. For all we know they all could be, I don't know. I think everybody coming into this country ought to be checked as they are in other countries, as they are checked in Mexico when you're going there. They check you out pretty well. People from South America are checked out pretty well. I know they check them out in Australia. They want to know where you

are every night that you are there, and what you are doing there, and what you are going to do there, and how long you are going to be there, and whether or not you are going to work there or not when you go into Australia. I have been there several times. They check you very closely in New Zealand and other countries, China. And China is coming to be a great competitor of ours. I spent some time there, over in China. I am happy [about] the fact they recognize a Georgia product in China, and I have got to show you this. On all the airlines in China, if you fly from Hong Kong to Beijing, that's across the backseat of every airline, that's Coca-Cola, holy water. It's in Chinese and I took one off the back of my seat when I was flying from Beijing from Hong Kong. Coca-Cola is doing well in China. A lot of Georgia products are going into China and we are getting a lot of Chinese products into Georgia, probably too many. But it's a growing country and they check people going in and out of there too you know, and other countries too.

COBB: They check you after you are there as well.

WHEELER: You are right about that. It is a big country too and a fellow from Atlanta, John Portland, has built a hotel over there in Sang How I believe. We have a lot of interest over there. I never will forget, I visited the American Embassy one time over in Beijing. President Bush Senior was one of the first Ambassadors to China. He goes back quite often I understand.

COBB: We haven't talked about Richard Nixon since that was one of his great initiatives in terms of opening up...

WHEELER: Henry Kissinger did a great job as Secretary of Defense and Nixon went to school at Duke as you know, up in North Carolina, a little school up in North Carolina called Duke, which has been in the news lately, they have a soccer team up there. While we are talking about Duke did you realize that the Rose Bowl in 1943 was played at Duke in Durham, North Carolina? Did you know that?

COBB: No, I didn't.

WHEELER: You know why it was played in Durham?

COBB: Probably because they were afraid of...

WHEELER: They attacked at Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941 and they were very worried that the attack was going to extend to our west coast including Pasadena. Duke was in the Rose Bowl as I remember, and so they played the Rose Bowl in 1942 in Durham. I have got to say this, in 1943 the University of Georgia from Athens town, played UCLA in the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, and I was there, and we won. I was still at the University of Georgia and I saw President Caldwell there and told him, "I may be a little late. Can you help me get back in school when I get back?" And he said "Yes, I'll help you." I knew the Registrar very well at the University, Uncle Tom Reed. Uncle Tom Reed was a Registrar and he lived on the campus there at the University and he taught Sunday school at the First Methodist Church. I was smart enough to go to his

Sunday school class and walk with him over to the First Methodist church on Sunday morning. I lived in Old College which was one of the oldest dormitories on campus at the University. Several of us were the last students to live there then move out of Old College and then the Navy took it over and I don't know what you have over there now.

COBB: It is about the home of the Franklin College and Sciences.

WHEELER: Well, that is good. It is a great place and I lived in a room that Robert Toombs lived in and Alexander Stevens. Show you how long their room was still there and we moved out of it. Robert Toombs you know had an Oak tree named for him over there. He was an unusual man, number one in his class, but he made the graduation speech under an oak tree. He indulged a little bit too much probably [laughter], but everyone came out of the chapel to hear him speak. Is that correct?

COBB: That is correct.

WHEELER: You are the professor.

COBB: Of course, it was an awfully hot day that may have had a little to do with it.

WHEELER: I don't think they had any air-conditioning then. Toombs was a great speaker and there are many a great stories about Robert Toombs as you know. Little Alexander Stevens and I know they had a debate one night and Alexander Stevens said, I mean Robert Toombs, "You little drawled up shrimp I could eat you up." And he said, "If

you did you would have more brains in your stomach than you head.” [Laughter] You remember that?

COBB: I remember reading about that.

WHEELER: They were great Americans. The University is a great place and I would like to go back.

STUECK: Commissioner, that is about all the questions we have for you. Jim would you like to make any further comments?

WHEELER: Well, let me say this I am happy that I was fortunate enough to live near the University of Georgia at the city of Crawford. And I am glad to see that Crawford has a stop light and the city in Texas Crawford has a blinking light, and we have twelve more people than they have. I am glad I lived there because I got to see the first game played at the stadium, Sanford Stadium. I am proud that I knew Sanford, Chancellor Sanford and lived in Athens while he was Chancellor. He tipped his hat to every lady he saw in the street. Great American, Chancellor Sanford. Harmon Caldwell was the President of the University and Uncle Tom Reed worked on the Banner Herald in Athens when Henry Grady, who the school of Journalism is named after, was editor. He later came to Atlanta after Uncle Tom Reed worked with him on the Banner Herald in Athens before he moved to Atlanta to become editor, I think of the Atlanta Journal Constitution. Henry Grady, you have the Henry Grady school of Journalism. First game we beat Yale and I met

Catfish Smith that day and he was All-American from the University of Georgia. And of course Frank Sinkwich and I were good friends and there is a picture on my desk of Wally Butts, Frank Sinkwich and I. Sinkwich was the best man at my wedding and we were dear friends. He won the Heisman trophy that year and was athlete of the year from Youngstown, Ohio. I am glad I was there in school when Carl Sanders was a freshman and Ernest Vandiver who was later Governor was a senior. So Athens means a great deal to me and the University does. I am very proud I have a grandson there now who is going to get two degrees in the fall. An AB degree and a BS degree at the same time and I know he will be Phi Beta Kappa, his mother was. And God bless you. It is such an honor to live here in Georgia and be a citizen of the greatest country in the World, the United States of America and I am very proud of our flag and all it stands for and all it represents. It represents the blood of so many of our veterans, and when I pass on and I hope, I'm not getting up a crowd to go today, but when I do hope to have the American flag on top of it. And I will be saluting it, laying there saluting it. It is great to be an American, and be proud of it, and stand up for America whenever you get an opportunity, and stand up for our veterans who made it possible for all of us to enjoy the freedom that we enjoy and many of us take for granted as Americans. Thank you.

STUECK: Thank You.

COBB: Thank You.

[End of Interview]

Biographical Information

RBRL OHD 007

Pete Wheeler

b. October 19, 1922

Occupation:

Army Infantry 1942-1946

Army National Guard 1946-1978

Commissioner Veterans Affairs 1949-

President of the National Association of the State Directors of Veterans Affairs 1964-1965

Georgia Chairman, National Veterans Day committee 1954-

U.S. Veterans Advisory Commission

Chairman of the National WW II Memorial Advisory Board 1994-2004

Subject Analysis

RBRL OHD 007

Pete Wheeler

- Early life
- Start of World War II
- Wheeler's Education
- Wheeler's involvement in the ROTC, Army and Army Reserves
- Wheeler's first job at the OPA: Office of Price Administration
- Appointment to the Office of Veterans Service during Herman Talmadge Administration
- World War II Experiences
- The atomic bomb's use in World War II
- Veteran's Affairs Board and Commissioner
- Veteran's Benefits
- VA Nursing Homes, Hospitals and Cemeteries
- Opening of the first State Veteran's Nursing Home
- GI Bill
- Federal Funding of Veteran's Services
- Richard B. Russell's Inauguration as Governor
- General Marshall and Marshall's Plan
- Civil War and Spanish American War Veterans
- Vietnam Veterans
- Female Veterans
- Widows of Veterans
- Women who served in the WAC and WAVES in WWII
- Desegregation of the Georgia War Veterans Home
- Desegregation of the Armed Forces
- Iraq War Veterans
- Reduction in VA Staff
- Enactment of Civil Service regulations
- WWII veterans increased involvement in politics after the war
- American Legion, the VFW, the Am Vets, the DAV, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans Association, Military Officers Association Enlightenment and their roles in assisting veterans
- Georgia's Military Bases
- Peaks and troughs in funding
- Equal treatment of Drafted vs. Volunteer Veterans
- Columbus, GA and the Vietnam War
- Supermarket of Veterans Benefits
- Annual Golf Tournament to raise funds for homeless veterans
- Homeless veterans and how the VA assists them
- Harry Truman and the atomic bomb in WWII
- National Guardsmen's eligibility for veterans' benefits
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