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Mike Walton Memoir

W177. Walton, Mike b. 1948

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 45 mins., 9 pp.

Walton, Chief of the Springfield Police Department, briefly discusses his Air Force career in Vietnam, duties in Da Nang, career and duties as a police officer, veterans' organizations, and the American Legion's influence on his life.

Interview by Gary L. Maple, 1988

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of tape-recorded interviews conducted by Gary L. Maple for the Oral History Office on November 15, 1988. Margaret Reeder transcribed the tapes and Kay Johansen edited the transcript. Mike Walton reviewed the transcript.

Mike Walton, Chief of the Springfield Police Department, served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War. As a child, his heroes came from among the war veterans who were members of the American Legion and as an adult Chief Walton has fought for the rights of all American veterans. He firmly believes, "Everybody ought to do two years . . . for America," and "We've got to take care of our veterans and their families who are still with us today."

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Mike Walton, Springfield, Illinois, November 15, 1988.

Gary L. Maple, Interviewer.

A: December 16, 1948. I was born in Springfield, Illinois, the second son of Eugene A. and Gladys Walton. I had one brother, he died in March of 1988. His name was Ronald. My parents are both still alive and my father is a veteran of World War II and Korea. I went to Hay Edwards Grade School here in Springfield, Illinois. I went from Hay Edwards Grade School to Grant Junior High School, from Grant Junior High School to Springfield High School where I graduated in 1966. I hung around Springfield for approximately a little less than a year after graduating and I joined the Air Force in June of 1967.

I went through all my basic and technical schools at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Then I was assigned to Grand Forks Air Force Base, North Dakota. I spent about seven months there and I received orders to go to Da Nang, Vietnam. I reported to Da Nang in July of 1968 and I was assigned to the U.S. Air Force Security Police Squadron in Da Nang in what we called "Tiger Flight". That was the night shift where we shared part of the perimeter security of Da Nang with the Marine Corps. We had part of the perimeter and the Marine Corps had part of the perimeter and on the water side the Navy handled that. My basic duties were, we used to report to what they call a guard mound at about five-thirty to six p.m. every evening, receive any special instructions and then we would be taken out to post on 6-bys and dropped off.

I worked either a machine gun nest or a tower duty on the perimeter of Da Nang on what they called the Air Force side of Da Nang which was by the back gate of Da Nang. There was approximately forty of us that worked along that perimeter area and just down from us was the Marine perimeter. We would go on post and stay there until the next morning depending on how many rockets we got during the night. That depended on what time we left in the morning. When we were done with that in the morning, normally we would get off post anywhere between 0800 and 1200 hours depending on what happened the night before and how many rockets we got hit with and if there was anything coming from the village that surrounded us. When we got off, many times they would put us on transport planes. That's what I always thought was a little bit ridiculous. We used to go up in the sky and ride on these planes and we were supposedly guarding the supplies that were going out to the troops, out in the "boonies." My thought was, "Who the hell is going to steal it when we're up in the sky?" They told me, "It's not your job to ask questions but to do what you're told," and I did what I was told.

I stayed in Da Nang for one year. I had I guess the typical experiences everybody had. I didn't have it as bad as others and I

probably had it worse than others. It just depends, Da Nang wasn't the worse place in the world to be, it wasn't the best place in the world to be, it was a place that if I'd had a choice I wouldn't have been there. But I didn't have a choice. I didn't much care for Da Nang.

I did a little bit of work while I was there in my free time. What little free time they give us I worked with an orphanage there right outside Da Nang with some kids out there. I've got some pictures at home of that of the kids that we were trying to help. It was a Catholic orphanage run by nuns.

I stayed in Da Nang and in April of 1969 I took my R & R in Taipei, Taiwan. Stayed there about six days and came back and after completing my tour in Da Nang in July of 1969, I came home for thirty days. I was then reassigned to Ellsworth Air Force Base, Rapid City, South Dakota into a Base Police Unit which is altogether different than the security I had worked at Da Nang. I spent my last two years at Ellsworth and I was honorably discharged in June of 1971.

When I got out of service I came home. I went to work first for a dairy store for a very short time where I'd left from. Then I went to work for Coca Cola as a salesman for approximately one year. About July of 1971 and until about August of 1972 I worked for Coca Cola.

On the 25th of August 1972, after having completed the entrance requirements for the Springfield Police Department, I joined the Springfield Police Department as a patrolman and was sent to the University of Illinois for training. After my training was completed there, in about October of 1972 I came back and as a patrolman I was assigned to the midnight shift until the following spring when I was reassigned to the afternoon shift.

Upon joining the afternoon shift in the spring of 1973 I also enrolled in Lincoln Land Community College using my GI Bennies. I went to Lincoln Land in addition to working. I completed my time at Lincoln Land, on and off and finally completed it because it was rather difficult carrying a full load out there and working eight and a half hours a day and then going to court as the job requires. I remained on the three to eleven shift and stayed on the three to eleven through 1979. In August 1979 I was promoted to Sergeant and remained on the three to eleven shift as a Sergeant. In April of 1980 I was appointed as a Commander within the Springfield Police Department and at that time that was what they called a relief commander. It meant that when one of the regular shift commanders, there is three shifts, the day shift, the evening shift and the midnight shift, when one of those three commanders were off on their regular days off I would relieve that person.

I remained there until January 1, 1981 when I took over command of the midnight shift on the Springfield Police Department. I had command of the midnight from January 1st, 1981 until June 1981. In June 1981 I took over command of the afternoon shift where I remained until December 1st, 1987 when I was appointed Chief of the Springfield Police Department.

Between my time on the three to eleven shift and becoming Chief of Police I have attended Sangamon State University. I'm a graduate of the University of Louisville Southern Police Institute Administrative Officers Course, I have attended numerous police schools throughout the country. For awhile I was the Hazardous Materials officer for the Springfield Police Department and I've received a lot of training in hazardous materials throughout the country. I've been to Florida, Indiana, Colorado, Kansas, Missouri and Iowa on hazardous materials training. That was one of my additional duties while I was the shift commander on the afternoon shift. As I said I took over the Springfield Police Department as Chief of Police on December 1st, 1987, so I've been in that position for not quite one year.

During all this time, on May 12, 1973 I married my present wife and we've been married ever since. It will soon be sixteen years I guess. Yes, fifteen years we've been married. Soon will be sixteen. We have two children. Our first child, Nicholas, was born May 30, 1980 and our little girl, Ashley, was born February 10, 1988, so right now she's about nine months old. We still reside in the city of course, out in the Sherwood subdivision.

I was very active in the American Legion but because of my duties with this police department I've had to curtail a lot of my activities with the veterans. I'm a staunch advocate of veteran's rights. I get on my soapbox all the time about veterans and people probably get sick of hearing me but I don't think the American public and the politicians are doing enough for the veterans because if it wasn't for the veteran we wouldn't be free. Nothing will ever sway me from that.

I'm a past Commander of Springfield Post 32, the American Legion where I'm a member. I'm a member of the Sangamon County Voiture 344 of the 40 and 8. I am a member of the VFW Post 755 here in Springfield. I'm a former vice president of the Make-a-Wish Foundation of Central Illinois and I'm on the Salvation Army Board of Directors. I'm a former member of the Board of Directors of the American Legion Memorial Home Corporation where I also served as President and Secretary. I'm on the American Legion National Commission for law and order. I am general chairman of the Annual American Legion National Pilgrimage to the tomb of Abraham Lincoln which is held February 11th and 12th every year here in Springfield. I was director of the American Legion State convention in Springfield in 1988 and I'm also heading a drive to bring the convention back to Springfield in 1990. We have by the way won that and we will be bringing them back in 1990. I'm involved in numerous police organizations. I'm a member of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the Policeman's Benevolent Protective Association, the International Police Association, the Illinois Police Association, the Sangamon County Chiefs of Police, the Illinois Chiefs of Police and just about any other police organization you can name I think I'm probably a member of. I'm active and a member of the University of Louisville Southern Police Institute Alumni Association both nationally and in Illinois. What else do you need, Gary?

Q: I've got a couple of questions. Who has had the most influence on your life? Positive influence on your life?

A: Well I'll tell you, a lot of it had to do with the Legion and I'll qualify that remark. My dad has been a Legionaire every since he got out of the war. You know my dad, you know how he is, very patriotic and he's the flag waver and you think I'm bad about veterans rights, you ought to let him get on a soap box, he goes off. Dad used to take me down to the Legion. I remember as a real small child like in maybe kindergarten or the first grade going down to the old legion post on Second Street and I used to sit around and I'd talk to the old World War I veterans. There was a lot of them around then you know because I was born in 1948. Those guys used to tell all kinds of tales about what went on in World War I and then when World War II guys were there and the Korean War veterans. Well the Korean War was a little later on but the World War I guys and the World War II guys they were kind of my heroes. They used to tell stories and they were proud of what they did. There were guys there who had been shot up and of course you know how that is Gary? They knew that what they did was for a purpose, I mean they made me proud to be an American. So I'd say the veterans had an awful lot to do with the way I am today, with the way I feel about America, the way I feel about my job in law enforcement. Of course I love the Legion. I was raised in the Legion I would say. I was in the Sons of the Legion when I was just a young kid. In fact I was their State Adjutant one year right before I went into the service. In 1966 to 1967 I was their State Adjutant for the Sons of the American Legion of Illinois, then I went in the service. When I got out of the service the first thing I did of course was join the Legion and like I say I've been active in there ever since. I went through the chairs, I was Jr. Vice, Senior Vice Commander and Commander. So I'd say the Legion had a lot to do with it and the veterans down there. The pride that they had and you know I wanted to serve my country. I'm one of those people that wanted to serve my country. The farthest thing from my mind was going to Canada. The farthest thing from my mind was avoiding the draft. I'm one of these people that thinks that everybody ought to do two years whether it be in the Peace Corps, or whatever, something for America. I think everybody owes us two years and they could do two years standing on their head. Maybe it's not in the service but it should be in some form of service. Of course I think it should be the military for the men especially. The females, well I think there is a place for females in the military also. But I think everybody, once they hit the age of eighteen, ought to do two years somehow for their country because they owe it to their country. So like I say, I get a little radical about that but that's my feeling. So I'd say to answer your original question I'd say the Legion had a big influence on me when I was a young kid.

Q: Most people I've interviewed, their families or their fathers served in World War II and Korea and my dad did too. But he served in the United States, he never went overseas. He was a courier for the Army out of St. Louis.

A: My dad was in the Philippines and he won't talk much about it, he never has. He's told me a few stories but he don't want to talk. But it still bothers him today what he went through, I think, and I think what he wanted when he fought in World War II and then in Korea, he didn't want a Vietnam, he didn't want another war, the same way you and I don't want another war.

Q: We don't want another war.

A: I don't want my little boy going off to war. I think he should serve two years for the country, but I don't want him to have to go to war. If he has to he has to but I don't want him to. I don't want him to see some of the things that you and I probably saw. You probably saw a lot worse than me, Gary, there's no doubt in my mind. I didn't have it that bad over there, I didn't think I had it that bad. The only time you had it bad with rockets is if they landed right where you were at and then it was too late to worry about it, but Da Nang was "rocket city." But I don't want my kid to go through the things I had to and I don't want him to see some of the things I saw over in Vietnam and I didn't have it that bad.

Q: What is your outlook for the future?

A: I'd like to remain as chief for as long as the city would decide to keep me here. It's hard telling, you never know. They could replace me tomorrow if they don't like me. I want to continue to work hard for veterans and their families. I think our government needs to do more for the veteran. The only time the veteran is highly thought of is when there is a war that's affecting the American public in some way. That's the only time they think very highly of us. I want us to be prepared for anything and I don't like the idea of cutting back on missiles and all that personally. I don't trust the Russians. I think that we should be prepared for anything and I don't know that it will come from the Russians. It may come from this crazy-assed Khomeni or one of them, you know, to try something with us but we need to be prepared. Everybody seems to focus on Russia but I don't think it's going to be Russia so much.

But for my future I want to get my two kids through school, through college if that's what they want to do and someday I want to spend my leisurely time with my wife, get a motor home and see the entire United States of America. Then after I see all of America maybe I'll go overseas, but not right away. I want to see America first because I love America so. I want to see all the places I've read about and seen pictures of. Now I don't have time for that. Hell I'm lucky to get a vacation now with this job, there is so much stuff going on. I think all of us need to work harder for our veterans, we don't want to forget the guys in the hospitals that aren't ever going to get out. I'm happy to say that Springfield Legion every year does something about that. They give a thousand dollars a year just for Christmas stuff for those guys. It still isn't enough but at least it's something. There's guys in some of those hospitals that are never going to get out and they gave almost the ultimate sacrifice. But we've got to remember our war dead, we've got to take care of our veterans and their families who are still with us today, whether they are ill, whether they are feeling great, the American public owe it to them to take care of them and that's what I'd like to see happen. You know the politicians talk about it but most of it's political rhetoric and nothing get said. I mean a lot get said and nothing gets done.

Q: Closing notes?

A: I've said probably too much to you here. I appreciate you coming in. I've enjoyed talking with you not only today but in the past when you were working on the Memorial and you gave a lot of yourself for that. I don't think today or when they dedicated that memorial that you got your just dues, you should have been recognized more.

Q: Well I don't think any of us have been recognized enough for that.

A: That's history now but at least it's up, buddy.

End of Tape