

**Legacy Series Transcription**  
**Transcribed by Adina Langer**  
**November 23, 2015**  
**James Newberry interviews Lorenzo Wallace**

**Full Transcript**

JN: This is James Newberry, and I'm here with Lorenzo Wallace on Friday, December 12, 2014, at the Sturgis Library at Kennesaw State University. And Mr. Wallace, do you agree to this interview?

LW: Yes, I do.

JN: All right, could you please state your full name?

LW: Lorenzo Alexander Wallace

JN: And when and where were you born?

LW: I was born at 150 Chestnut Street, Southwest Atlanta, Georgia. That was in 1919.

JN: And tell me a little about your family. What were your parents' names?

LW: My father was named Edward B. Wallace. He was a physician. In fact, he was a surgeon. And he delivered all his five children except the youngest who was born the same day he passed in 1925.

JN: And your parents attended Clark College which is now Clark Atlanta University.

LW: That's right. Yes.

JN: And so, your father was a physician but passed away in 1925. So what did your mother do for a living?

LW: Well, my mother was just a housewife until he passed. And after he passed, she had to go to work, and she was an insurance agent for the Pilgrim Insurance Company which, at that time, was a small black insurance company. I believe it was on Fraser Street in, I'm not sure what part of Atlanta, but it was on Fraser Street in Atlanta.

JN: And what was your mother's name?

LW: Birdie. Birdie Florence Wallace. Her maiden name was Birdie Crolley Wallace. C-r-o-l-l-e-y. Her father, my grandfather was a Methodist preacher. In fact, he was one of the founders of Warren Memorial United Methodist Church, which is now located on Lowery Boulevard.

JN: So your mother had to go to work, and she was raising five children on her own.

LW: Correct.

JN: So, do you remember that as a difficult period, or were you not aware of those difficulties?

LW: I'm aware of the difficulties, because all of the five children-- those that were of age -- had to go to school, and come home, and certain duties you had. Some cooked, and some did different household duties.

JN: So what hobbies did you have as a child?

LW: Let's see. As a child -- I was trying to think of -- I just played with the neighborhood kids. We played different games, football and things like that. It was just a matter of playing with the neighborhood kids.

JN: So you were growing up in the 1920s and 1930s in Atlanta, so it was a segregated city based on color.

LW: Right.

JN: So did you have any interactions with white people at that time?

LW: Not too many. In going to school, you had the -- well, most of your teachers were Afro-American, but the Superintendent of the Atlanta School System was white. I was trying to think of his name, and I can't think of his name right now, but he was famous as the superintendent of public schools. But it was strictly segregated -- the black schools and the white schools.

JN: Where did you graduate from high school?

LW: I graduated from Booker T. Washington High School in 1937. That particular high school was founded in 1924 with Professor Charles L. Harper as the principal. And he remained principal for -- oh, I think it was about 20 years or more. But it was the only black high school for blacks in Atlanta at the time. So if you went to high school, you had to go to Washington High.

JN: Where was it located?

LW: It was located on what used to be C-Street and later changed to Whitehouse Street. But that was off of -- it was between Honor Street and Beckwith Street in the southwest of Atlanta.

JN: And you said your mother worked for Frasier Insurance?

LW: No, Pilgrim Insurance Company.

JN: Pilgrim, sorry.

LW: Which was located on Fraser Street.

JN; That's right. And so, that was an insurance company for black clients, and so another one would have been Atlanta Life Insurance Company.

LW: That's correct. I was trying to think of what they used to call those companies. But these were – you know they had nickel and dime policies. I think most of the policies were, say, ten cents a week or something like that. Well, you had the sick and accident policies, and the death policies. And I don't think the death policies paid but \$50 on death. But, in those years, everything was low key. You could buy a dozen eggs for ten cents, a penny a piece, things like that. I remember well how reasonable things were, but people weren't making any money. Some people were making, let's say, \$8 a week, or something like that. But what really brought the fact in mind to how things have increased was before my mother passed at 94, I used to try to help take care of her, and I'd go to the grocery store for her, and she would give me \$5 and give me a long list of things that she needed from the grocery store, and she'd always give me \$5 or \$10 and say “Bring me some change,” but anyway I'd have to spend about \$40 or \$50 to get what she had, and then, when I brought it back, she'd say “Where's my change?” (Laughing). So, that was comical.

JN: So, do you remember life and social activities on Auburn Avenue at all during that time?

LW: [11:00] Yes, I do. Auburn Avenue was quite a metropolitan street. They had night clubs, and businesses – black businesses – and one of them was, like you just asked about – the Atlanta Life Insurance Company and the Citizens Trust Bank were a couple of the main businesses. And they had a building – let's see – the Oddfellows Building. There was a club located upstairs in that building that had different places that you could, well entertainment places. And then they had a place down the street called the Top Hat, which was on Auburn. And there was another one --- the Poinciana Club on Auburn. And there was the first black daily newspaper was located on Auburn. *Atlanta World*, they called it. At any rate, it was quite a street for Afro-Americans. That was why they used to have different clubs – used to have dances at the clubs there, like the Top Hat Club.

JN: Did you attend those dances?

LW: Yes, I did! And they were quite enjoyable at that time. Because – well that was all we had with places we could go. Now, I remember the Fox Theater which is still in existence. [13:00] You could go there, but you had to climb steps that looked like they were almost sky high, and you sat in the balcony. And so most of us didn't go.

JN: So there was a refusal to go to a place where you had to be segregated.

LW: Right.

JN: So, you graduated from high school and attended Morehouse?

LW: Yes.

JN: Can you tell me about your years at Morehouse? What did you study?

LW: [14:00] Well, I went to Morehouse in 1937. And that was the first year that Dr. Benjamin E. Mays became president, and well, he didn't become president until 1941, so my class was the first class to graduate under his tenure. I studied economics, and I had a minor in mathematics. When I finished in 1941, it was hard to get jobs for blacks then. Either you had to be a school teacher, or a preacher, or something like that. There just weren't jobs available for black men. But I had taken a lot of

government exams, and the first job I got was with the War Department as a messenger. I think it paid \$1200 a year. And I remember being in that quartermaster's office of the army, which was located in Atlanta – well it was located in the Hurt building which was on Edgewood Avenue, and I was the only black in that office, and I saw how they treated me, and that was during the time of World War II with a compulsory draft for all males 18-26 years old. And so when they got ready to draft me, I noticed how they had treated me in that quartermaster's office in the army, and I said “I'm not going into the army.” And that time, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had just signed a proclamation that the Marines – that the U.S. Marine Corps had to desegregate. It was the last military facility to desegregate. So, I said “Well, I'll try the Marines.” So when they drafted me and asked me where did I want to go, I said, “I want to go to the Marines.” Well, that was in October of 1941. Well, they left me along until July of 1942, and then they called me in. But they were building a special camp for blacks to be trained in the Marines. We didn't go to Camp Lejeune, we went to Montford Point, which was a camp where they had just been built for blacks to train. And that's how I got into the Marine Corps.

[18:21]

JN: Let's go back to the army quartermaster at the Hurt building. What sort of – what were the attitudes of the folks there about you. What was the treatment you faced?

LW: Well, there were different promotions that would come up, and they would never consider me. They would consider folks that had come in behind me, and some of them I had given some training to. They would promote them, but they never promoted me.

JN: So, you arrived at Montford Point in the summer of 1942?

LW: It was July 1942, yeah.

JN: What did you find when you got there? Was it built? Was it not built? What did it look like?

LW: When I got there, they had built a lot of, I guess I would call them huts. They had a lot of huts in a line, and they started with the first platoon. I think it was 40 – either 20 or 40--- I believe it was 40 in each platoon. They went on up – 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. Anyway, each platoon, the first platoon, second platoon, third platoon, were housed in these huts. They were large enough to have cots for 40 people. And when we first went there, they had white drill instructors. And gradually, they would promote someone of the black race to be a drill instructor. But that's how we started out. And of course they had other activities that they were training for, the different, well, rigors you went through learning to be a Marine. As things went along, they promoted blacks to do the jobs that the whites had done.

JN: How intense was the training?

LW: It was very intense! [21:40] Well, the drilling and the marching wasn't that bad, but then they had maneuver training, I would say like jiu-jitsu and things like that. Well, you just learn to – I can't remember exactly what went on – but different rope training and training you how to protect yourself and how to defeat others, and that sort of thing.

JN: Did you make friends with your fellow trainees?

LW: Yes!

JN: Do you remember anyone in particular?

LW: Yes, I remember there was a fellow named Charles Gilmore. He was from Evanston, Illinois. We became very close friends. And there were others. Well, you had to become friends with the fellows you associated with everyday and went through difficulties with. It was just a matter with – it was the same way you just had to be friends with them.

JN; And you said, this friend from Illinois-- he would be coming to North Carolina, which was from a northern state to a more southern state.

LW: Yeah.

JN: So, did you go off base with these guys? Did you ever leave the base?

LW: Yes, yes. We would go on what they used to call “liberty.” Now, a lot of weekend liberty, you could go to different cities located around there which was, say, Wilmington, NC; Greensboro, NC; Goldsboro, NC. Different places. Nearby cities. You could catch a bus and go to those cities for the weekend. And they had what they called the USOs in all the different cities.

JN: That was entertainment?

LW: Yeah, you could go for entertainment.

JN: What sort of entertainment?

[24:30]

LW: Oh, well, mostly, you know, they had food and refreshments for you, and just different things like that. There wasn't a whole lot of stuff going on.

JN: So, when was your training complete?

LW: My training – well, the first group of platoons, they put them, they called them the 51<sup>st</sup> defense battalion, and I guess our training went on for just about a year-- almost a year. And that 51<sup>st</sup> defense battalion learned how to take care of things, mostly other units would go in and take a place, and the defense battalion was the outfit that held that territory to keep people from coming back in. Like that 51<sup>st</sup> defense battalion, we were sent overseas. We went from California, from Camp – you know my memory's not too good on some of the names, but we went from San Diego, California, overseas to Enewetak which was in the Marshall Islands. And I remember going over. We were on an aircraft carrier, and at night they would make us go down into – you had to go down into the ship there, and they wouldn't let you up, and things like that. It was a lot of maneuvering, and you just had to be careful, because the Japanese were still bombing the ships and things like that.

JN: Did they not want noise on the deck, or activity on the deck?

LW: They had some activity, but at certain times, when the Radar had found that there were Japs' planes in the area, they'd make you go down in the bottom of the ship with no activity on the deck.

JN: So when you landed in Enewetak on the Marshall Islands, what did you find on the island?

LW: [27:00] We found that most of the palm trees had been cut off where the Navy had, with there big guns, had just blown everything on the island down. And I didn't see any live Japanese except, we saw a few dead ones. You could, every now and then, you could run into a boot or something with a leg in it. But they had really just cleaned that island off with the big guns. We went in with this as a defense battalion, and there were other folks that went in – Air Force with some planes on the island and there were some Navy people on there. And we were there just to maintain the island in case the Japs tried to come back in there, but they never did.

JN: What were your day-to-day duties?

LW: [29:00] I had to – I was with a Radar group, and my main duties were the power plants. And, in fact, they sent me from the Enewetak in the Marshalls to the Ellice Islands which was a small island in the English group called – well the particular island that I went to was Nukufetau. But it was the Ellice island group. And I went over there to maintain the power plant which supplied all the electricity for that area. And that was what I did over there. Before I went over to that island, I was on Enewetak in the Marshalls, and my duties there were just – well I was with the power plant, but someone else was in charge of it.

JN: Who was that?

LW: I don't remember exactly. I know it was somebody from the – somebody from the Navy was in charge of it.

JN: So you would have been working with people that you hadn't trained with before.

LW: That's correct.

JN: How did you get along with them?

LW: Well, we got along fine after we got to know each other. [31:00] But I remember one specific case. I was with this Radar group, and we would study together. And black Marines, and several white, I believe it was Navy group, would work with us, you know, to maintain the Radar system – that was to detect anything that would come in, you know. Anyway, I remember one fellow, white fellow, from Kentucky. He told us... We would get together and study together on some Radar maintenance, and you know they would have beer in canteen cups and pass it around and everyone would take a drink or something. But this fellow never would, but eventually, after he got to know us, this fellow from Kentucky told us that his parents had trained him that blacks were no better than dogs, and not to associate with them. But he had to associate with us in that group, and he said, "When I get back home, I'm going to tell them that you all are just like anybody else. You're just as good as any whites that I know." But he said that, you know, his parents had just trained him that way. So that was enlightening. So things like that happened!

JN: On these islands, what sort of facilities were you sleeping in or eating in? Were you in huts? Were you in large barracks? What was that situation like?

LW: Well, it was mostly huts. There were several different huts there, and you had to sleep in facilities where there was always somebody else around. And when I got to the Ellice Islands, I had a place all by myself, because I was right there with the power plant. And my living space was right next to the big power plant.

JN: What sort of things were you doing in the power plant.

LW: You maintained the – you just maintained the facility. You had to change the oil in it, and all that sort of thing, you know, and all the different mechanisms. You had to be sure it was running correctly and that sort of thing.

JN: You said that the Japanese never came back to these islands while you were there.

LW: Correct.

JN: But were there ever air raids? Were there ever moments when you felt in danger of bombings, or did you feel fairly removed from the fighting?

LW: You were removed from the fighting, but there was always that chance that the Japanese might come back, and you had to be alert to that, but I guess we were just blessed that they never came back to that area.

JN: [35:00] So how many months did you spend, first on the Marshall Islands and then on the Ellice Islands?

LW: I spend about, lets see – I spent about four or five months on Enewetak on the Marshall Islands before they sent me to this Ellice island group. That was Nukufetau. And I spent about eight months over there. Before they called me back to the Marshall Islands. There was an island called Perry where they would discharge people from. And they sent you to Perry, and there was a maneuver there where they got you ready to go back to the states.

JN: [36:30] Do you remember hearing the news that the atomic bomb – that the first atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima?

LW: Yes, that was about the time that I had been back on Enewetak in the Marshall Islands about six months. That's when we heard about that. And after that, you know, they said the war was over, and they started maneuvering to get us back to the states. You had to have so many points to get out. Those who had been in longer than others were maneuvered out first.

JN: How did you earn points? Did it help if you were married or if you had children, or those sorts of things too?

LW: I don't remember about that. I know it was your length of service, and I suppose it was – had a lot to do with who you – whether you were married, I imagine. I wasn't married at that time, so I don't

know. I think that had a lot to do with it, but I just don't remember exactly how those points were given out.

JN: So of the years you spent in the Pacific, when you think about that military service today, what stands out the most? What were your proudest moments?

LW: Well, I'm just proud that I was able to be in an outfit that was supposed to protect certain territory, and I'm also proud that I didn't have to do any real fighting, because there were so many people who did the fighting and didn't survive, and that sort of thing.

JN: So you returned to the United States in about – in early 1946?

LW: Yeah, in December of '45. Right.

JN: And you were discharged from the Marine Corps. What did you do after the war was over? [40:05]

LW: Well, I had taken, many years ago, before that I had taken the Postal Service exam. And they had called me, you know, when I was in the service. And so, when I got out of the service, they had me at the top of the list. So I went to work for the Postal Service, and I started out as a mail carrier. And after that, after a short time, I became a clerk inside of a post office. And, eventually, I was able to get on the train. At that time, you know, the train was carrying the mail, and, you know, they had mail clerks who sorted mail on the trains between different cities. And I was appointed to what they call the Chatt and Atlanta. That was the line that ran between Atlanta and Chattanooga, Tennessee. And I did that for, oh, about nine months to a year, and I had taken an exam for the regional office, and they called me for that position as a railway postal clerk into the regional office. And I started out as a, I don't remember what they call it, but I was making out pay – payment issues for the-- well for the railroad companies that were hauling the mail. And they promoted me from that to – they promoted me to – I'm not quite clear on my memory.

JN: A transportation planning officer?

LW: No, that was later. At first I was a... Anyway, I had several positions before I became a transportation planning officer. But in 1971, I believe, when Nixon was voted President, he made Blount, from Alabama, his Postmaster General. And that was the time when they went from 15 regions over the United States – I was in the southern regional office – they downsized and called it a quasi-postal service-- the regions. And the southern region which was over four states, Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, and South Carolina, moved to Memphis, Tennessee, and it was over nine states. And at that time, I was a transportation analyst, and they transferred me to Memphis, Tennessee. I either had to retire at a reduced annuity or go to Memphis. So I went to Memphis and spent three years over there and got my annuity up to something I could live with, and I retired in 1974.

JN: How did you feel about moving to Memphis from Atlanta where you had always lived? [45:33]

LW: I didn't like it, but it was one of those things. I used to – well my wife stayed in Atlanta, so I'd make it back at least every other week for a weekend. Sometimes I made it every weekend back in Atlanta, but it was just a case of getting my annuity up to something I could live with, and I retired, and for a while, I moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee, and I had a little beauty products business going



where I was supplying beauticians. And I did that for a few years until I left Chattanooga and moved back to Atlanta, and that's when I went to work for the Georgia State Senate under Governor Zale Miller. At that time he was the Lieutenant Governor of the State of Georgia and also the president of the Georgia State Senate. And I went to work for them under him, and I did it for 23 years. The last four years I was a sergeant-at-arms for the Georgia State Senate.

JN: So you were first a door-keeper?

LW: Yes.

JN: And what did that involve?

LW: That involved – well I was on the front door then. I was involved in letting the right people in and out of the front door and keeping the wrong people out. That was the gist of it.

JN: Who were the wrong people?

LW: Well, anybody who just wanted to come in the Senate just to lollygag around.

JN: You'd send them up to the balcony?

LW: Right. That's correct.

JN: Do you remember any personalities of the politicians during that time? Political change in the 1970s?

LW: You had some real powerful senators in that day. One was Culver Kidd. He was quite a – sometimes-- I think he was on the rules committee. He was the one who, if a bill came before the Senate, it had to go through him, and he put it on the docket. He was a powerful senator. There were others who had a lot of clout. Well, during the time I was there, they had two or three – I think it was about two or three-- black senators. And by the time I left in 2010, they had about twelve, so things were moving in the right direction there.

JN: So, you said you retired from there as a sergeant-at-arms only four years ago?

LW: Yeah.

JN: How old were you at that time?

LW: I guess I was 92.

JN: So, can you tell me about your family? When did you first marry?

LW: Well, I've been married more than once. The first time I married was right after I got out of the Marine Corps. That was in 1946. [50:25]. And that wife and I had one son, and eventually, now I'm trying to think of the year. But anyway, we were married for 32 years, and we divorced. She got tired of me, so that was when I moved to Chattanooga and became – I was retired then, see, from the Postal

Service, and I had a little beauty products business going. And I stayed there eight years and came back to Atlanta. And I married again in 19-8 – I believe it was 1988. I'm with that wife now. She's 87 and I'm 95.

JN: What is your son's name?

LW: He is a junior. Lorenzo A. Wallace, Junior.

JN: And where did he go to school.

LW: He went to Harper High School in Atlanta, and then, they tried to give him a scholarship to Morehouse – four years paid scholarship to Morehouse-- but he didn't want to go there. He wanted to go to Yale, so he went to Yale. And he finished Yale, and then he went to Harvard and got an MBA, and he worked for PriceWaterhouse, and then he worked for Citicorps Bank in New York. And then he started building houses. Started under John Wieland who builds houses in Atlanta. He went from there to something else. But anyway, he's at Gas South at present. And he said he will be ready to retire in six years.

JN: How did it make you feel to see your son go to Yale and Harvard?

LW: It made me feel real good! I mean I was surprised that that's what he wanted to do, but I tried to make it possible for him to do what he wanted to do. So I was very pleased.

JN: Tell me about this medal that is hanging from your neck?

LW: This medal was authorized by President Obama in 19-- I mean in 2012. And they had a big deal where it was presented by some general in Washington, and I think Obama was supposed to be present, but something else came up and he didn't make it, but anyway, it was a medal that he authorized for the first black Marines. [54:45] Those who went in at the first – well when they started to let the blacks join the Marines in 1942, between 1942 and 1949. That's who was eligible for the medal. And I didn't learn about the medal until after they had gone to Washington. In fact, they had a list of who was to go before I got authorized.

JN: So you didn't attend the ceremony in Washington.

LW: I didn't attend the ceremony in Washington. I attended a ceremony here in Atlanta with a banquet that was given where they had a black general who was the main speaker. And he presented the medal.

JN: So, Mr. Wallace, how do you think the South has changed since you were a child?

LW: Oh, it's changed by leaps and bounds. It's quite a different place all together. You see, all this – most of the things that happened to me were before the Civil Rights Movement in the '60s. And that changed the whole – it changed the whole climate. And things are still not perfect, but they are a whole lot better. I mean, they are just quite different – you could say like “black and white” from the way things used to be. [57:00]

JN: How do you think the Montford Point Marines contributed to the larger Civil Rights Movement?

LW: At the first incept, well, of the blacks into the Marines, the Marine Corps, as a full outfit, felt that the blacks could not function, you know, in a very good manner. And after they got in, and they found out that they could do just what anybody else could – it was just a matter of “a man is a man.” Also, a woman is a woman, I mean regardless to race, you can do whatever your character lets you do. So that changed the whole climate of things. And it's just a better outfit now.

JN: Why did you agree to talk to me today?

LW: Well, I would just like for – if this does any good, which I hope it will, it will be an influence on helping blacks – young blacks – to progress and make good choices. If I've done anything at all that's worthwhile, I'd like for them to know. [58:58]

JN: Well, thank you for talking to me today, Mr. Wallace, and we'll end there.

LW: OK. All right, well, it's been quite enlightening, and I wish I could have remembered a lot more than I have presented today, but I did the best I could.

JN: You did a wonderful job. Thank you.