

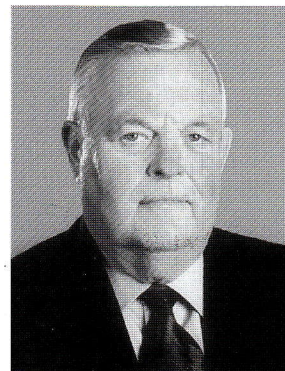


REMINISCENCES:

# An Interview with Robert L. Waltrip

*Interview by William H. Kellar*

*On October 13, 2004, William Kellar, PhD, sat down with Robert Waltrip to discuss his memories of growing up in Houston during World War II. His father owned the Heights Funeral Home, a family run funeral business. Waltrip is the founder and CEO of Service Corporation International, the largest death care company in the world. He also has helped create the Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston.*



Courtesy Service Corporation International

Robert L. Waltrip

RLW: I really do not remember a heck of a lot about the Depression except I can remember the older folks talking about how tough it was and jobs were hard to come by. But I was a small child and that really had no meaning to me. Although we were not wealthy, I never missed a meal so the Depression as such really did not mean anything to me as a small child.

I think the era of the 1940s was a good time. The Depression was really over and there was a lot of activity and a lot of business growth. I think that times were really good before Pearl Harbor. And there was a lot of news. News was not as immediate as it is today, but there was a lot of talk about the war in Europe and all of the things that we all know now as history of how all that developed.

I remember vividly the day of December 7, 1941. We always went to my grandmother's to eat Sunday dinner. We had come back from there and about three blocks from our house, there was a vacant lot and we would go down there and play sandlot football. I could not wait to get home and get down to the lot where we could play football. We were in the midst of a football

game and my mother pulled up in the car, motioned for me to come over. I went over and she was crying. I thought someone had died. She said, "The Japanese have just bombed Pearl Harbor. We are at war." Well, I did not even know where Pearl Harbor was, had no feeling one way or another about the Japanese. I mean, they were just



*Even from a young age, Bob Waltrip was interested in airplanes. This enthusiasm led him to be a founder of the Lone Star Flight Museum.* Courtesy Waltrip Family

people, as far as I was concerned at that time, that made little gadgets and trinkets that said "Made in Japan" on them. But I think everybody's life changed that day. The hustle and bustle that was created almost immediately, the tremendous enlistment in the Armed Forces, it was something that was unheard of and probably has never been duplicated since that time. There were long lines of young men enlisting in various branches of the service. And, as that momentum picked up and all of the gearing up for contingent manufacturers of war materials, this area, with the refineries, the ship building that they created down in the Galveston area, the air and training bases around here, really became a bustling area. A lot of activity was taking place.

All of the patriotic posters and all of the patriotic songs and things started. I still remember many of the songs that were written during the war about the war itself. It was a time when the camaraderie of all of the people came together in a crescendo that I do not believe will ever be duplicated again anywhere else in the world. Everyone was pulling in the same direction on the same road. There was not all of this political bickering and carrying on back and forth.

I also remember, soon after the war started and all the men started going off to training at the various bases, the first groups started being sent overseas and the draft started. My wife's father was the first number called in the draft.

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER:**

William H. Kellar is the executive director of the University of Houston's Scholars' Community program. He is also affiliated with the Center for Public History at UH and has written several books on Houston institutions.



On the home front, Houstonians contributed to the war effort by cooperating with the rationing of various products. One item that was ration-free, however, was V-8 vegetable juice.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

I did not even know her then. They lived in Oklahoma, I think, at the time. But his was the first number that they drew.

WHK: Talk about luck!

RLW: Yes. He did not have to go because of a health condition but he was the first name that came up.

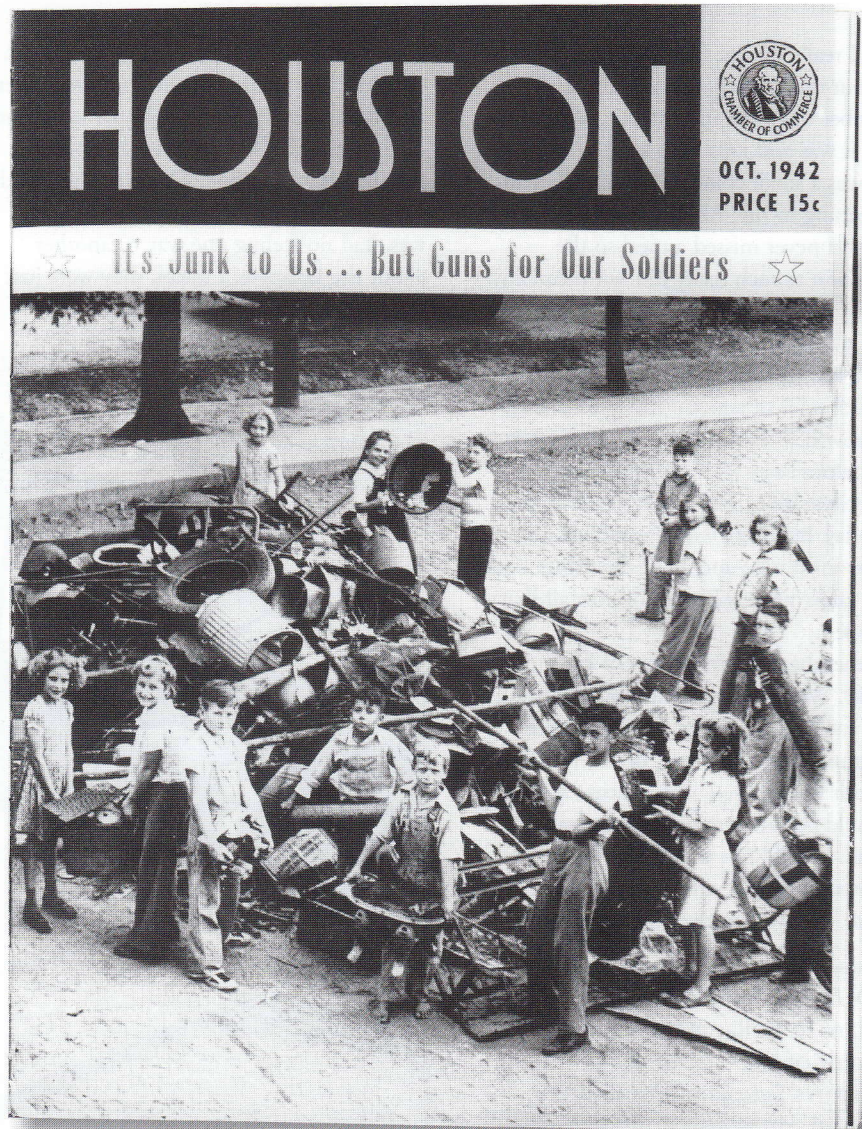
People do not think about that today but almost everything was rationed. You had ration books that would entitle you to so many of this item and so much of that item over whatever period of time that they issued the various books for. And gasoline was probably the most noticed because you did not really get enough gasoline allotment to do very much. People had to be very, very conservative in how their driving was done and only for the most important things. As a result, a lot of people walked and rode bicycles. When I was a kid, I rode a bicycle everywhere that I went. I mean, long distances, too; or I walked. There would be only certain days that the food markets would have meat. They would advertise that they had meat on Friday or Tuesday or whatever day it was, and there would be long lines of people to just buy meat. And they had to use their ration tickets to purchase whatever meat that they were allocating. So, a lot of other things were rationed, too, but meat was something that you really noticed, and gasoline was something that you really noticed. Tires

were almost nonexistent.

They did not have all the synthetic rubber that they use today. All of the rubber came from the islands over there. So, all tires were recapped, very poor quality recapped. They quit making automobiles. 1941 was the last model that came out until 1946. So, for a person in the used car business, it was almost a license to steal because there were not any more cars and the car values just shot straight up. If you had a 1941 vehicle, that was brand new all the way through the war because there was not anything else.

I remember my dad, being that he was in charge of the civil defense, ran an emergency ambulance service at the funeral home back then. They had a C-card, gasoline ration card. There was an A, B, and a C. An A was

what most everyone had. You had a little sticker at the corner of the window like an inspection sticker, and it had an A, B, or C, and they were all different colors. I think the A was black and white, the B was blue and white, and the C was kind of a rose color and white. If you had a C-card, gasoline was not totally unlimited, but you could get enough to do just about whatever you wanted to do. Specialty workers, government workers, doctors, emergency personnel, people that worked in defense plants and the shipyards, they had C-cards so they would not be restricted in driving back and forth to work. The B-card was less fuel, but it was more than the A and that was another category. Most people had an A category that entitled you to so many gallons a week, and



"It's Junk to Us... But Guns for Our Soldiers." Even children joined in on the act of gathering scrap metal to help the armed forces.

Courtesy Greater Houston Partnership and Houston Metropolitan Research Center

it was not very much. I cannot remember the exact amount.

I remember I got to go with my dad to . . . he was head of the Civil Defense and chief of the Auxiliary Police. So, he had the authority to go just about anywhere he wanted to go. I got to go a lot of places with him and see a lot of things that were off limits or restricted areas to just about anyone else. I got to go on a lot of the air bases and that was very exciting to me. Literally, I can remember going out to Ellington Field and just seeing airplanes as far as you could see and several different rows, all with the engines running. There were air bases all around Houston, a little bitty training base at Bryan College Station, at San Antonio, and other places. It was not unusual to hear the roar of airplane engines in the sky all the time because they were training so many pilots. And then these big formations of bombers and fighters would come over, and it was kind of thrilling to see all of that.

*WHK: How old were you about that time?*

RLW: Well, I was ten years old in 1941. I remember getting to go on a submarine that was in the ship channel here for repairs or maintenance or whatever and it was here for several weeks. We went there and had dinner one evening in the captain's quarters in the submarine. That was really exciting to me, too. I got to go on an aircraft carrier and things like that . . .

*WHK: For a young man, that was really a fascinating thing.*

RLW: Right. I wanted to be a fighter pilot so bad, you know, like most kids would want to do and I felt that when the war was over, I was deprived of my destiny. But also, I can remember very well the night that the war was over. This friend that I went to high school with, his daddy had a Model A Ford pickup truck. Of course, the Model A was fifteen years old, I guess, at that time, but his father had really fixed it up and it was

transportation. It had a little four-cylinder engine in it and it was very economical, so he got to drive it some. Well, five or six of us loaded into that car and drove downtown and it was bedlam. I mean, all the streets were closed and people were partying and there was festivity and music. It was quite a celebration. I know there has never been another time in the history of our country that was like World War II during the war. All of the news was very bleak at the beginning. We were losing everything. The war in Europe was going very badly and the Japanese were moving all the way across the Pacific with no one to stop them. So, it



*Houstonians were encouraged to raise their own "Victory Gardens" to show their patriotism and alleviate the food shortages. At-home vegetable dehydrators were displayed in the windows of department stores like Foley's and information booklets were available throughout the city.*

*Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library*

went from a bleak period to things kind of leveling off and then back on the offensive.

Another thing—there was not any television. And so, everybody listened to the radio every evening, and they had some of these old programs that you hear a lot about—*The Bob Hope Show*, *Fibber McGee & Molly*, and *Your Hit Parade*. These were regular programs that everyone listened to and you looked forward to that. We had one of those Philco radios that sat about this high. It was a piece of furniture but the radio in it was not very big. My dad's chair was there next to it. Everyone would gather around where they could sit and hear the radio. I would lay down beside his chair and listen to the radio. It was quite an interesting time.

When the war was over and all of the . . . well, let me say one other thing: I can remember when they started sending the bodies of the boys that had been killed in action and how that first started. Being in the funeral business, that was quite an event at that time. It just started off kind of slow and then it accelerated, reached its peak and then leveled back off again. But that went on way after the war was over. And with all of the military funerals that were held, that was quite impressive to everyone.

During the war, everywhere, they had a Victory Garden. I remember planting my first Victory Garden. I got it all ready and I took the seeds . . . I did not know any better but I took the seeds and I put them in the hole and then I packed it down so tight on top, patted it down with my hand, that I made it so hard, the seeds could not come up! So, I did not have anything to grow the first time. And the amount of food that you raised was very small. But I think it was just the significance of people trying to pull together to make things happen. The Victory Garden was just a significant thing that people were willing to pull together.

Down at Sugar Land . . . the sugar companies had these huge pieces of land that they had used for sugar cane production. And they converted a lot of those to producing vegetables, and particularly, black eyed peas, purple hull peas, squash, and okra. They set up a canning unit and you could go down and you had to go out and pick your own vegetables. And then, you would bring them back in and process them yourself. And then, you could use the canning facility there that they had to go and blanch the vegetables in the hot boiling water and then put it in the cans and run it through the machine. So, families would take all the kids down there and we got to shell those peas. I remember shelling peas until my fingers would just get numb and bleed and everything else. And that was something I really did not like to do. I did

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not mind helping process the tomatoes and squash and those things but shelling those peas, I just really hated to do that.

WHK: *I could see that!*

RLW: I did not look forward to that when I had to do that.

There were a lot of troops . . . everybody had some kind of uniform on. It was amazing that almost everybody you ran into was in some branch of the service. A lot of service people were here because of all of the training, and this was a major area for assembly and shipping out because of the two train stations. One was right down there on Washington Avenue right back over here and the other was where the baseball field is today. That was the Union Station. And this one on Washington Avenue was the Southern Pacific Station.

WHK: *Oh, that is where it was.*

RLW: And so, with the two rail heads and the ship channel and all of the staging areas that we had set up around here for the various branches of the service, this area was really filled with service people. It was amazing how the civilian population would help and try to take some of these service people into their homes, provide meals for them, and provide help and assistance. They could have been from Minnesota but they were here and they were away from home. So, there was a lot of that going on—people bringing service men into their homes and trying to be helpful and compassionate. Of course, that is something you do not see anymore. But that was very, very common; real hospitality to people in uniform.

The Doolittle Raid to bomb Tokyo was a very significant event because if you think about it, the war started in December and the Doolittle Raid was in April 1942. If you look back on what they had to do to accomplish that, that was a tremendous accomplishment, to be able to respond that quickly to something and put together the training and several weeks of staging to get the aircraft carriers in position. That was quite a feat. But it really gave the country a boost morale wise. And, although it was not very significant, everybody was talking about it.

Another thing—there was no television,

of course, but you could hear the news every day. Walter Winchell was a very famous correspondent/news person. Edward R. Murrow, those were two that everyone listened to. And when you would go to the movies, they would always have a news trailer. It was as up to date as they could keep it and they would have a new one every week. It was called Movietone News and it had all the current events that happened during that week. They would put this thing together and it was distributed around to all the theaters. So, you would be getting it one week late but that was about as current as you could get on something on film at that time.

I can remember President Roosevelt always had his fireside chat and everyone would flock to the radio so they could hear him speak. That was very inspiring and very morale boosting for the population. And when he talked about the Doolittle Raid and talked about the airplanes coming from

RLW: At the very beginning, because Roosevelt had been so popular, Truman was not accepted right away but as things went on, Truman gained the confidence of the American people and then he was accepted and things went right along. But that took quite a while for that evolution to take place. The war was just about over anyway. The B29s had bombed Japan and burned out everything in the country, in all the major areas, with those incendiaries. But we were going to have to invade Japan. I do not know how they got the information out, but on the Movietone News, they would show a lot of the things that were going on in Japan, how they were teaching children in Japan to fight with sharpened broomsticks. So really, the atomic bomb, although it was a crescendo, the war was over anyway. But it saved a lot of lives even though a lot of people were killed by the atomic bomb.

But the enthusiasm after the war had



*Average Americans served as air raid wardens for their cities. Houston had a dedicated contingency as seen here posing in front of their Post 164 Air Raid Warden headquarters.*

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

Shangri-La, everyone was trying to find out where Shangri-La was. It was some time before people understood that that was just a mythical name, that there was not a Shangri-La. But, for a long time, they thought that was an island somewhere that no one had known about.

The death of Franklin Roosevelt was a bleak period for the country. I mean, people just went into total mourning and suffering because he had been . . . he was the only president I had ever known.

risen because of all the people coming back and all the young people returning and getting back into the swing of things. It was a very exciting time. From 1946 into all of the 1950s it was kind of like the 1990s were—just really boom times. Although, unlike the 1990s, people still felt very good about each other and you did not have all the chaos and the different factions and cliques that later developed that we are experiencing today. That was unheard of back then. So, I know there will never be another time like that.

I noticed when I went to Australia that it reminded me a lot of how the United States was back in the 1940s and 1950s. The friendliness of the people, no one locked their houses or their cars, and there was not all the crime. People felt good about one another. They trusted each other. And those things were very significant during World War II.

*WHK: It was a different time and a different country.*

RLW: Yes, it really was. I know it will never happen, but I wish there was some way you could return to that kind of an atmosphere without having a war to cause it.

*WHK: When did you start getting interested in airplanes yourself?*

RLW: Well, during that period, my dad got me to be a Civil Defense spotter. Radar was unheard of and so the only way you could find out what kind of airplanes were flying around, you would have to have people to look and identify them. They had spotters that would be stationed at certain areas that you would go in and you would just sit there and you would look. If you saw any airplanes that were German or Japanese or anything, you were supposed to report it. Of course, there were not any but as a result of that, you had to learn the silhouette and other characteristics of all of the other countries' airplanes so you could immediately look and identify, well, that is a Fockewolfe 190 or a Japanese A6M Zero.

As I went through that, it really boosted my interest in aviation and all of the war stories about the Aces and all of the propaganda being put forth, all the great heroes of the war. It would kindle your interest in whatever you felt closest to, particularly aviation—but the Navy or the Army as well. And usually, if you had family in the service, that was a branch that the kids kind of catered to because their father, brother, uncle, or somebody was in that particular branch.

*WHK: Did Houston have any blackouts or air raid drills?*

RLW: I can remember the first blackout we had here. As I said, my dad was head of the Civil Defense. The Gulf Building was the tallest building in Houston—there were only two tall buildings in Houston then, the Gulf Building and the Esperson Building.

The Gulf Building was taller than the Esperson Building. On the top floor of the Gulf Building was Civil Defense headquarters for the blackout. From there you could see everything and all the communications were set up. And I can remember there was a network of air raid wardens and they each had a territory, and then they had block wardens. So, it was pretty well thought out as to what happened if you had an air raid.

So, this blackout was prepared for months and everyone was in place, sirens went off. I can remember the lights started going off all over the city. Some of them, it would take a while for this group to go off. It did not all just happen at once. That was a very exciting time to look out from up top of the Gulf Building there and totally black, just as far as you could see.

And then there was the Houston Coliseum that was right there downtown and was the only large gathering place in Houston at that time. They would have these huge demonstrations of how to fight various types of incendiary fires of the various kinds of incendiary bombs that could be dropped. Water would not affect some of them and some of them were very toxic and produced poisonous gas if you put water on them. They had these demonstrations of those kinds of fires, and trained people on what to do.

*WHK: Did they do the blackout very often or was that just kind of a one-time drill?*

RLW: I can remember it twice. In Galveston, it was a little more stringent there. They did not have total blackouts, but you had to have reflectors on the headlights; you could not drive along the sea wall past a certain time at night; and they tried to keep the city lights dimmed. And there were several sightings of submarines off of Galveston. They had the big gun emplacements down there with those huge guns and these big concrete bunkers. Of course, no one saw that during that period but after the war, they were still there and so you got a chance to see what was there. Scholes Field in Galveston was a very busy place.

And they had the Blimp base down at Hitchcock.

*WHK: Oh, I did not know that.*

RLW: They kept two of those huge blimps and they had buildings for them to go in. They kept two of them down there. One of

them was out all the time on patrol of the coast. B-24s and PV4Y2s were at Scholes Field for long-range surveillance and patrol. So, again, with the refineries and the ship building and the air bases here, this was kind of a hub for protection. San Antonio had Randolph Field and there was Bergstrom in Austin and all those air force bases. Texas was the key state for pilot training. I cannot remember how many training bases they had in Texas but they were all over.

*WHK: Did the war affect your routine in terms of going to school in those days?*

RLW: No, we would have air raid drills at the school just like you have fire drills. But other than that, you really did not . . . the first thing you started to notice was that some of the people that you knew were killed. I remember the first person that I knew who was killed was . . . my mother was parliamentarian of the Texas House in 1939 and one of the pages that worked for her on the house floor was a young man named Johnny Heath. He was one of the, right in that age—19, 20 years old, right off to flight school. He was killed early in the war in a B-25. I can remember when that happened. That kind of started bringing things a little closer. And then, over the period of those few years, no one really was without some type of grief or without some type of suffering because one of their friends or family members had been killed. A lot of people were killed.

*WHK: Did you ever have a sense that the public was turning against the war effort or was it always really supportive?*

RLW: Oh, no. That was unheard of. There was not anything you could do. I mean, there was not anything to turn against. You could not quit. It was not like some of the wars now to where you could go in and then you decide you do not want to be there anymore and you could leave. It was winner take all. With England almost going under and there was quite a bit of fear in those early years that we're very vulnerable and that was a big chance that the war could go the other way.

*WHK: Would you like to talk for a couple of minutes, Bob, about the Lone Star Flight Museum?*

RLW: After the war, I started flying and got

my pilot's license. Because of World War II and my interest in airplanes, the old war planes were of tremendous interest to me. Those started being sold surplus—some of them—most of them were scrapped. There were a few that were sold as surplus or went to other nations, particularly in South America. Some of them were later brought back and survived. Those came on the market spotty at the beginning. The fellow that worked for me, our first pilot, was in World War II in the Air Force and flew everything that was made just about, a very accomplished aviator. He and I actually became the company pilots in the early days. So, I started buying an airplane every now and then just for the fun of being able to fly some of the World War II aircraft. And I would buy one and Glen and I would fly it for a while. And then, another would become available and I would sell that one and get another one just for the fun of it. Before long, I had one and I said, well I kind of like that and I am going to keep that and if I get another, now I'll have two. I had two or three of those stationed around and before you know it, I had four or five. And I said, well, there is not going to be any more of these ever and for future generations to be able to see, touch, and feel these kinds of airplanes, there should be a preservation movement to try to keep as many of them around as possible.

I had some of these airplanes stored in College Station in a hangar I rented up there. I had some of them stored out at Hobby. I had some of them stored down at Galveston. And then the thought came of building a museum for the public to see these airplanes, a flying museum, where they could also see them fly and hear them and all the things that went with it. We looked at proposals from a number of areas to do that. Galveston was very active in trying to encourage us to do that there and I am glad that we did. It turned out to be a perfect place—a big tourist attraction and a lot of people in and out all the time from all over the country. So, I just started putting these airplanes together and restoring World War II aircraft and you know

how that goes. Before we knew it, we had eight or ten. Now we have got twenty-some odd that fly and another ten or fifteen that are just static displays. I have really gotten a lot of satisfaction out of building that museum. Have you ever been there?

*WHK: Yes, sir.*

*RLW: It is a one of a kind place in that it still makes the public available to see and watch these airplanes fly. And as long as we*

*tial in moving this thing forward, getting President Bush when he was governor to present to the legislature a proclamation that declared the Lone Star Flight Museum as the official home for the Texas Aviation Hall of Fame. And so, from that time forward, we built another building and then started inducting people who had had any Texas connection. They either were born here or did their aviation activities in Texas. They had to have a Texas connection for them to*



*Bob Waltrip, seen here with his family, was central to the creation of the Lone Star Flight Museum in Galveston. The museum is dedicated to informing and educating the public about aviation heritage and history. More information about the museum is available on their website at <http://www.lsfm.org>.*

*Courtesy Waltrip Family*

can keep that activity going . . . it is expensive to do that because you have to have maintenance and maintenance crews on these aircraft all the time and crews to fly them that are competent and trained. It is not like flying the big airplanes of today. So, it has been a real fun experience, putting that together and creating a significant board of directors who really were influen-

be inducted into the Hall of Fame. A committee was established and the names were screened and we would end up with a certain number of people each year. And that is still going on.

*WHK: Well, thank you Bob. This has been really interesting. ☆*