

Interview with T. Walter Middleton
March 27, 2003

T. Walter Middleton
resides at 629 Hillcrest St. Sylva, NC
84 years old, date of birth September 17, 1918

Interviewer: Nancy Potts Coward
Photographer: E.J. Pullium
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Transcript: Kim B. Lambert

Interviewer: Walter-

Walter: Yes-

I: I've just completed reading **Flashbacks**, your book on your experiences as a prisoner of war in the ^{Philippines} Philippines. It's such an incredible story that if I didn't know you to be a completely honest person, I would believe it to be fiction. My questions are going to be based on it. First, will you talk a little bit about your Appalachian beginnings and the draft call that took you away from your mountain home?

W: Well, I was born ^{up} in what they know now as Little Canada and.. I grew up up there, just an old mountain boy.. The biggest change I had I guess when I was a kid was when I came to Cullowhee to school. There was so much difference in the people at Cullowhee and.. us mountain.. fellas that it.. was a big shock to me. But ..growing up up there, those were my mountains.. I knew them day and night. I hunted on them; I was on all the cliffs that were challenges; I fished all the streams ..I-I was a regular mountaineer. I guess, now I'm not sure, but I guess, that.. the time that I spent up there...going across those mountains helped me when..I got in the prison camp.

I: What about the draft? What about when you were drafted?

W: Well...that was a shock to me, too. First thing I knew I got a letter that I needed to register for the draft.. then after a while, after I'd registered, I-I don't remember exactly how long it was, but it wasn't long until .. I had been chosen. .. asone to ..give myself to my country, to fight for my country. Well..I was in Sylva on that early morning and..Ms. McKee-she was the-she was the lady ..of the town and she told me that.. "We'll be waiting for you with open arms when you return". Well,I returned five years and six months later, and she was already gone to Heaven. But..I dreaded to leave Sylva, that was.. I went to Fort Bragg, and this was on ..was it May? Yeah, about- it was in May and.. I went from Fort Bragg in a roundabout way to ^{near} ~~Bellevue~~ ^{Bellevue} Virginia, where I-I got eighteen weeks of training before I left the United States.

I: That was with the eight hundred third (803) Engineers ^{Battalion} Battalion?

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W: Yes, ^Eeight-hundred-third ^Eengineers ..B Company. Now, I didn't know about that company or that ^Batallion until I got to Angel Island .. I got a group of people from up..in ..Yankee country that-it was an old outfit that hadn't been in any combat of any kind, had very little training. They ..they were just drawing their money, I think, and..most of them were up in the years, ten years older than ^{any of} us draftees were ... They-they just came in and it-gave a frame work for..a outfit. In other words, it was all chiefs and no..Indians. And and about.. I guess about two thousand-I'm not sure how many draftees, from-from Bellvoir engineer training outfit were there, and so they divided us up. And-and I went into B Company...Headquarters Company..was the company that owned all the machinery and.. they..my company..got the machinery that we needed from Headquarters Company and were responsible to them for the machinery. We were going to the ^{Philippines} Philippines to..build airfields.

I: Tell about the four months on the Bataan Peninsula between December the seventh, nineteen forty one (1941) and April the seventh Nineteen Forty Two (1942), when the American forces in the ^{Philippines} Philippines surrendered to the Japanese, including your being wounded.

W: ..This was ...well, it was sort of a surprise to us when, when Japan ..hit Pearl Harbor. ..One Sunday morning ..we heard a strange bugle call, and we all piled out and lined up. Our company commander told us that..we had just heard the call to arms; that Japan had blown- the way he put it .. 'Blown.. Pearl Harbor all to hell this morning' and..so..it wasn't the next day, I believe it was the second day- they started hitting us there at..Del Carmen where we were-we were building a large bomber base. And..from then on we were a prime target. We were right in the middle of a target ~~in~~ and would be as long as the war lasted. But ..anyway..that's where the bombs and the ^{strafing} strafing began for us...in B Company of the 803rd. We ..we left there when.. the Japanese..came into the Island, up at.. ..can't remember the place where they landed, but it was on the northern part of Luzon ^{Luzon} Island..and when they came-started down through- we left there and, and started toward Bataan, which was a peninsula..going down ..past Corridor that was out in.. Manila Bay. Now the Bataan Peninsula had been.. a part of the plans for when-if there was..some problems that-that all ^{of the} armed services would begin traveling back toward Bataan. My outfit- my Company- stayed right at the upper part of the peninsula and waited for all the people to get through.. We..we had built a airfield there, ^{a small one,} hoping that some planes would come in but... we stayed there until..everybody that was coming through came through. There was hundreds of them coming up out of Manila and making the circle onto Bataan..they were riding everything that'd move and piled on..just as high as they could hang on ..^{to the} cars and trucks... ~~We got~~ all the outfits..^{the} service outfits came through and we closed it off. ..We started on down the Bataan Peninsula..We'd go ..from one town to another and..we were building airfields as we went, hoping that the United States would get us some planes in there and get some help to us... but...not so. General ^{Mac}Arthur kept trying his best to make us believe that America was going to be there with hundreds of planes and thousands of...recruits, but..they didn't come. One of the hardest things to take was the fact that...before the Japanese even started down the Bataan...they cut our rations into half. We started fighting the Japanese...on half rations

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and that was about the hardest thing for us to take.... We figured that he had plenty of rations over on Corrigidor but, ... I'm not sure what they had over there. I noticed when the ones that came from Corrigidor after they surrendered, they-they didn't look like they'd been hungry... But for about four months when th-when Japan started fighting the main battle on Bataan-for about four months we held out... We knew..long before we-they took us-that we weren't going to have any help, and.. ^{Mac}Arthur left there going to Australia, so we-we held out just as long as we could. There was only a -well less than forty percent of the men, they say, that was able to fight and.. my outfit was-my Company was one of the last.. groups leaving the front lines. We...we had.. there'd been two lines that was set up on ~~the~~-on Bataan, and the first one didn't last very long.... The Japanese threw everything they had at us, and.. I guess we sort of had to get used to it, because.. But, but we had a line of... barbed wire stretched; those old rolls of barbed wire that you can.. that you've heard about with World War I-cause all of our equipment was World War I equipment, and the Japanese would... come at that roll of wire and we were set up with machine guns and-well I wasn't; I-I was -I wasn't on the front at that time,* it was later on when they needed me the worst, my outfit went to the front ..but..

I: Wha..

W: Pardon?

I: When they came at the roll of barbed wire, what happened?

W: Well..our machine guns stopped them. And it was real hot weather ..close to a hundred degrees, and you can imagine what it smelled like around there, an-and after two weeks when those ..that barbed wire was covered with..hundreds of Japanese. The-the first time they got ..a taste of American fire, the-they were coming down into Bataan and ..they were walking down the road about - I guess there was a hundred of them, maybe more that was coming down the road toward our lines and..they were talking and had their guns up on their shoulders and just like a-like they were going ^{on} down for miles, and our boys ...had them in their sights. When they got close enough, they let them have it. And that was the first battle of the Bataan. But.. they came- the rest of the group, I guess. ..A battalion hit us that night and-and our waterco^{led} machine guns ..were..you could see them glowing that night, and..the water in the tanks was bubbling, you could see the barrel glowing. We just about used up all of our machine gun barrels that night. But..then when we had to leave, we went on down to another-and built another ..line across the Bataan Peninsula. And that's where we stayed ..until..the Japs came in and-and took us.

I: Describe for us the Death March and the O'Donnell Prison at the end of it. ✓

W: Well, the Death March, we started at ..the very tip of Bataan, ^{at ??} Mariveillas; we had built a airfield down there. And..the Japanese brought all of us there, and there was twenty-five-thousand Americans and..and it's untelling how many thousand..Filipinos-not all of them soldiers. There was a lot of those people that came, there were civilians,

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and all of us were hungry.. Then they started pointing up the road and gouging us with their machine guns and ~~and~~ talking in a language that we didn't know anything about. But we understood the gouging with the..the bayonets and ..and pointing up the road, so that's the way we went. And..we were in about four, five, or six lines up the road, and we weren't...in uniform lines, just walking along, and the Japanese were running along side of us and everytime they'd...^{pushed us out} stagger out or try to get some water...need to go for personal reasons...they'd bayonet them, gun-butt them, shoot them. There was about twenty percent of-of our twenty-five-thousand men that...were killed on the Bataan Death March. It was about sixty-five miles and..it took about..I guess I was on there eight days, maybe ten, I'm not sure because time- you couldn't keep track of time. We were hungry; we had no water...it was one of the most terrible things that..I'd ever heard tell of, that was happening to American soldiers, and we were angry; we were angry at the Japanese, but we were- I think we were more angry at our country for..deserting us and letting the Japanese take us..for keeping us hungry all the time we were fighting. But we fought long enough to let them arm Australia before they captured us. We got to Camp O'Don~~nell~~ell...I don't know if I should tell about all..When we got to the end-end of the Bataan Death March, we got ^{to} some. ..some...box cars...a train- they filled the box cars. We were standing in there so tight that we couldn't move. I got pushed back into a corner, and there was a crack in the old wooden box car there, and that helped me ~~out~~; because it wasn't long till about all the oxygen that was in that boxcar was used up. And...when they got moving-there was a little of it had come through some of the cracks, but they were still..we were needing oxygen...When we got to, in about ten miles, I guess, of O'Don~~nell~~ell, they-we got out of the-they put us out of the box cars, and we couldn't walk. There was lots of-of the fellas that had died standing up, and..and there wasn't anybody in there that could-could stand up until we..we started trying ^{to} ^{and} on our..feet, getting up on our knees and pulling to each other. Then we started helping each other up. But we marched on into Del Carmen, and Del Carmen was a hell hole...The condition that..the..that the soldiers were in; they started dying right away...The ones of us who were able, dug ditches down below the camp and ..then we'd go around over camp and the ones that'd died- we carried them down and buried them...Usually you found them-you found them without any clothes on, nothing but their dog tags...somebody needed their clothes. But, anyway, we put their dog tags in their mouths and buried them there. The water-it was down near sea level and water rose in the...holes before..ditches before we got back, and we'd hold the bodies down with a pole and...dump dirt in on them; hoping that when America came again they'd be able to recognize the ones that they dug up. They started sending us out, sending some of the fellas out on...work detail, and I noticed that... the work detail- when they came back, there was- they looked a little bit better and-and the percentage of them that were still alive was better than the-the percentage of the fellas that were dying in camp, I figured...And the best thing I could do would be to get on one of those details. So I volunteered for a detail, and we went all the way up through the..the mountains, all the way to the upper end. I don't know how many miles it was; it was a couple hundred anyway and..it was one of the strangest experiences of my life..

How how far am I supposed to go on this?

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I: You just..

W: *Go right ahead?*

I: Go right on about that mountain expedition and the order that you were given that you carried out.

W: *All right...We got way up in the mountains where there was..headhunters...We went into a little comm-a little ..barrio community ---a little community and.. we started looking inside the houses; they were up on stilts about eight feet off the floor-off the ground-and over in one corner was where they cooked on a little stand that had clay mud about a foot thick on it and ..all the way up that corner was black, just as black as it could be, where the smoke had gone up. And there was a string across, and it had bones on it, we got to noticing, and it was.. it was human jaw bones...It- so we knew we were in headhunter territory. And we started down, and we got to the forks in the road, and there was a .. long pole standing there with a human head on it. A skull. And we knew that was meaning just don't come this way...So the the Japanese turned the other w--turned the other way, but we went up on the mountains. This-the - we met a lot of the natives up there..they-they just wore a band around their head and.. brief-I don't know what you call them -just a cloth around their hips; men and women alike...The women had- the older ones were tattooed like right around their (gestures around elbow) and all the way around their arms and wrapped around their fingers and around their bodies. It looked like they were wearing a sweater...Strange looking. We were walking up through a meadow ^{where} there was weeds up ...waist to shoulder high and.. all of a sudden there was- I guess there was fifteen to twenty of us in my- in the squad that I was in-and ..there was about a hundred of them that just rose up right out of that-they had...they had capes made out of these old long ..grass. And hats that had...and they- and when they were- while they were down in the-in the-in those weeds, you couldn't tell anything about them being there. But all of a sudden, they just rose up all around us. Well..we became the Japanese friends right away. They came- we just all ganged together and..we tried to look as pleasant as we could, I guess, but..they looked us over and told us to go on and we did.*

I: Tell us about the resistance people that you ran into.

W: *Well.. the-there was some Americans and Filipinos that'd gone up-the guerillas we called them, up in that area. And they hit us ..about three times I guess...the first time they killed about three Japanese, and..several of the fellas had got bullets but not bad...We helped bury the Japanese and..then we went on again. We started down a steep hill into...a ravine where there was a river, and when we started down that hill...those guerillas were on the other side, and they were hid in the bushes..weeds, and they opened up on us. Well..nobody got hurt bad, I don't think, but..another group that was a part of our.. Japanese group that I was with had came down the other way and came down in behind them, and they saw they were sandwiched so they put up a white flag. Well ..the officers that was with us they -oh, they were real happy that they were getting these*

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guerillas-capturing those, so ..they carried that white flag down to where ^{we} they couldn't quite see them, down on the river, and we kept waiting for them to come up, and they didn't come. The Japanese went to see about them, and they'd gone down-down the river and..it was terrible. Big steep cliffs and everything down through there, they didn't want to go down there. So we went on....

I: I want you to get^{to} that order that you were given and how you carried it out.

W: Well that's going to be a hard one. One night we were-we were piled up sleeping..in here, there and about, and I was on the outside..and somebody woke me up in the night and I-I -he-he was saying "peace, peace.." or something to that effect and..and he told me he was a Filipino.. that was a part of that group(gestures), he said his commanding officer wanted to know what the Japanese were doing up there. And I told him the only thing I knew they were-they were making maps and taking notes. And ..he-he asked about, something about who-who was carrying those- was some one person doing it, and I told him that I thought that-that one person was doing it and..so he went away, ^{just} went out into the dark. The next night, I waited for him, I figured he'd be back cause I told him I wanted to go and..and ..join the guerillas, and..he didn't come. But the next night he came, and I was waiting for him, he told me he-he said my commanding officer- and he told me his name, and I believe it was Colonel Cushion, or something along that line. Anyway, that doesn't really matter; said his commanding officer gave me a command to destroy those maps at any cost. Well..that, that, I exploded along about there ..him telling me to do it when they had a bunch that could do it, and they were stronger than I was, and they...they had guns, and here I was .. a prisoner and them telling me to destroy ..those maps at any cost. And "at any cost" didn't sound good. So we started marching the next morning and I hadn't slept well that night, we started marching, and I was still giving him down the road, I-I was cussing him to tell you the truth.. and..wondering why on earth it had to be me. ..There was fellas in the outfit there that was stronger than I was ..more able to do it than I was, and after we'd marched a half a day or so, I-I began to reason; well, now, those maps are for some reason, when America comes again that they'll be hiding out up here, maybe building caves and so forth, and it might save ^{somebody's} somebodys' life. If I can save some soldiers' lives and make..make it a little easier for them, then I don't mind making the sacrifice. So I was waiting for a chance, I kept following along and trying to stay up right about the rear end of the column and trying to figure how in the world I could do such a thing. There was a lieutenant, a young lieutenant, and he didn't look very strong..and I figured he'd just had come out of college that was wearing that..a bag with a strap around his neck and down on his side. I tried to stay as close to him as I could let him kind of get used to seeing me so he wouldn't think I had anything wrong in my mind, but..we started, we came to to ~~a~~ another steep mountain that was going down and we could hear ..a stream down there, and the closer we got to it, it was just a rushing torrent ..When we got there, there was a- the commanding officer had a horse, and he gave up a rope to the end of the Japanese group, and they held hands and followed him across, well...the POW's joined hands and joined hands with them, Well, I was the last ^{POW} POW, and this young officer that was carrying the bags, he was, ^{the} ^{that} ^{we} one of us carrying up the rear, and he'd been doing that: bringing up the rear. So we got started out in there, and see we

didn't have anything to hang onto except them..and the water got the best of some people in front of us and-and swept them down, and we were right on the end. It was sort of like cracking a whip; it cracked us off the end of it, and..we went- we started down the stream, We both went under..I got my foot on his neck, but I already got that leather off from around his head- the leather strap, and I just turned it loose, and let the stream take care of it...he he was fighting back, but I-I managed somehow to get him turned over with his face down, and I was hanging onto him, and I'd come up for a breath of air and go back down. I saw a log that was partly out into the stream and no limbs on it, just some crags on it about so long (gestures), and...I figured if I could get him out to that corner and-and get hung up on that-that we might get out, because I knew right then if I didn;t get him out, that I didn't have any....that I'd be killed the first thing. So I got him there, and I used every bit of strength I had to drag him up on the bank just a little ways there, and I turned his head downhill and-and started giving some-some old fashioned...body pushes..and he started...coughing..and...the water coming out, and coming out his nose and his mouth, and he ~~came~~ ^{snorting} and he finally came around. And...when he-he got ^{conscious} ~~conscious~~ ...they started coming, a-getting down there..and I -I was exhausted, and I just fell off over there, and they-those Japanese ja-jabber, jabber, jabber, jabber, jabber, and I-I was just waiting for them,* I knew they ^{were going} ~~would want~~ to get me; I figured they would. But they fi-they finally decided that we'd walk on. But that old guy that was riding the horse, he- he didn't like what had gone on, so he, he started on up the mountain on that side and..we followed. When we got up there just a little ways ..they stopped and he-he talked; he told them some things in Japanese, and I knew then that it was my- that they were going to kill me.

Now, do you want me to tell about that?

I: I just want you to tell how the one you saved, saved you (unintelligible)..

W: All right. Well, ^{that} before, when we were coming up the mountain .. happened, I was reading my Bible under one of those shacks one night. There was a Japanese soldier that came in, and I dropped my Bible, he-he asked me..wanted to know if I was a Christian, ..and I told him yes, and he got it across to me that he was going on and he'd be fighting, he'd be killed (using hand gestures as symbols), and he wanted to -let's pray, and we did. He laid his rifle down, he was on one side of it, and I was on the other. And the best I knew how, I-I prayed. And he got up and went on. Then when-let's go back now to where I was when they were going to kill me .. This lieutenant that I had pulled out of the water, when he got up and he came by me, he-he he whispered to me (in Japanese) that's "thank you," Well....now we're ^{before that} up here, and they're going to kill me, and the line started on up out of the way (gestures) and these-there's two people-there was three people there, One little yard bird was just flirting around there (gestures) and... he hit me with his...his rifle across the back of my shoulders and neck...I thought he'd killed me, but.. they ran him on- put him ^{up} through there and...the fella that had the- that I had prayed with, he-he came over to me, put his rifle up against me, and slapped the stock of it just as hard as he could slap it, so they'd know he'd hit me..up (gestures) when they heard it, and the man that -the lieutenant that I had pulled out of the water, he-he came over- he had a-- he had a..round ..carrier where he had.. I believe it was a 22 pistol

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maybe a 25, but anyhow he got that out, he came over, he pointed it right down at me and I was just about to say "Well, hello, God" and.. he put it over to the side and pulled the trigger three times and.. I turned around and looked, and that big sergeant that was- he -he had two white spots right in the middle of his forehead (gestures over each eye), how it was places where his momma had burned him I had seen lots of the Japanese with those spots down their back and.. they didn't have medicine so she, the.. they burnt them to..... for some strange reason. Anyhow, he had those two white spots, and I remembered them from... from when we had prayer, well, he started on over, and this lieutenant turned around and I-I said (thank you in Japanese); he nodded and went on.

I: I wish that we had time to talk about your recovery, but we don't. Will you spend just one minute describing why you think Dr. ^{Ishii} is in ^{Heaven} Hell?

W: Well.... a man that had killed thousands and ... of people .. would tie them up to stakes and shoot them full of ... buckshot and.. wait for them to die and cut them open to see what had happened .. inside... would skin people alive and.. things of this nature .. he, we have documented-I've got one of the documents over there (gestures) where he killed thousands of Chinese and other prisoners and.. he's .. when.. the war was over.. the Americans took Dr. Ishii, made a trade with him .. that.. if he'd give them his- .. the documents that he had kept on-on the people he'd killed .. and... worked with, that they'd set him free, and they set him free. I have ^{the documents} a document on that, and they put the documents in Washington, D.C., and kept them there.. until about a year ago, and they turned them loose, and I have those documents-copies of them.

I: At this time you were in ^{Mukden} ~~in~~ Manchuria, where they had transferred you all to work in factories..

W: Yes

I: I wish we had time for that but we don't. Tell us how you heard of the Japanese surrender.

W: Well, I was- I was out at a side camp, working up there away from the main body ... of the prisoners of war. There was about... 1400 of us up there and... the first winter there'd been about three or four hundred men die from .. one of Dr. Ishii's experiments but.. I was -it was my turn to go down and get a.. bucket of water at noon time, and I-I went down to get it, and I passed by the guard shack, and they were standing at attention in there.... and saluting. Well I-I listened and it was their..... king or whatever you call him that was ^{talking} to them and ... he was telling them the war was over and for them to surrender to the nearest ... Americans.... or... the Russians or whoever. Well.. I understood enough of it to know what was-what was going on. I ^{run} back up and told the fellas that the war was over that.. I just had heard the emperor tell.. tell them to surrender and that-they told me just-I was every kind of liar, you couldn't imagine how many kinds of a liar that an American can think of, but I got called that many. But in about an hour they gathered us together and took us back to the main camp... is.. There was five Americans that had bailed out of a B-29 over their airfield that morning and came in the camp and

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said they'd come to take over the camp, ^{that the war was over.} Well, these Japanese hadn't heard any thing about that and..so ..they beat them up and put them in solitary. But by the time we got back-got to camp, they had come out, and they started telling us that the war was over that..there was something called atomic bombs that.. the Americans had-had dropped on Japan, and it had just about blown Japan apart, and so they had to surrender.

I: Will you pick up that sword lying next to you and tell us how you guaranteed that this saber that you've gotten from the camp commander in ^{Mukden} didn't disappear on the USS Hope because the sailors liked the sabers you prisoners of war were bringing home.

W: Well ~~not~~ ^{And} everybody got one if they could. ^{to begin with,} Well, right ~~at the beginning~~ we had our eyes on Japanese sabers, and I'm not going to tell you how I got this one, but.. on...on board ship when we got on, they were giving us tags to put on them and piling them up on deck. Well, I..I got my tag and put it on this one, and I decided, ^{hope-}I'm not going to leave this here; it means too much to me to....let somebody steal it." So I..I refused to put it down.. And they-they threatened me and so forth, and I told them I wanted to go to the Captain. I went to the-they took me to the Captain, and I told him I wasn't trying to be ugly in any way but that I-I wanted to leave this saber with him ..I wanted his guarantee on it. So I..I left it with him and ..then, ^{when} when it was-we got to ..Okinawa and started off the ship, I started- I went in and got my saber, but they was lots of the ones that had been in that pile- the best ones- were gone, so.. I had done ^{right} ~~rightly~~ by ..letting him keep it, or asking him to keep it till I got back.

I: Walter, we have five minutes for you to tell about a lifetime after the war. In what ways ^{did} the horrible experiences shape your life after the war?

W: Right after I got back, I was wild as every thing. I drank ~~alot~~. I wrecked my car I don't know how many times. And various, ^{and various} other things that'd happen to a wild man, because you live with a bunch of animals for three-and-a-half years, ^{you're} your going to take ~~or~~ some ~~home~~ of that personality. And..but but I-I ran into a girl -I was in the hospital- I stayed there a year, but I ran into a girl that...that sort of calmed me down and..we fell in love, and .. I wanted to-to be a better man. I knew that wasn't the life for me..and she told me that -that there was no deal between us unless I did straighten up. Well, I did and eventually I started going to church.. I got.. I got my life straightened out with the Lord.. and I think little by little I started getting back more like a human being. But- but it took me a long, long time to, because of..post-traumatic stress and anxiety syndrome. The doctors didn't know anything about that then and ..we just had to--they gave me all the pills I wanted and.. but you get where you-you're not satisfied with ~~with~~ pills anymore; you-you want to--you want to do something better than that, you want to become somebody. My grandma told me one time, "Walter, I-I want you to be somebody." Well, I wanted to be somebody, and I've tried ever since to to be somebody, but I'll tell you one thing before we close, ~~When~~ ^{When} was over there and while I was fighting, I-I gave it everything I had. I didn't-I didn't hold back anything. I fought just as hard as a man could fight. And that's it.

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I: ~~Walter~~, I thank you for all the people that we don't even know who will watch this video and ^{be grateful for} the great people like you who weren't afraid to sacrifice for the United States of America . Thank you.

W: You're welcome. I'm glad I could . If I was-if I was able I-I'd do it again.

{fade to music}
various medals