

## Alfred Wehner

Tape 2 of 2

**QUESTION:** You started as a glider pilot is that right?

**ANSWER:** Right.

**QUESTION:** And so that was, how do you get trained as a glider pilot?

**ANSWER:** You started, you had to earn your flights by building gliders under the instruction of a craftsman who of course was in uniform. Uhm and you start training for your first wing, that's a uh.. a white seagull in a blue field, in fact I have it here I can show you later on, I brought it for you, and the planes if you could call them that are similar to what I showed you in that picture. They were just crates with huge wings and they're very forgiving. And the way we started you went to a hill and you had a.. a rubber rope about from here to the door.. v-shaped and the notch of the "V" was hooked to the nose of the plane and at the tail of the plane a fellow was sitting, his heels dug into the ground and held onto a short piece of rope from the tail. And then each leg of the V rope had about five guys on it and they were running down hill as if their life depended on it and putting tension on the rubber rope, and when they just about came to a halt on account of the tension of the rubber rope the pilot yelled let go and then the guy in the back let go and this great rumpled over fueled craft bobs and suddenly became airborne.. ja. But oh you got up about 20 at most 30.. uh 30, 40 feet you know down the hill. And then we all had to run down with a dolly, and lift that plane on the dolly, and pull it up hill over the grass and it wasn't paved. That was hard work and after 30 of these take offs you got your first wing and the second win.. the first wing was called, or has been I don't know if they still do it as I've lost touch with the field, is called the "A" and two wings are called the "B" and three wings is called the "C". And for the "B" for your two wings you graduated to a real sailplane, not just a crate and you were then pulled up by a winch and the B started with a winch and that is an interesting thing.

You have someone hold the wing otherwise it would touch the ground you know, you sit there and you give the command and the wench starts pulling and the guy who's holding the wing level runs with you, until you have enough speed and you become airborne.. and then you pull up the stick and you go up like that and you see.. you see only sky and you then are pulled over by the winch and you look out and there is a flag man to the side and when he waved you released the tow rope, otherwise you'd be pulled back into the ground. And then you have your altitude and you fly your pattern and you come back and do that. And for the "C" it is essentially the same. You have winch starts, but you have longer flights and more complex patterns. And when you have the "C" you are an accomplished glider pilot, and I went one step further that was the tow.. the tow permit, this again is a bigger plane that was towed up by a propeller plane and of course you don't pull the stick you keep it level, you keep the tow plane in front of you and the tow plane pulls you up to your desired altitude and then you release the tow and you fly your pattern.

**QUESTION:** So by 19, 19-20 you were an accomplished a..

**ANSWER:** 17

**QUESTION:** 17 years old

**ANSWER:** I was.. you need a number of take offs with the tow plane before you get your tow permit and I missed one take off because by that time I was drafted to the air force so that I didn't get the tow permit. I crashed two planes. The first one, was one of these crates that was my stupidity but the second one I could have actually gotten killed there, and I uh.. I attribute my survival to my cool and my survival skills. That's uh.. the second one we were training at a military air base, and on the very right they had the pilots train who piloted these

## Alfred Wehner

Tape 2 of 2

cargo planes and transported troops.. ten or twenty troops in a glider. The glider is towed by a propeller plane, and gosh I tell you.. these guys they practice their flying it.. was the airbase and then they dove down like a dive bomber with that glider.. and just a few feet above ground they pulled her up and sat down right then and there.. ja. That was on the far right, and in the center.. fighter.. fighter planes were training touch and go and to the left we were the glider with a single seat glider not those big gliders. And I was supposed to get up high start I was supposed to be pulled to maximum altitude to fly my pattern, and because I was fairly advanced at the time. And the winch was about 300 yards ahead, we had wench starts you know, and the sergeant who was an airforce sergeant who was supervising this.. he was a mean spirited, short tempered guy and I was supposed to get my.. the first take off of the day.. and there was a telephone line from the a.. sergeant who stood right next to the plane to the winch. And they were also a flag, for flag signals and the telephone line hadn't been laid yet, because it was the first take off of the day and uh.. so he got mad he grabbed the flag and gave flag signals. And the poor guy at the winch didn't recognize it, he didn't respond so.. the sergeant threw that flag to the ground with such force that the handle broke and that of course didn't make me any easier because it was one of my test flights for the "C" for the third wing. Anyway somehow we got the signal that the winch was ready to pull me up, and as I said to the right of me with the fighters and the big sailplanes being pulled up and so I couldn't turn right, to the left was a forest, tall fir trees and I was to fly my pattern over those fir trees and then fly back to the start and put her down there. So!, the wench started to pull as soon as I was airborne I pulled the stick up and I got up like this looked at the sky suddenly noticed that the wench stopped pulling.. and I immediately I straightened out the plane or I would have stalled and I thought there was a malfunction.. any second.. that guy must start pulling me again up to altitude. But he didn't, that idiot at the winch didn't know what to do with me, he didn't know if I was a beginner who should just get a hop or an advanced student who should go up to a high altitude. And he did the most stupid thing of all putting me in between, you know if I had been at the winch and did not know if that guy is a beginner or an advanced student I would have pulled him up.. just up for a hop that he could have put the plane down again on the air field. So I found myself too high to still land at the airstrip, but too low to fly my pattern. So.. I knew I couldn't turn.. there were orchard ahead of me so I had to turn around I had to try to get back somehow you know, so at half altitude I veered to the left over the forest and usually you have downdrafts over forest, I was losing altitude and I had made 180 and tried to get back to the base to the starting point but I pretty soon realized I don't have enough altitude.. so I made another 90 degree turn towards the airstrip, airbase, and I pampered the plane. I was.. I don't know.. I was about 30 yards, 30, 40 yards over the tree tops but.. uh.. inside I knew if I tried to maintain altitude I would just stall and come down so I pushed the nose down and gained speed, and right over the tree tips and leveled out and nursed the plane to the edge of the forest. I faced another problem uh.. at the left side a Heinkel hundred el.. a Heinkel hundred eleven bombers were parked you know, they were to the left of us.. so with the last bit of speed I made it to the edge of the forest, I dove down again pushed the plane down a foot above the concrete and right in front of me was that big Heinkel bomber but I had enough speed from that last dive to lift her.. get her over that Heinkel bomber but now I was coming across the field you know I couldn't make another 90 degrees. And by that time I was a little nervous, a 17 year old kid and I had forgotten to pull out the landing flaps in all this excitement.. trying to avoid the bomber and I hopped over the bomber and I pushed her down and she was kicked up again, boom, boom, boom, it was a rough landing and the skid broke so that was my adventure in the air.

**QUESTION:** Did the.. so because of your flying experience is that why you got drafted or was it a certain age that everyone got drafted?

**ANSWER:** Well everybody got drafted but uh.. but because I had that flight training of course I was predestined for the airforce.. the Luftwaffe, and I volunteered for the airforce..

## Alfred Wehner

Tape 2 of 2

not because I was particularly brave, but if I hadn't volunteer for the air force I would have been drafted to the infantry and all my flying talent would have been for naught. Well turned out it was anyway because I was drafted in August of 44 at the age of uh.. 17, turned 18 in October and uhm.. went to the air war academy, we had five of those. The one I went to was air war academy number 3 in Saxonia, between the cities of Leipzig And Dresden. And um.. by a.. by February all flight training had ceased, by March the air academy was dissolved, and we were shipped across Berlin to a town east-northeast of Berlin for a very brief and cruel uh.. training again. It was that drunk major, who treated us like, like dirt. He was continually drunk. And we were then put in that transport plane.. uh a train. We were joined by a thousand recruits, we were 200 air force cadets from the air force academy and we were.. all 1200 of us put in that train, cattle wagons, and we were supposed to be shipped toward Silesia for another division.. Infantry division Hermann Goering.. uh and that is when we drove into that uh.. southern pincer movement there.. the Ukrainian the first Ukrainian front under Marshal Konev. And uh.. there were those two pinchers attacking Berlin. The Zhukov From the north and Konev From the south and we were driven into the uh.. tank columns of a.. of Konev's finest.. ja.

**QUESTION:** It sounds like with very little training and you also if I remember right said your weapons were...

**ANSWER:** Oh yeah, the major.. the major was drunk, and incredibly he collected our weapons which were rifles and put them.. locked them in the last wagon of the train. Of course we couldn't have done anything with the.. with the.. rifles against tanks we didn't have bazookas.. so uh.. that was a.. formidable slaughter. Can you imagine those tank grenades exploding in these packed wagons. We had no councilors there... to treat our psyche.

**QUESTION:** By this time was it evident that the war was a...

**ANSWER:** Lost ja.. sure.

**QUESTION:** So here you are a young kid, going in and...

**ANSWER:** Just being sacrificed for, for nothing. I think the uhm.. the last uhm. We.. we realized, even the last among us realized that the war was lost when the uh, when the Battle of the Bulge did not achieve it's objective. And a lot of people realized it earlier but of course it was forbidden to even mention any doubt. That was a.. there was a paragraph in the uh law book that the deterioration of the will of the force to resist, in other words you see doubts among your fellow citizens or among your fellow soldiers and then they don't fight that hard anymore... it was a death penalty.

**QUESTION:** By this point had Hitler been exposed to the German people?

**ANSWER:** No that happened all after the war.

**QUESTION:** Yeah.

**ANSWER:** That happened uhh.. they shot us up on April 19<sup>th</sup> and he killed himself April 30<sup>th</sup>, eleven days later and we retreated to a small town called Luchau 200 of us.. of the 1200 made it to Luchau. And the Kampf Commandant which was a Nazi supreme commander of that town.. he had absolute authority. He order us.. we were fed and then he ordered us into the trenches at the east fringe of Luchau, which the "Volkstrum" old men and kids had dug. And their bazookas were lying around you, you could fall over them, but only every tenth man had a rifle.. uh.. after we were fed we were ordered to defend Luchau and we then got

## Alfred Wehner

Tape 2 of 2

intelligence information the next day that we were surrounded by 11,000 Russians and several hundred tanks and we were 200 practically untrained kids. And the Russians had they attacked with infantry they could have killed us with broom sticks because we didn't have any rifles to fire but they came with tanks and we knocked them off with the bazookas.

We held Luchau for two days, and then we broke out under the most adventurous circumstances at night. We had one motorcyclist who spoke Russian, he was leading the column. We blackened our faces, reversed our caps and uh.. there were several vehicles from straggler's units. One was a.. well they're actually they were all armored SS, and they had 88 millimeter, this famous gun, famous for anti tank effects but originally designed as an anti-aircraft gun. And they had two quadruple twenty millimeter truck mounted guns you know, and we had orders, strict orders not to speak, and we drove right through the Russian lines. I could see the silhouettes of the Russian tanks, I could see the glimmer of the cigarettes of the Russian soldiers and we drove right through and that would ruse worked as long as it was dark and when it got light it was another matter. We got shot up again.

And uh.. I had to admire these SS guys, at a time when everybody thought only of survival, the war was lost and over, we came to a.. uhm.. an opening in the forest we had to cross an opening from the tree cover here to the tree cover there and while we were in the midst of crossing there.. uh.. we Uh.. the Russians from the left we didn't even know they were there they threw everything they had against us you know, artillery, mortar, machine gun fire, everything. And these SS guys instead of high tailing it out of there, they had the engines to pull their trucks across, they stopped in the middle of it, and the 88 millimeter was put down swung around, and the two trucks with the 20 millimeter quadruple fired against the Russians. We saw those stately trees just come down like match sticks and gave us a chance to cross and uh.. then they pulled out. Of course we lost a few people there and the tragic situation in those days was you could not go back to try to recover your wounded, you had to just go high tail it out of there and who ever got hit was left. So we got out of that one and we.. we finally reached the Elbe River By then the SS vehicles had left us and uh.. we uh.. cadets and surviving recruits were left. We marched always chased by Russian tanks. We heard the cannon thunder in the distance, sometimes lots of distance, and we reached the Elbe and I thought we would go across west toward the American lines. But somehow the leader of our our straggling group, a captain, went up the Elbe River which is in southeasterly direction towards Czechoslovakia and when we reached the prewar Czech border, the war had ended it was May 9<sup>th</sup> and we disbanded.

By that time the Russians had taken Berlin, Hitler had committed suicide, and then the combined Russian force, Konev and Zuhov went south toward Prague. And everything that was east of that wide path of Russian armor and troops was cut off from Germany with little old me among them. We were then dismissed and I was on my own. And uh.. yeah, that was May 9<sup>th</sup>, wee hours of the morning. And May 21<sup>st</sup> I arrived home in Wiesbaden Sick, emaciated, but I had made uh.. without having ever seen the inside of a POW camp.

**QUESTION:** Where did you face the Russian that you had, that you fooled them with your..

**ANSWER:** There were 200 kilometers, the 500 miles that I had to make to my home town, with 200 miles Russian occupied uh.. kilometers, 100 kilometers no mans land and 200 kilometers American occupied. And it was in those first 200 kilometers, the Russians of course the moment of the capitulation all of the troops that were cut off east of that Russian thrust towards Prague disappeared into the woods, into the mountains. So the Russians set a trap.. they gave strict orders not to bother the German soldiers. We could be robbed of watches and things but let them go you know, and of course the word spread and everybody

## Alfred Wehner

Tape 2 of 2

came out of the woods, and the roads, and then the Russians door snapped shut. And only very few survived the Russian uh.. uh.. prisoner of war confinement.

The Russians kept them against the Geneva convention, of course they never signed the Geneva Agreement. Our last people came back ten years after the war if they came back at all. In Stalingrad for example where the sixth army was annihilated, was 300,000 men sixth army and 100,000 finally surrendered.. out of ammunition, out of food. 90 more exactly.. a little over 90,000 surrendered and 5,000 came back, you know. People don't.. don't know that here, and in those days nobody cared.

But in any event, I ran into one trap there and that was the last town where supposedly nobody could get through. And I turned the.. because we heard uhmm.. there were other stragglers of course, we heard the Russians had Calvary troops there scouting the forests and the fields for stragglers and uh.. so I thought well, uhm the word was this town Marienberg uhm.. nobody could get through so I figured maybe not through but let's go in, I needed information, intelligence, what in the world was going on there, why doesn't anybody get through there. So I figured I go into Marienberg, and find out maybe they block just the main roads and then I go through a side road, and I didn't want to be shot down by a Calvary troop looking for stragglers. So I went on the road and the road made a bend, and when I came around the bend I saw a column of German prisoners, men, women, children soldiers guarded by a Russian guards with submachine guns driving them east.. I was going west you know. I thought oh my gosh, that's it. Interesting enough the first guards didn't bother me, but the one at the end he came with his Tommy gun and said something Russian you know, with that Tommy gun waving me to that column. And they.. the column while I past them said turn around, turn around you can't get through. So uh.. I just reached in there and showed him the red postal savings book in which each entry was marked with a stamp and a signature of postal official. And of course the fatal blemish of that book which was red which is the communist color but right on the front page was a big German eagle with the swastika. So I handed the booklet to him with the back side front, and he was startled and opened it and he saw all the signatures and stamps so I didn't give him a chance to make up his mind I just took it out of his hand, pocketed it and marched on. I was the only one who got through there.

**QUESTION:** Wow.

**ANSWER:** yeah, those were the days, when I think back I have to ask myself did that really happen to you.. because it was exactly 57 years ago. To me it is as if I'd seen a movie or read a book about this. It's hard to believe that one uh.. one could go through all this, but in those days it was survival of the fittest. There was no Red Cross there was no food, there were no.. no rules of law, drunk Russians wanted to.. to ah.. shoot German people, they just shot.

**QUESTION:** Last week we talked to a gentleman, Frank Wokojanec, Woko, and he was with the American troops in Berlin called off and they were saying let the Russians come in. And he said you know the Germans didn't scare us, when we saw the Russians, he said, whew the German's were nothing compared to what, some say the Russians they only went after the Germans, he said they didn't care who it was German, American, whoever and they had some scary adventures with them in Berlin.

**ANSWER:** I tell you I have seen in a potentiated way what you have seen in Rwanda, and Burundi, and Bosnia. I.. my unit when we broke out of Luchau.. we marched among these refugees who pulled wagons.. overloaded little wagons with what they could carry, clogging the roads. And I saw the Russian soldateska.. in German villages and towns killing and raping

## Alfred Wehner

Tape 2 of 2

people, I have seen it you know. And you either survive or you don't and a lot.. a lot of my buddies didn't you know and that of course was before what do they call it... uh.. post traumatic stress syndrome was invented.. either you survived or you didn't, it was that simple.

**QUESTION:** Cause you got, you got back to your home town, is your dad gone already?

**ANSWER:** No, I got home May 21, it's one of the three days I celebrate. One is April 6 when I came to this country in '53, the other is May 21<sup>st</sup> when I reached home from the war and the other is August 19th my wedding day. No my dad was taken in August so I was home from May to August, 3 months.

**QUESTION:** Because he was, if I saw right because he was a news correspondent?

**ANSWER:** During the war during the war, he volunteered for the antiaircraft and he was heading an antiaircraft battery and then was shipped to Norway stationed with occupation forces. And my dad was a go-getter, and enthusiast a patriot. He volunteered in World War I the day the war broke out, his entire high school class.. senior class volunteered. He was wounded twice, saw service at the front four years of World War I, and then World War II he thought the country called again and he found it too boring in Norway so he volunteered as a.. a uh an armed forces war reporter because photography was one of his hobbies.

**QUESTION:** The one thing that was kind of interesting that I never heard about before, because again being taught through our school system, and it's a funny sounding term denazification. It sounds like you walk through a thing at the airport and you walk in one way and.. what was that all about?.

**ANSWER:** These were laws that were formulated by the Allied Occupational Forces that every party member had to go through this process. It was a little bit like uhm.. like being assumed guilty until proven innocent. Every party member and of course the records were there from the Nazis, and all party members were forbidden to practice their profession until they had passed this court process.

It wasn't court it was lay people and with the millions of party members of course you can imagine the backlog that with millions of people had to go through. Schools for example there were only a few teachers who were not party members and only those could teach. See the war was over in May, and til November there were no schools. But uh.. the conditions then were really terrible in addition to not having anything to eat there was no authority, no police force, you couldn't buy anything, you could buy nothing. And uh.. there was no newspaper, no uh.. you could not travel for many weeks until after the trains started to run again. So as a party member you could only work in the uhm.. menial labor whether you were a lawyer or doctor or what have you, official you were only permitted to work in menial labor until you went through that process. That's a.. it was sort of a pseudo court.

**QUESTION:** So the court, was it American soldiers running it or German citizens?

**ANSWER:** German citizens, antifascists.. uh.. of course they uh.. it wasn't an impartial court. The ones who had suffered from the Nazi rule were then sitting there uhm.. judging their fellow citizens. It wasn't.. then of course there were the bribes and you know.. uh.. There was a public prosecutor, this person didn't have to have legal training and if some farmer who had to go through the process couldn't bring him a ham, a dozen eggs, or a pound of butter, it was bad.

## Alfred Wehner

Tape 2 of 2

No law and.. that's what you get when you start a war and lose it. And again I have talked so much about.. what I personally experienced, that should not overshadow what was done in the German name you know. And as I said before I voted with my feet, I came to this country, gave up, I wasn't a financial or political refugee I had everything I could ask for but I wanted to come to this country and I think it's the greatest country on earth and I'm very grateful that I can live here. I'm happy that my children, my four children are American citizens and with that I'll end it unless you have more questions.

**QUESTION:** I uh.. boy it's yeah, one quick question because this is one I ask all American vets which would be totally different in Germany. What significance did Pearl Harbor have in your history as a kid. Did that mean anything? Here that was the beginning of the war.

**ANSWER:** Sure. At that time we had already, this was December 7, 41, and we had been in war since September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939. And we had received reports.. of course we were aware of the Lend Lease Act and we knew that President Roosevelt had given orders to his navy to shoot and sink German submarines on sight, before the war. And that of course struck us at the time as a peculiar neutrality, uh.. although I should, I should interject here I think. If Roosevelt did anything to get America into the war on the side of Great Britain, more power to him because Hitler had to be stopped and he had the superior perspective he knew what was going on. The masses of people here didn't, and they might have been isolationists.. uh.. but that he came to the help of Great Britain I think is to his credit. But in any event Pearl Harbor was big news for us because, we measured everything according to German gauges and when we heard the Pacific Fleet was practically annihilated.. in those days the battle ship was still the number one war ship, rather than the carrier that came in just a few months later. We figured ok they have lost their Pacific Fleet, that will take them many years to rebuild so they are eliminated from the Pacific. This is because our leadership particularly the Nazis, with some what primitive ideas. I can imagine Hitler went into the Ruhr area, in the industrial heart of Germany and saw all these smoke stacks and said my gosh this is fantastic nobody can match that. If he had gone to Detroit he would have seen everybody has that in his back yard, you know, figuratively speaking and they completely underestimated the American industrial potential. Which is what finally won the war for the allies.... fortunately.

**QUESTION:** As I said I have a million more questions but time.