



Irwin F. Williger, MD

World War II

**U.S. Army Air Forces
376 Heavy Bomb Group
North Africa**

**40th Evacuation Hospital
Europe
Major**

Irwin Fox Williger

**Veterans
History
Project
Transcript**

**Interview conducted
September 18, 2012**

**Niles Public Library
Niles Public Library District
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Veterans History Project Transcript

Veteran: Irwin Fox Williger Rank: Major
Branch of Service: U.S. Army Air Forces Theater: World War II – North Africa
Europe

Units: 376th Heavy Bomb Group and 40th Evacuation Hospital, Germany

Interview Date: September 18, 2012, 1:30-3:30 p.m. Place: Large Meeting Room A

Equipment: Philips Digital Pocket Memo Recorder and Sony Handycam HDD DCR-SR82 Interviewer: Neil O'Shea

This Veterans History Project interview is being conducted on Tuesday, September 18, in the year 2012 here at the Niles Public library in large meeting room A. My name is Neil O'Shea, and I am privileged to be speaking with Dr. Irwin Williger. Dr. Williger was born on April 9, 1913. Dr. Williger was born in Chicago and still lives in Chicago. He learned of the Veterans History Project through another veteran of World War II whom we interviewed - Dr. Jerry Levin. Dr. Williger has kindly consented to be interviewed for this project and here is his story. (Interviewer's words appear in Italics.)

Margery Waldner, a close friend of Dr. Williger, was present during the interview and her contributions also appear.

So Dr. Williger we have a series of questions that the Library of Congress has suggested we can use as a starting point. We don't have to follow them but we can start with them and see how it goes.

Dr. Williger: whatever you say. (Veteran's words)

Dr Williger, did you enter the service in 1940?

1939, actually.

How did that come about?

Well, I was in training. During our medical school days, somebody came and gave us a lecture to the so-called doctors about getting us to enlist and we could go in as 1st Lieutenants if there was a war. Whoever ever thought about a war at the time? I went to school from 1934 to 1938. When I finished my training, I figured I'd put in my year and then get out and go into practice. Well I never got out because the war started, and they said nobody gets out so I wound up with 5 and 1/2 years instead of a year.

Dr. Williger, if I could ask, what high school did you attend in Chicago?

Roosevelt High School.

So you were a Rough Rider?

A Rough Rider, yes.

And then you were attending medical school at

Illinois here in Chicago

So your one year commitment turned out to be a little bit longer.

Yes, unfortunately. It did.

So Dr. Williger you were living on the north side of Chicago and you attended medical school here in

I had my training in County Hospital, Knoxville, Tennessee. The reason I went there is my folks moved there. My dad was a clothing designer. And Palm Beach Company opened a factory in Knoxville and they transferred him. I was originally going to Portland, Oregon with a friend of mine. We were accepted and everything and my father said, "Why don't you come here?" We got a nice county hospital." I said that doesn't mean I can just say I can go. He said, "Well, I know the mayor. I'll get you in." And of course he did. He got me in. They lived there and that's where I stayed while they lived there.

From there, my senior resident and I were very close. He was hired by Peabody Coal Company to run their hospital in Harlan, Kentucky. He asked me to go with him as his assistant so that's where I went and we ran that hospital. From there, that's when I went in the Army.

The gentleman who came and told you could go in as a 1st Lieutenant he was from the Army?

Yes. He was soliciting. What did we know about it? Everybody said ok, "we'll sign up." What did we know?

So when you come in the Army as a Doctor do you still have to go thorough basic training or anything like that?

No. I was stationed at the station hospital at Wright-Patterson Field right away.

That was a famous field.

That was the research headquarters for the Army Air Force.

And was the type of medical work you did there different from the work you had been doing?

Well, I was doing general surgery. I was Chief of Surgery for the hospital.

Then they sent me to several places on temporary duty. They sent me to flight surgeon training in San Antonio. When I got through with that I went back to my original place at Patterson Field. Then later on they sent me to Walter Reed for a course in tropical medicine. And that's when I was getting suspicious. "Why are they sending me to all these different places?" Every time I got through I went back to Patterson Field. Then the last place they sent me was in Panama for a course in malariology, and then I was thinking, "Of all the doctors in the service, why are they picking on me?" I just couldn't figure that out.

Was that before the war broke out?

This was after war broke out.

And then when I came back from Panama. I went back to Patterson Field again. Shortly after that, a couple of fellows from the FBI visited me in my office at the hospital. They wanted to know what my allegiance was to the United States. Of course, they had a dossier on me. They knew my folks were born in Hungary. When they asked what my allegiance was I said, "I think that is a very unusual question because I was born here. I am a natural citizen. I volunteered for the service." And of course they accepted that. They got through questioning me, and they were very nice, they weren't trying to catch me on anything.

Then shortly after is when I got these secret orders and I just couldn't understand why I got the orders. Now the orders read – and it was a crazy kind of an order. It was from the War Department. I was a captain at that time. It read, "Captain Irwin Williger, serial number, and so-and-so will proceed to New York or Miami then hence via the North Atlantic Route to Gura, Eritrea!" I had no idea where Gura, Eritrea was.

So when I got home, my wife and I got a map out and we looked and looked. It took us two days to find out where Gura, Eritrea was. Now, the orders read that I wasn't to delay in any one place for more than 30 days and that I was to be on per diem for my meals and so forth, but they didn't tell me how to get there and that's all here in this summary of my assignment to Gura, Eritrea – Fox's Secret Orders (The statement was written by Margery Waldner, who was present during the interview. The 3-page statement is appended to this transcript). It took me about eight weeks to get to where I was going and I was on a banana boat to start with.

Do you recall where you sailed from on the banana boat?

We sailed from North Carolina. We stopped at Trinidad to refuel. They had an Air Force base there and I went over there to see if I could get a ride rather than go on a ship.

Because when we got out of the 12 mile limit, the Captain called us all together and said that we are carrying nothing but ammunition. It was a banana boat that was conscripted by the War Department. In those days they were called Liberty Ships. All they had was the crew, the Merchant Marine to man the guns and me - I was the only one. When we stopped at Trinidad, I

couldn't get another ride because they weren't going that way. So I got back on the ship, and then next stop was going to be Cape Town, South Africa.

While I was on the ship, I got acquainted with the first mate and the navigator, those fellows that knew that I was alone and I was talking to the navigator one day and he tells me that they are going through the Straits of Madagascar and the Japs are sinking all the ships that are going through there. Well, I said, "My orders say not to delay more than thirty days in any place." So I told the captain, "I'm getting off at Cape Town and I hope that someday you'll write me a letter and let me know ..." They were going to Karachi, India.

I did get off at Cape Town. I finally got the South African Air Force, which is in this statement, to fly me to Gura, Eritrea. That's how I got there.

Dr. Williger is referring to a statement that he's worked on with his friend Margery Waldner and further details are provided in that memoir which is appended to this transcript.

That's amazing that you got secret orders and you had to be your own travel agent!

Oh yeah. It was a harrowing trip but I made it. Believe me (Margery comments "very involved" about Dr. Williger's passage to Gura.)

Did you ever get sea sick?

Oh, no, it never bothered me

You must be a good traveler. So the South Africans flew you up to Eritrea, and then when did you understand the point of the secret orders?

I was very friendly with one of the pilots at Patterson Field. I was on flying pay as a flight surgeon and you had to put in so many hours per month in order to collect the flying pay which was half of your base pay. That was a lot of money to me in those days. And of course I was very friendly with most of the guys. This guy in particular I had operated on his kids and his wife at the station hospital. He came to me one day and said that he was leaving on such and such a day

I said, "Where are you going?"

He said, "I'll get in touch with you when I get there." Well, he never got in touch with me. After that for a couple of months I wondered about him; I thought about him.

Well, he had asked for me to become his personal flight surgeon and work with him at this Douglas Aircraft Factory in Gura, Eritrea that was servicing the British Spitfires that were flying the desert war against Rommel. So he wanted me to be his associate and be a liaison between Douglas and the Air Force.

When they have the job title flight surgeon that means that you perform surgery on pilots and crew? It does not mean that you perform surgery in the air?

Oh, no. That's what they call them if you graduate from the school of aviation medicine.

So he's the one who requested me.

Do you recall his name?

Graff

He had quite an effect on your life.

Oh, yes! He could have told me that right away and then I wouldn't have worried about it.

So were you stationed in Eritrea for a period of months?

Not very long. As I told you, Douglas had this plant and they were getting their supplies that came through the Straits of Madagascar. And they weren't getting their supplies because the ships were being sunk. They had a hospital there and 12 civilian doctors working in the hospital, and I was supposed to supervise them, that was supposed to be my job, but there was nothing doing. There was nothing going on.

Were the other doctors Americans?

The other doctors were Americans; they were civilians, making a big buck.

After a while, I wasn't doing a lot so I talked to this friend of mine that called me. I said you know I appreciate your thoughtfulness and asking for me and going through all this trouble but you know as long as I gotta be away from my family, I want to be where the action is. I don't want to be just sitting around and collecting my pay.

So he transferred me to Cairo, Egypt. At that time that bomb group had landed in Palestine for refueling, that was the Halverson Task Force. By that time I was a Major so I was a senior officer. The general in Cairo, Egypt, transferred me to that group and since I was the senior officer, I was in charge; there were four other doctors so I was in charge of the medical part. As I said that was a select group that was scheduled for this task force, and they were all handpicked by this Colonel Halverson. Originally, that was the Halverson Task Force. It was Lieutenant Colonel Halverson. He was appointed by Roosevelt to get a group together to do what Doolittle did later on. Now I wasn't with the original group. I was assigned into them as a senior officer. He picked this group. They were all college graduates, even the enlisted men. They had 3 civilian professors along with them because one of them knew Chinese, one knew where all the airports were and one knew where all the gas dumps were. And what they were going to do was fly to China and then bomb Japan and then come back to a different airport each time so they wouldn't know where they were coming from.

While we were there getting this set up, Rommel had indicated he was going to counterattack and take over Cairo. So somehow or other, Churchill found out that we were there. He called

Roosevelt and said, "Can we borrow that group for a mission to bomb the Ploesti oil fields in order to stop Rommel from getting Cairo?"

We got orders to stay where we were and fly this mission to the Ploesti oil fields (June, 1942). They did a pretty good job because we got a citation from the President. Four of our planes ran out of gas so they were interned in Turkey which was neutral so those four planes stayed there. We got stuck there and Montgomery who was the general of the British Eighth Army got us to stay where we were and be the air support for him, he was going to counterattack. He stopped Rommel at El Alamein so we moved from Palestine to Egypt, to the Heliopolis Airport and then we followed the British Eighth Army and all we did was bomb tankers coming across the Mediterranean – gasoline tankers and all the ships in Tobruk and Benghazi. We got as far as Tripoli and then Eisenhower came in from the other side and then they got him bottled up and they surrendered. So when Rommel surrendered, then we got our four planes back and one of the pilots was a little goofy from the experiences he had after being interned and so forth so my commanding officer said, "The war is over here so why don't you go back to the United States and take him with you for rest and recreation so I went back to the States after the war in Africa."

Were those planes B-17s?

17's and 24's, mostly 24's

And I suppose some of the times, the pilots didn't come back.

Yes, unfortunately, that was the sad part of my job. You'd see these guys off and then having to have supper and they are not there.

The cream of youth

Oh yes, as I say, they were all hand-picked, all college graduates.

When I came back, I was stationed in Miami Beach. I was in charge of six hospitals on the beach for rest and recreation of flying personnel.

So when you were in charge of six hospitals, you are doing a lot of administration and management?

No, I had some other people, I was still doing surgery. Matter of fact, one of the hospitals had a fellow that I knew from County Hospital and we were working together doing the surgery.

Then eventually I got transferred to an Evac Hospital that was going to Europe. Then I went to Oklahoma, I forget the name of the city where I joined this Evac Hospital. It was like a Mash Unit, and we followed Patton into Germany.

So after you come back to the States and Miami, then you're back across to Europe and then the journey to Europe you make by plane or by ship?

No, we made it by ship. But this time I went with a group, a big ship. Then when the war ended there, I eventually got back home.

So your one year turned into four and 1/2 ..

Five and a half actually because I had so much time off coming; I never took any time off because I was all alone and had no place to go.

When you heard that presentation from the Army officer about being able to join as a 1st Lieutenant in the Army, did your parents share in that decision? Did they mind?

No, I just told them. We signed up. No, that was when we were sophomores, probably 1936. He just got us all in the auditorium and made this big speech about what a great life it's going to be.

I had another veteran who was first year in Engineering and heard a spiel like that, and the next thing he wound up at the Battle of Bulge. They changed the program as the war got worse.

Here's another article, I volunteer at Mayo Clinic. They wrote that up.

Now let me show you this book.

Okay

Margery: Here is an article that was picked up in a health magazine.

That was picked from a newspaper's article. Once you get in the newspapers ...

Oh, brilliant, high marks, (as Dr. Williger hands over a photo of himself in uniform) Dr. Williger has just presented me with a handsome photograph of a handsome soldier.

You can have that.

Do you know when the picture was taken?

That must have been when I came home.

What does the four-leaf clover on the shoulder indicate?

Margery: That is insignia for Major.

As an officer was it easier for you to stay in touch with your family while you were overseas?

No problem, we had the AP number on that special paper that you wrote on that was very light.

You didn't have to worry about V-Mail?

That's what it was. It was V-Mail. I had no trouble getting my mail. Only once was it censored. Other than that, I got all the letters from my family, my wife. I had no trouble.

During that period of service, you mentioned that you got back that one time for rest and recreation. Was there any other time?

When I was in Miami, my wife and my youngest son came down. I rented a home. We were there for about 8 months, I imagine, before I went to Europe.

So then in Europe, you're working in hospitals in France and then in Germany?

No, tent-stuff, an Evac Hospital, like the MASH (Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) unit

Margery: You moved around. You didn't stay in one place.

Was there any time you felt that your unit was in imminent danger, that the hospital had to be moved?

No, nothing like that. I didn't think we were ever in real danger with Patton in front of us.

What did you think of Patton as a general?

Oh great, if he and MacArthur were alive today, we would never have lasted that long in Iraq and Afghanistan. That war would have been over in a week or 10 days. Those guys didn't have a good reputation but they were good generals.

You didn't think that General Patton was too hard on his men?

Well, I didn't have anything to do with him except that we were following where he went.

He moved quickly, I think.

He believed if you're fighting a war, destroy everything and he did. He destroyed places that when we got there, there wasn't a person, a dog, or an animal, or a cat any place around, nobody, absolutely. I had movies of that. I don't know what happened to the movies.

Well, anyway here's the book that my nephew made for me. It has the story that she (Margery) wrote. There are a lot of war pictures in here, from Africa. If you want to look at it and see if there is anything of interest.

Are the originals of these pictures?

These are the originals.

I wonder if I can, without opening this up too much, it would be very useful, illustrative of the interview, if I could scan some of these and then we build them in at the back (of the interview booklet).

Do what you want to do.

Oh, this looks like somebody we know here.

Margery: That's a beauty.

Is that the man?

That's my office in the desert.

Major Williger is sitting there with a pen in hand in the desert, and this in Palestine or North Africa?

North Africa

Wow. So here's ... the Evacuation Hospital Unit that did go into Germany then at the end.

Well, the war ended when we were in Germany, shortly after we got there.

That's my family

Wow.

When the war ended, you were still a doctor, so you didn't you have to worry or did ..., usually the veterans when they came back they had to find their old job or maybe they couldn't get their old job back or take on a different line of work or worry about they could live.

I had never been in practice so when I got back I had to start from scratch because I was broke. I had three kids and I had to get a place to live.

So you came back to Chicago.

I came back to Chicago.

Was your wife from Chicago?

Originally she was from Boston, and then she moved to California, most of her life was in Chicago.

So you set up a practice here in Chicago.

Yes.

Did you stay in contact with any of the people you met during the war, your war buddies?

Yes, there were two people I kept in constant contact with until they died. The last one died a couple of years ago, Resch.

When I got back, discharged, they offered me a full colonelship, but I said, "No, I've been away too long." But these two fellows did stay and they got be Colonels and they went to camp every year. And I kept in touch with them until both of them passed away.

I don't have any friends left.

When I was about eight or nine years old, I started a Neighborhood Boys Club by myself. I started with about 10 boys from my class, I was in grammar school. Then we went to junior high. And then somebody heard about the club and they wanted to get in so we got some more members, and then we all went to Roosevelt and we picked up more members there. We wound up with 50 members, and most of us went overseas and all of them came back ok. We stayed together for about 50 years.

Wow!

And I'm the last one left.

The founder and the president is still ...

I founded the group and I am the last one.

It's interesting that when you were doing your volunteer work in Scottsdale, it was for a Boys Club, too.

Yes.

It is kind of a continuing theme in your life.

As a matter of fact, I donated my scooter to the Boys Club. I was going to get a new one.

That was my Honda 50cc. I loved that thing.

Margery: He started with the scooter in Florida when he was running around those hospitals.

You know how I learned how to ride a motor cycle?

Am I taking too much time?

No, not enough.

You know, the Italians wanted no part of that war in the desert. They would surrender by the thousands. They had what they called a sand-bike. You could ride this motorcycle in the sand and they were very stable in the sand. So we picked up a bunch of them and when the planes would go out on a mission, we would ride these things round the desert.

And then they had these gliders. So we'd get about 12 of the enlisted men and tie a rope on it and they'd pull it, and we'd go up about twenty feet so that's the way we spent our time when the ships were gone.

That's where I learned to ride a motorcycle. And then when I had to make rounds in Miami at the six hospitals, I bought a bicycle that had a motor on it; it was a motorbike – a bicycle with a motor. It wasn't a scooter. And that's the way I made my rounds because my car was being used by my wife.

Was it hot in North Africa?

Oh, was it hot? You know the thing I don't understand, it would get 120,130 degrees during the day, at night we would sleep in our flying clothes, you know those fleece-lined pants and jacket and helmets. We could never get warm because it would drop down to maybe 85 degrees and that variation was just too much of a change. We had to have little furnaces to stay warm. But during the day it was hot, hot, really hot.

Just like Phoenix only all you had was sand and the sandstorms were terrible.

Usually there's a standard question in the interviews, how do you think your military service and your experiences in the service affected your life?

I thought it was a good experience as long as I came back safe. When I look back, I thought it was a good experience; I met a lot of nice people, associated with nice people.

You met a lot of different kinds of Americans in World War II. It was amazing that people from all walks of life all sort of blended together to form a cohesive unit to accomplish a great common goal.

They often spoke about having a reunion, and I've been in Chicago all my life. I am sure they could have found my name, but they never got in touch with me. Now the roster is in that printout (of the 376th Heavy Bomber Group).

Now the fellow who took my place as Chief Flight Surgeon, his name is in there! But not mine, because I left early to take this fellow home. So I guess they never considered me. His name is George Richardson and he was in the flight surgeon school with me as a student. So I got to know him very well but he stayed with that group and when the war in North Africa ended, I think he went with that group to England and it became part of the American Eighth Air Force. I think he went with them.

And then when you back to Europe you are no longer associated with the 376th. You were with the Evacuation Hospital

40th Evac Hospital.

Here's another standard question we ask, Dr. Williger. Has your military experience influenced your thinking about war or the military in general?

Oh yes, definitely. You have to be crazy to go to war. Absolutely. I cannot understand why people want to kill each other when there are so many things to live for here. Crazy. But it has been going on from time immemorial and it is never going to stop. You know, they said World War I was the war to end all wars, but World War II was even worse. It never stopped. There was Korea and then Viet Nam, (Margery: a couple of skirmishes in between) Baghdad. It just doesn't stop, a way of life. War is a way of life especially in the European and 3rd World countries. They're always having revolutions there.

It must be very difficult to be a military surgeon in all the wars and then lately all the men with amputated limbs.

Now, the lives they save we never could have done. What they can do now! Some of the fellows with a prosthesis you would never think they had a prosthesis.

You mentioned it was kind of like a MASH arrangement, the field hospitals in the tents in Europe. Was it ever like anything on the television show? Crazy characters? Funny things?

Aw no. No. No. We used to have some fun. We were in tents. I had movies of that but I don't know where those two tapes are. I had a movie of doing the whole procedure of an appendectomy.

Dr Williger, you are an amazing man. It is an honor to be talking to you.

Well, I don't know about amazing. I enjoyed my life. You know when they speak about the Golden Years. Well, I think they are Golden Years. Most people don't because they don't feel good, but I have been in good health except for this last year, but I still am able to get around. I am not an invalid.

Not at all, you traveled quite a few miles to come to the library today and we appreciate that.

We're reaching the end of the interview. Is there anything you would like to add that we haven't covered?

No, not unless there's something here that you want.

How was the army food? Pretty good?

Well, if you like spam. We had a chef that could make spam eighty different ways, but it was still spam.

Margery: You ate pretty good on the ship, though

Going on that, this ship belonged to the United Fruit Company. It was a ship that went 8 knots an hour. No escort or anything. We were just out in the ocean by ourselves. But I sat with the captain. He was very good to me. And we used to have steaks and lobster and flowers on the table.

Margery: And a cargo full of ammunition and no escort

Well, you couldn't have an escort with ammunition. But he was really nice to me.

You were blessed also with three children and six grandchildren?

Let me see, I have five grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

Did any of them ever enter military service?

One of my grandsons couldn't get a job. He had a degree in finance and he's very religious. He went to the Yeshiva University in New York; he got his Jewish degree and also a degree in finance. He decided he wanted to live in Israel. He went to Israel and he got a good job for a telephone company that was based in New Jersey. He had about 20 people working for him. He had a good job and was making a good buck. He married one of his employees and after a year they had a baby. He called me one time and he said "I'm coming back to Chicago." I says, "Why?" He said, "This is no place to raise a kid." I said, "Well, there are a lot of kids there." But he didn't want to raise his daughter there. So he came back here to Chicago where his parents live. He could only get menial jobs. Her folks lived in Florida so they moved to Florida, and he got a few jobs there. But they were just commission jobs – not enough to make a living.

He made up his mind he was going into the service, and they gave him a good deal. They gave him a bonus of \$20,000 in the medical corps. He was going to be a medic. He wasn't a buck private. He had a special rank because of his degree in finance. And he loved it. He's doing more work than I did when I was a senior in medical school. I couldn't believe what he's doing and he's still in. He was in Afghanistan for a year, came back ok. And when I went to the Honor Flight, he met us at the War Memorial. He looked terrific.

So there are echoes of your career in your grandson's present career.

Margery: he's stationed in Virginia.

On the Honor Flight, they give you a bunch of letters. They call it Mail Call, and I got letters from my grandchildren and friends. I never thought they thought about me! What they wrote was unbelievable for the Mail Call. Unbelievable, I just couldn't believe these were my grandchildren.

It is wonderful that the Honor Flights are so

You have to go there and be in it to appreciate it. What they do is unbelievable!

The library makes a contribution every year to the Honor Flight.

Margery: so does he

I know they have to get a lot.

And this November, I think I might have sent you an invitation to this year's annual Veterans History Breakfast - because there will be some veterans of the Honor Flight who just came back.

Margery: Yes, we are going. The veterans are just glowing when they come back. They are so impressed.

And the feeling at Midway. Oh, my God. I only went there once, but when I got home it was like a funeral and a wedding, the emotion was just ...

They must have had 500 people there. And the sailors with the saluting and everybody wanting to shake your hand. They acted like you were the President of the United States. I couldn't get over it. I knew about this for a long time, but a couple of fellows finally talked me into it. So I said "Ok, I'll go."

And that was this year?

Just a couple of weeks ago, oh, yeah.

One of the veterans you will meet here in November was on the flight a couple of weeks ago. There was a Mr. Tymczuk from Niles went there who was at Normandy. Now I think they are going to try and get the Korean vets.

Well, they're going to run out of World War II veterans.

Yes, they are all getting promoted.

Well, is there anything else you would like to add to the interview, Dr. Williger? If anything comes to mind afterwards we can always add a little bit.

Well, I think the best years of my life were when I retired and started to volunteer at three hospitals and during the baseball season for spring training with the San Francisco Giants. I just had a ball. It was the best years of my life. I met so many people and they call me and say, "We wished you came back."

What does an experienced professional expert surgeon do when they retire and go back to volunteer at a hospital?

Margery: They don't do anything medical.

Do you miss that all?

No, because I am associating with such nice people. They appreciate that you're there.

Margery: They couldn't function without volunteers.

They couldn't function without volunteers. They could but it would cost them a lot of money, they save millions of dollars. I didn't realize the amount of money they save. Every year they say about 3 million dollars. But I really enjoyed those years.

And that's when you were volunteering at Mayo, and

Scottsdale Health Care, Evanston Hospital, and the baseball games.

When my kids moved out of my house, that's when I gave up my practice and I went to work for Holy Family Hospital as the First Surgical Assistant. I was there for 15 years.

What year would that have been?

Margery: '70 something until about '83

I really enjoyed that because I wasn't tied down to any responsibility other than to be there to help whoever needed help for surgery and they were nice to me. And the sisters treated me very well.

I think of you riding the scooter in Arizona, riding the scooter in Miami, and riding the motorbike back in North Africa.

Margery: About three years he had to give up the scooter and driving because of Macular Degeneration.

I still have an electric three-wheeled scooter. I got two of them. Sidewalk thing. I can do some of my own errands without being dependent.

Margery: It goes about 8 miles per hour.

Margery: We met at Evanston Hospital. We've been together for 17 years so we've been through all this. I think one of his biggest pleasures is telling his story. He is getting very proficient at it.

One of the most meaningful parts of my job is to participate in the Veterans History Project because you meet so many wonderful people.

I think I had a good life. I can't complain.

One thing, during the Depression, my father always made a good living, and we were never bothered by the Depression although I knew about the bread lines and the soup kitchens. I was five years old.

Your father relocated from Chicago down to Knoxville, Tennessee.

Yes.

Well, thank you very much Dr. Williger and Margery. Maybe we'll conclude the interview at this point but anything that we want to add we can do that. I've had vets come back and say "I forgot to tell you this story; you're not going to believe this." Then we put it on and it's great. So you're the boss so however you want this interview to turn out is how it will turn out. So at this point I think I will turn off ...

The craziest part of my life was that trip. Sometimes I sit down and say "How did I get to where I was supposed to go?"

Margery: You read this account I wrote and you'll get it. It's really good.

Yes, we'll build this into the interview transcript.

I had to carry my bedroll and my sleeping bag. How did I carry all that stuff around from one place to another? When I got off that ship in Cape Town in a big city, I said, "Where do I go from here?"

I think that is amazing that they have this important position for you, and they give you this document that says "Secret Orders." Big Deal. I mean you still have to implement it, effect it! How do you convey yourself from the States around the Horn of Africa?

That was a harrowing trip. But I made it, somehow. I don't know how. I never realized how I could possibly do what I did, all by myself. What did I know, I didn't know all these places; they were new to me.

Fortunately, when I got to Cape Town, I ran into some nice lady. Obviously she saw me carrying all this stuff, She said, "What are you are doing here?" I said, "Oh, I'm just going to report to where I am supposed to go." She said, "Well, would like to stay with us overnight and have dinner?" They were very nice to me.

So all these different people you met did you have any favorite nationalities or groups or were they were all members of the human race?

Most of the people that I met were very nice except some of the Muslims you had to be very cautious about.

I used to collect things. I didn't smoke, but my wife smoked. I used to get an allotment of cigarettes and candy and chewing gum. That was like money, like gold. I used to buy nylon hose in France and send them home and silk gloves.

Did you play a lot of poker games?

No, we did shoot craps once a while. But we were being paid in pounds or something. We didn't know what we were doing. It was just paper money to us.

Margery: They had nothing to spend it on. Where are they going to go?

Although I had a jeep that was assigned to me as a senior medical officer, so I did travel the Middle East. I went to Damascus, Baghdad, Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon so I did get around.

Margery: You used to go on foraging trips with your airplane, looking for food.

As I say, when I was a flight surgeon, they taught me how to fly. I never landed or took off but they would let me fly.

They would let you hold the controls in the air?

Yes, I used to fly as a co-pilot when he got the mail in Cairo. When I came back to Miami, there was a school there. I went over there and this guy, I told him, I had been flying for a long time and a lot of hours and I wanted to at least solo to get the thrill of it. They had Piper Cub C planes and I told him my experience so I took about 8 hours of dual controls plus the literature that I had to be examined on. And after 8 hours, he said, "You're ready to fly." I said, "Are you sure?" He said, "I am confident; it's in you."

And I flew, biggest thrill in my life, being up there and nobody bothering you, nobody around. It was the biggest thrill of my life.

Free as a bird.

I had no trouble landing.

Any of these interesting, various, foreign, locales did you ever think after the war that you would like to go back and see how it was today?

No, there's no place like the United States. No, no way.

Margery: You went to Palestine. You went to Israel a couple of times.

That was a highlight. I happened to go to the Hadassah Hospital there, and Golda Meir was my docent. She showed me around the hospital and introduced to me a lot of the Germans scientists that had come to Israel and were doing research. I met a lot of the top men I had read about in books in Medical School. That was when I was stationed there.

But I did go back after the Six Day War (1967). And then I went back once more with Hadassah. That's when we went to the Golan Heights. Then my grandson got married there and I went back then so I've been there four times. When I was there the first time, there were 3 hotels – the Dan Hotel on the Mediterranean and the YMCA and the King David, that's all. There were no fruit trees.

When I went back for my grandson's wedding, I couldn't believe it. There's no more land left, no place they can go. Beautiful high rises ...

Margery: Constant movement, they're always tearing down and building something else.

I remember my father visited there in 1960s and was very impressed. He said that they had made the desert bloom.

What they did there is unbelievable.

Margery: There's a constant state of flux. I can see why Rob wanted to come home because it's hectic. It

I never felt unsafe there.

Margery: But you didn't live there like Rob and Yael and the baby; it could be very unnerving. Some people can handle that. It's exciting for young people there, I would think, to see this growth. It's a constant state of flux.

But I never felt unsafe there.

I think we've covered the past and the present.

Is there anything here you want me to leave? And I'm sure that it will be secure.

It will!

Margery: You can keep all of this and we can pick it up at the breakfast. How would that be?

I think that's brilliant.

I know you'll take care of it. It will be safe.

It will.

It might interest you to know that I belong to an international needlepoint guild.

Margery: That's the other part of his life.

Princess Grace was an honorary member. She invited us to Monaco every year for an exhibit and she would give out awards. I went one year and I got some awards from her. Our national guild makes something for the government every year. One year we made a wall hanging of all the birds of the states and one year we made a wall hanging of the seals of the fifty states. We were always making something. I was involved in a lot of those things that are hanging in Washington and around there.

How did you become interested in needlepoint?

That's a good question. You know when I was in Palestine, I went to the Western Wall; everybody goes to the Western Wall. I put a little note in there like everybody else. And when I came back, I went to the wake of one of my friends. And this lady was doing a needlepoint of the Western Wall and I became so fascinated and I sat down and watched her and talked to her. I explained that I had been there so this had some meaning to me. And I said, "Where did you get that?" And she told me. She said she got it in New York or someplace. I had a good friend of mine, a toy buyer that used to go to New York, and I told him that if he ever saw something like that, "Will you get it for me?" And he did and he brought it home. I worked on it, from what I had learned from her. And, of course, my father had taught me a lot about needle work because he was a designer. He used to make all our own clothes, hand-stitched. I did that and then I went to a needlepoint shop. I got interested and joined a class. Then somebody told me there was a local guild here, called Starlight Guild. They said, "Why don't you contact them?" And so I did. I joined them and then I got really hung up on needlepoint.

I imagine as a surgeon who has great hands...

Right, in between cases I used to do needlepoint. And I did it for all the doctors and they said, "Will you make this for me." So I did. Most of the stuff I would give away although I do have a pretty good album.

Do you still needlepoint a little bit today?

No, I can't see. I can do big stuff but nothing like the real fine stuff.

One time they commissioned our guild to do the logos for all the missions flown in space. There were 242 missions. And if you wanted to get involved you had to give them a sample of your work which I did, and I was assigned the first woman, what was her name, she just died, who went up in space, who was..

Margery: Sally Ride

Sally Ride. I did the one she flew on. Then they invited us down to Stennis, Mississippi. They were just remodeling their museum. The logos were all framed on the wall; they were just gorgeous, 242 of them.

Margery: It was for the opening of the Visitor's Bureau in Stennis Air Base, Mississippi. You were number 143.

If you ever get to Stennis, Mississippi, or Washington, there's a lot of my stuff in Washington.

Margery: In Blair House.

Oh, the Vice-president's house

We needlepointed 4 chairs when they remodeled Blair House, one of them is mine and when I was in Washington, this last time, I asked them if I could get in to see them, but I couldn't. There wasn't enough time.

Margery: What about the piece at the United Way?

At the United Way, it is depicting all the different things that happened to the United States over so many years and I did one with the firemen pulling the fire wagon with the two wheels and that's hanging in the United Way Museum in Alexandria, Virginia.

So you not only made history in World War II but then you come back and fashion these representations, pictorial descriptions of these great events and people.

I was fascinated by needlepoint. I did it for 40 years. I hated to give it up. I just can't see well enough any more.

Margery: A lot of doctors do handwork. I don't why but they do. They have fine motor skills.

They are artists:

Margery: they draw; a lot of doctors are painters.

Then tomorrow I am going to a meeting for my guild. I donate a scholarship every year for someone who wants to join needlepoint – one scholarship every year.

Margery: He used to go all the Mayo Clinic Reviews every year.

The needlepoint organization does that have a name or

The American Needlepoint Guild. ANG.

Margery: Those are all the little things that kept him out of pool rooms.

Well you never smoked. Did you ever drink?

No.

I like those drinks that are sweet, like grasshoppers, cocktails. They taste like malted milk or milk shakes. I don't even drink that anymore because of my eyes. They told me not to drink alcohol.

And Dr. Williger were you at Wrigley Field recently?

The last time, you know, when I was at Holy Family we operated on Vince Lloyd's (famous baseball broadcaster) wife. The following day I went up to visit her to see how she was doing. I don't know how it came about, but it turned out she was a needlepointer. So we talked a lot about needlepoint not about her operation. And her husband walks in -Vince Lloyd! I told him I had been watching the Cubs for 100 years and waiting for a World Series and he says, "how would you like to come to the Press Box?" I said, "Oh, boy would I!"

And he invited me and I went there. You never saw a ball game until you've seen it from a Press Box. You see everything. It was great. I went once more; I took my grandson. And Lou Boudreau was there. And what's that fat guy's name?

Margery: Jack Brickhouse.

Brickhouse! So I got to meet them. That was interesting.

In order to go to a ball game I have to sit behind the backstop otherwise I can't see the ball.

Margery: We don't go any more. He can't see the ball. He can watch television pretty good. He was also a handball enthusiast until the Macular Degeneration took over.

Handball, I played for 70 years but then I couldn't see the ball anymore.

That came to mind because I think there are doctors who play handball. Dr. Levin comes to mind.

Yeah, I played with Dr. Levin; he was one of our players.

Margery: Yes, they get together on Fridays and tell lies.

All the old handball guys, we meet at Al's Beef Place on Touhy; it's near the Leaning Tower, so we meet every Friday, all the ex-handball players.

Margery: A couple of guys give in and play paddle ball which they don't think is worth the effort.

It's not as pure a sport

Handball is a great sport. I played for 70 years.

Margery: You only quit that about 5 year ago. He couldn't see the ball anymore

I couldn't see the ball anymore when it went into the light.
If it came back straight I could see it, but if it came back high on the ceiling I just couldn't see it.

Although they wanted me to play, they said we'll back you up. No, I'm not spoiling your game just because you want me to play

Dr. Williger, when you meet the boys then on Friday, do you have a cup of coffee?

No, I don't drink caffeine. That's another thing they don't want me to drink. I don't drink coffee. I never drank coffee.

Margery: de-caffeinated stuff

Tea?

Very rare.

You know when I went to France. In Cherbourg I got off the ship, and I had to drive an eight-wheeler to where we were we going across France with the enlisted men in the hospital unit and it was bitter cold. And I said, "Boy, if I ever see a place, Red Cross place, I am stopping to get some coffee. Well, we finally did run into a Red Cross place. I got the coffee, took one sip and that was it. I love the smell of it brewing but I can't stand the taste of it.

Margery: He won't even eat coffee ice cream.

We didn't have it when we were kids. My parents drank coffee, but we drank Postum and cocoa and Ovaltine. And my brothers and sister they never drank coffee either.

Of course, they're all dead. I'm the only one in the family left. That's what I say. All these friends I used to have, I don't have them, except the young cousins.

Margery: So we're leaving you with all the goodies.

I appreciate the expression of trust. I will look after them, definitely. You given us a very generous interview and you're also very generous to leave us ...

If there's anything else, if you want me to come back or something and talk to you, I'd be glad to do it.

Margery: The only thing he would want back would be this album.

Well, I'm going to give it back to you right now. I'll scan this right now

Margery: that's ok but don't you want to keep it?

Sure

Margery: You can keep it all together. This photo you can have. Just put it in the box. Just keep it all together and we can pick it up when we come for the breakfast. Is that ok?

Terrific, that's wonderful.

Margery: Can we have the hat (referring to VHP cap.)

You can. Would you also like a t-shirt?

We got a t-shirt from the Honor Flight.

Dr. Levin gave us a very good interview. He had a very interesting time in World War II. It's funny, you know, when he finished, he said, Neil, you know the Marines they didn't do it all!" Anyway, Dr. Levin said, "You gotta interview Dr. Williger." It would be a great interview.

I want to thank you, Dr. Williger. And thank you Margery.

He said, "You gotta go." I said, "Ok, give me his name and telephone number.

We said we would do it. And we did it.

You have a great memory Dr. Williger.

Margery: He had a sister (Helen) who died about four years ago. She was about 5 years older than he, and if you think he has a memory you should have tried to talk with her. She didn't miss anything. She was to Europe I don't know how many times. She'll tell you the name of the boat and what time it sailed. What she wore for dinner and what they served. She was 98 when she died. She died in August.

Her birthday was in December. She would have been 99. She had a great memory.

You know, I'll tell you another story; I've got a lot of stories. She had a memory. I went to a school called Lowell school in Humboldt Park (3320 W. Hirsch), a grammar school, and she went to the same school. I was listening to the television. This instructor was describing some kind of block system they were using for teaching purposes. I don't know exactly; I got in on the tail end of it, but I heard that Lowell School and so forth and so I immediately called my sister: "Do you remember Lowell School? She said: "Do I remember Lowell School? I'll tell you who the principal was and who my teachers were." And she told me who they were. I didn't know who they were.

That must have been 80 years before then.

Oh, at least!

Margery: You do pretty good.

She went around the world a couple of times.

Margery: She was really amazing she had a lot of kids and she had a lot of grandchildren, great grandchildren. She remembered every one of them. She sent everyone a birthday card. She never missed. I don't even think she had a list written down.

I used to take her to the card shop and she'd say, "This is for so-and-so, and so-and-so." I said, "How do you remember everyone's birthday?"

Margery: She was something else.

I just wanted to say that as far as I know at the end here that my mother was in Cairo in December of 1942 or 1943.

1942, that's when I was there.

She was in the British Foreign Service. She was in Moscow for two years after that.

Did she stay at the Shepherd Hotel?

I don't know but there was a popular American named Bobby Rafferty, a consular official or something like that. I feel as if I was raised on World War II and it is a thrill for me to interview World War II veterans.

We stayed at the Shepherd Hotel. The Americans were very few but there were a lot of British; they hated us. They used to leave a tip of maybe two cents and we'd give them a 5 pound note. We didn't know what the hell it was. They couldn't stand it. "Hey, you're making us look bad."

People would go at midnight to see the pyramids on camels.

Yes, I went on the camel out to the pyramid. Yes, we did. And that one time I was scared. I had just gotten to Cairo, and I got my room at the Shepherd Hotel and I wanted to take a shower or bath or something, I turn on the lights. And all of sudden I hear "Turn off those god-damned lights. Don't you know there's a raid starting?"

I didn't know what a raid was to start with.

Margery: Blackout.

And we were right next to the Heliopolis Airport.

Margery: And nobody told you that when you went in?

No, who would tell me? Nobody knew I was there.

But when I heard that there was a raid, I figured, "forget it." I never did get my bath.

Margery: Did you take your shower?

No.

And then it happened that the airport we were stationed at near Lydda, Palestine, it is now called the Ben-Gurion Airport, but in 1943 it was very small. I heard the sirens go off and I'm standing in front of the building. My commanding officer says you'd better get out of here and get into the slit trenches. They were expecting a raid but it never happened.

Other than that I don't think I was ever in any real danger. The guys on the front lines were.

It could have been interesting on that banana boat.

Margery: It is all in there (referring to the statement which is appended).

You know, we had two 50 caliber machine guns and 2 cannons. And every time the Merchant Marine would test them they'd never go off. They never worked. But I had to stand watch; everybody on the ship had to take turns standing a four-hour watch. Like I would know if there was a submarine, ha. But being in a ship like that all alone, going at that speed, 'course you know we were zig-zagging, never the same course. Every minute they would change courses. That's why it took us so long to get to Cape Town, took us about six weeks to get to Cape Town.

Thank you Dr. Williger.

Reader's Notes:

This 15-page appendix includes photos, documents, clippings, a map, and printouts, which illustrate and amplify Dr. Williger's remarks about his military service and amazing life.

"Fox's Secret Orders," a 4 page statement previously written and typed out by Dr. Williger's friend Margery Waldner who was present during the interview, appears first and recounts his exciting passage from Ohio to South Africa and then East Africa.

The wartime photographs are scanned from a Photographic Kodak Album assembled by his nephew and presented to Dr. Irwin "Fox" Williger on his 95th birthday. The album's first paragraph "What Is in a Name?" reads:

When Irwin Williger was a child, every time the boys would misbehave, their mother would yell, "the police are coming!" All the boys terrified...would hide. One day Fox decided to look out the window, and saw that it was his eldest sister Helen who was ringing the doorbell pretending to be the police. The gig was up! From that day forward he was known by the family as "Foxy."

FOX'S SECRET ORDERS

Finally, I was a doctor and with a job, too, as one of two managing physicians of the hospital affiliated with the Peabody Coal Company in the thriving metropolis of Harlan, Kentucky. With a wife and expected child, I knew this was not where I wanted it to be born or where I wanted to spend too much time. So, after six months, I enlisted in the Service, prior to going into any private practice, to fulfill the one year obligation I had committed to in medical school when I signed up as a First Lieutenant in the Army Reserves.

I had no idea I would be lucky enough to be assigned to the Air Force as a Medical Officer, nor did I know that my plan to enter private practice after my one year stint would be cut short and all discharges cancelled when war was declared. I was sent to Randolph Field in San Antonio, Texas for flight surgeon training and then returned to Wright Patterson Field in Dayton, Ohio, my original base. While there I had wonderful relationships and experiences with the staff and pilots among whom was one flyer with whom I was very close. However, when I returned from Texas, I found he was being transferred, but could not reveal where. He only commented that he would let me know when he got "there" and that was the last I heard. Soon after, there was a series of unexplained events. I was sent to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. for a course in Tropical Medicine, why, I had no idea. Not too much later, I had orders to go to Panama for a course in Malariology. Again I wondered what I was going to do with this information in Dayton, Ohio. One morning, two FBI agents visited my office and inquired about my parents' Hungarian background. In addition, they questioned my allegiance to the United States. I replied that I was an American citizen, which I'm sure they knew, that I had volunteered to go into the Service, and was a staunch supporter of my country. I never heard from them again! At the time, I was very curious as to why they were asking me all those questions and not any of the other five doctors in the Hospital but I soon forgot about those incidents.

My enlisted staff at Wright Patterson Field, Dayton, Ohio, was not above playing jokes on me, senior officer of the Air Force surgical unit, as well as on each other, war or no war. They had to let off steam from the pressure cooker of daily surgeries, injuries and traumas involved in a stateside hospital facility.

Therefore, I did not take seriously, the important looking envelope I found on my desk one blustery winter morning in 1942. Who would be sending me, Captain Irwin F. Williger, MD/USAF, this imposing looking letter? When I opened it to discover another envelope marked "SECRET" in large red block letters, I knew it was no joke.

I was ordered to proceed to either Miami or New York, my choice, and obtain available transportation to Gura Eritrea, Africa. Oh yes...and it stated I was not to remain in any one place en route more than one month. I chose New York so that I could say goodbye to my mother who was visiting her sister in nearby Philadelphia and after a hasty farewell to my wife and young son, I took off on one of the most unexpected and unexplained adventures of my five year wartime career.

Picture this: Grand Central Station, New York City, World War II having recently been declared, uniformed soldiers and harried civilians were hurriedly threading their way through milling crowds. I was of course, among them heading for 1st Army Headquarters to present my request for transportation to carry out my "SECRET" orders. Imagine how shocked I was when the Officer of the Day at HQ said, "I couldn't send you across the street with these orders."

"Stunned, I asked, "Why not?"

"They left out the transportation code," he explained, "and no, I don't know what you should do now except go to the Pentagon in D.C. to the Air Force Surgeon General's office and find somebody to complete them! Good Luck!"

Obviously, my next move was to take a train to Washington, and traverse the endless corridors of the Pentagon, which was still under construction at that time and find the office suggested by the OD. If I tell you that I went from office to office for two days trying to find the recommended Surgeon General's office, you'll know why I was sitting dejectedly on a bench in one of the maze of connecting corridors, wondering what I should do next.

As luck would have it, while pondering my predicament, a young woman approached me saying, "Can I help you, Captain? You look lost."

"I've got orders to go overseas," I explained, "and they need to be completed so can get transportation to my destination. I can't find the Surgeon General to fill them out".

"Let me see your orders", she said, and then in an amazed voice, continued, "I wrote those orders...they're from my office...follow me and we'll take care of this right away." And she did. The rewritten orders arranged for me to meet with the Port Commander in Charleston, South Carolina.

Anxiously awaiting some kind of sailing orders, I was confronted' with the PC who had received no orders from Washington to expect me or provide me with any sailing information. He did say, however, that there were two ships out there, pointing to the port, and I could take my choice and be off toward my African destination. A cursory inspection revealed one of the ships was manned by a platoon of all black soldiers, not necessarily how I wanted to spend days at sea; and the other appeared empty and was flying a red flag, which, I was told by the commander, was a signal flag. I chose the latter and found, after we were at sea, that her staff was the U.S. Coast Guard, on board to man the guns and that I was the only passenger. This was great since I was a guest at the captain's table every meal and discovered that the galley had a freezer full of delicacies like lobster, shrimp, steaks, fresh vegetables and desserts of all kinds. Heaven!

After the ship had passed the twelve mile limit out at sea, the captain called everyone on deck to announce that we carried only ammunition, that we had no escort due to our dangerous cargo and that if we were hit, we should not jump overboard, but that it would be safer to stay with the ship and take a chance on being blown off into the ocean. Since the vessel was a United Fruit Company ship, it could only go eight knots and so it zig-zagged continually to avoid submarines on its way to Trinidad, where it was to refuel. I

planned to debark this ominous voyage but found when I tried to get a flight from the Air Force base in Trinidad that no planes were flying to Africa, so back I went to the ammo-laden ship.

By this time, I had become friends with the radio operator, who told me that the Japs were sinking all ships going through the Straits of Madagascar, which was our next port of call after Cape Town, South Africa, to which we were heading. Since my orders had read, "...don't spend more than thirty days in any one place," this seemed like a good time and place to leave my friends with their "hot" cargo and so I said goodbye and thanks for the ride.

I was surprised to find that there was no American consulate in Cape Town and so I went to the British consulate and asked for transportation to my destination. A clerk in the office sneeringly asked, "Who's going to pay for this trip?"

Furiously, I retorted, "Who the Hell do you think is paying for your bloody war?". Disgusted, I asked where the nearest American consulate was and when the response was Pretoria. I requested the use of the telephone and immediately contacted that United States base there.

Still angry, I explained to the colonel-in-charge what had happened and he blew up, saying, "Let me talk to that son-of-a-bitch...I know him well!"

I gathered from what I heard at my end of the conversation, that the colonel was really letting this guy have it, for all he meekly answered was, "Yes, sir; Yes, sir; Of course, sir; right away, sir!" Needless to say, I had my flight to Gura, Eritrea. The flight itself, on a South African Air Force plane, was uneventful, except that we all almost passed out halfway through the flight, I began experiencing a terrible headache and it dawned on me that we were flying at an extreme altitude, 12,000 feet. I went to the pilot in the cockpit and found they too were having the same problems.

"Don't you have any oxygen for flying at this altitude?" I asked.

"What's that?" they innocently answered. They had never heard of this kind of thing. After I explained that if they dropped down below 9000 feet, their discomfort would disappear; they dropped to 7000 feet and we were fine. Imagine, an air force so uneducated. I wonder how many crashes might have been averted due to their lack of information which we considered so basic.

The airstrip on which the South African Air Force twin engine plane landed was connected to Douglas Aircraft Company, located in Eritrea to service the British Spitfires in the African Campaign...this I found out later. More to the point, however, the reason for my mysterious flight was explained when I got off the plane and came face to face with my old friend from Wright Patterson who had disappeared from the base months before. E4Now it all made sense! He was now a colonel and welcomed me with great ceremony pinning his own major oak leaves on my shoulders, raising my rank to Major. He explained that he had sent for me to run the hospital there and be the connection between the medical personnel and the Air Force.

After the initial shock and I realized why I was in Africa, I acquainted myself with the hospital and my future duties. During my tour of the hospital, I found all the beds in the wards were full of healthy looking men. The doctor in charge of the other twelve civilian physicians explained that these "patients" were workers at Douglas who were idle because all the supplies that they needed for their jobs were on strips being sunk by the

Japs. In order to justify the hospital's operation, he had to fill his wards, so he had developed a rotation system of R & R for his personnel.

To say I was surprised at these turn of events was putting it mildly. I had a long talk with my friend the Colonel, and expressed my appreciation for the confidence he had in me to do the job and for sending halfway around the world to get me there. I explained, "If I'm going to be in this war and away from my family, I want to be where the action is!"

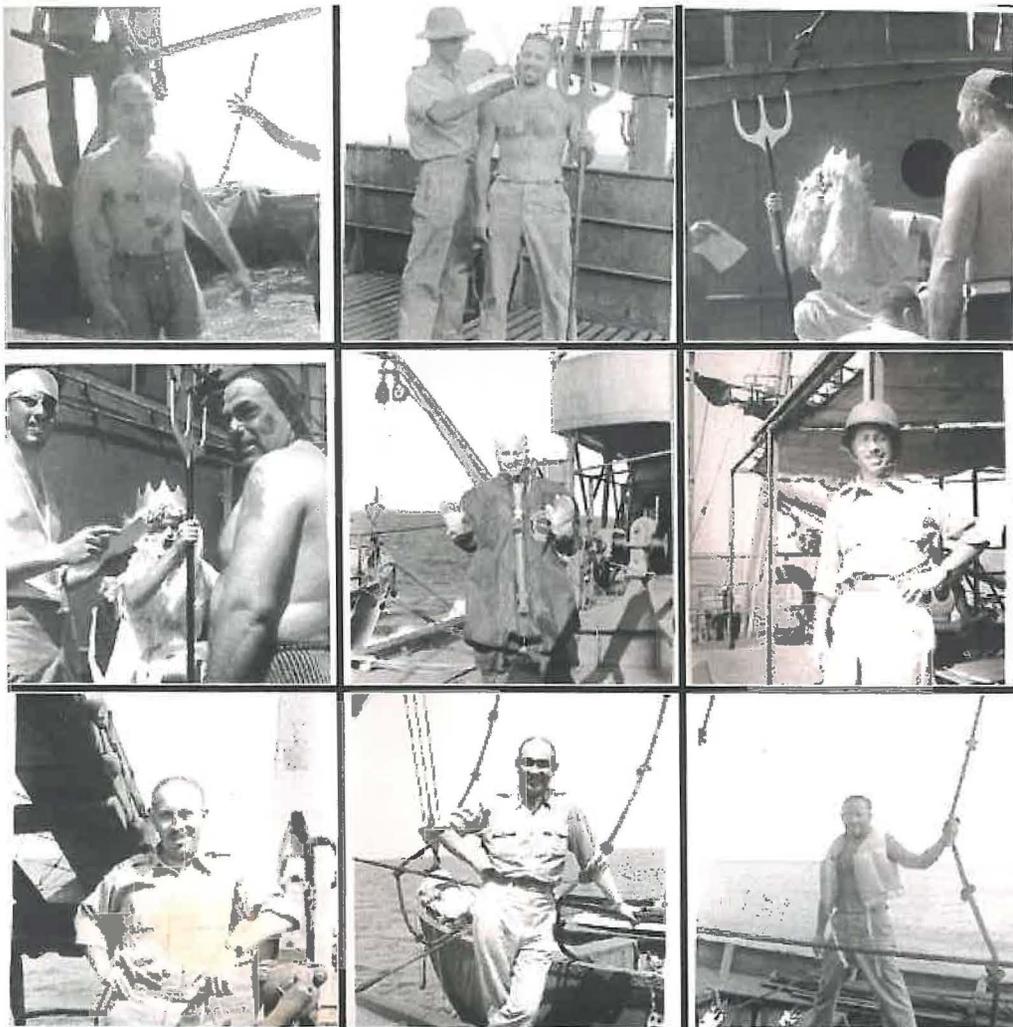
He was most understanding and in time, arranged for me to fly to Cairo, Egypt, to be with the North African Military Mission. I was assigned to a general who transferred me to a bomb group in Tel Aviv. They needed a flight surgeon to handle the medical group part of the bomb squad stationed there, BUT THAT S ANOTHER STORY!!!!!!!!!!

Written by Margery Waldner

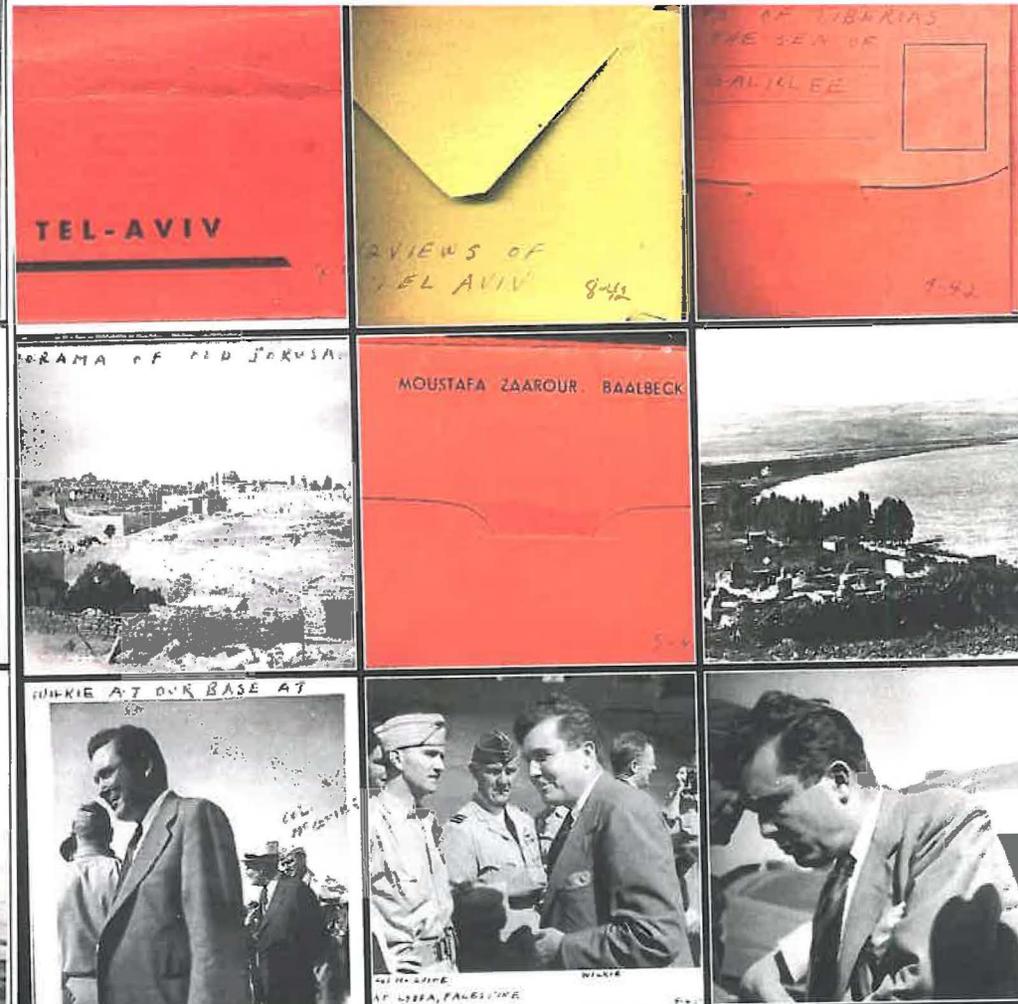
The map below shows Gura (Eritrea), Cairo, Palestine, and Tobruk. Major Williger's work as a flight surgeon took him to these locations after he received his "Top Secret" orders at Wright-Patterson Field near Dayton, Ohio. He would make his own way on an unescorted fruit ship from Trinidad to Cape Town and then by plane to Gura, about 20 miles southeast of the Eritrean capital, Asmara, as approximated by the red arrow below. After his North African assignment and a period working at army hospitals in Miami, he served with 40th Evacuation Hospital in France and Germany, following Patton.



The above map is in the public domain at <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/media/collections/nc/ww2/WWIIEurope33.png> and is credited to the Department of History at West Point.



Ceremony of Neptune. Only Passanger on a "Hot" Ship



Post Card Envelopes from the Middle East August-Sept. 1942

Then Captain Williger, Dr. Williger is subjected to the ceremonial hazing in the court of King Neptune as he crosses the equator bound for South Africa.

Wendell Wilkie, FDR's opponent in the 1940 presidential election, later served as Roosevelt's personal representative, he traveled to Britain and the Middle East in late 1941, and to the Soviet Union and China in 1942.

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ELEANOR WILLIGER

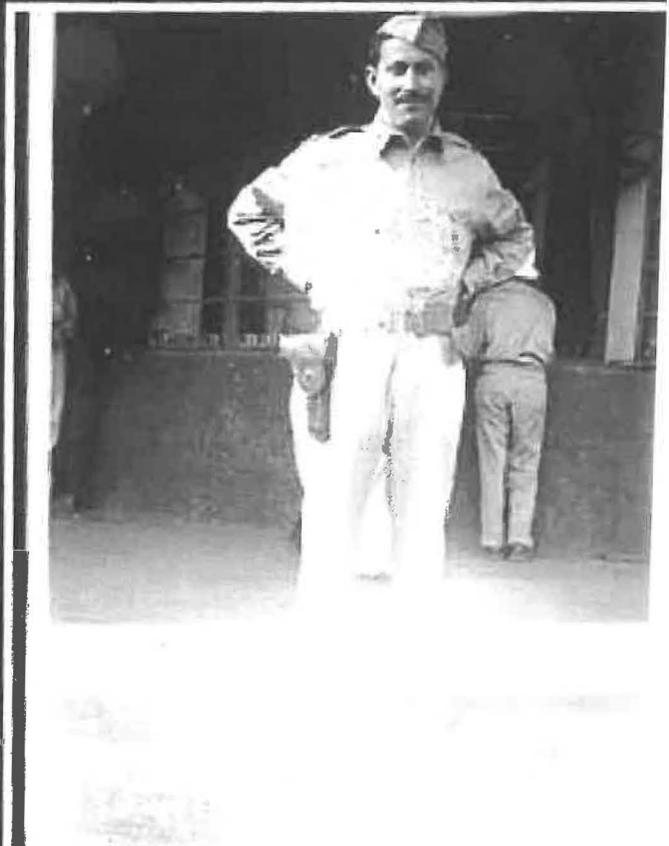
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Telegram received by Dr. Williger from his wife Elinore while he was in Cairo



The photograph above was taken near Tobruk and was entitled
"Warming Up on the Desert: Rugged Individualists."
Dr. Williger is in the middle.



Major Williger at Tobruk which General Montgomery had recaptured from Rommel. He also visited Cairo, Alexandria and Jerusalem.



**Major Irwin Williger at work in Germany at the war's end as part of
an Evacuation Hospital near
Andernach, Germany.**

Dr. Williger provided the following information about his North African Unit, the 376th, obtained from their web site at <http://www.376hbgva.com/index.html>. The 376th received its first Unit Citation for its Ploesti, Romania mission to hit the oil fields and later in the war for action over Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. Dr. Williger's name does not appear in the roster, but the name of his successor, Dr. George Richardson, does appear.



376th Heavy Bombardment Group, Inc. Veterans Association



**One of the Most Decorated Bomb Groups
World War II...**

*"To perpetuate the name, history, comradesh
and deeds of the living and the heroic dead o
Heavy Bombardment Group"*

This site was created and will continue to be maintained in dedication to all the members of the 376th risked their life in the fight for our freedom. We wish to preserve the history of the 376th Heavy Bomb Group and its role in WWII, as well as help others in their search for missing crew members.

376th Bombardment Group (H)

DISTINGUISHED UNIT CITATION

**For Action Over Tunisia and Sicily
May 1942 - 17, August, 1943**

War Department General Orders No. 23, 1944

The 376th Bombardment Group (H). For outstanding performance of duty in action against the enemy in strategic support of the Allied forces in the Middle East theater from May 1942 to the capitulation of the enemy forces in Tunisia and in Sicily. Arriving in the Middle East as a task force and later operating as a provisional bomb group before it was organized as the 376th Bombardment Group (H), this organization conducted the first United States air combat operations in defense of the then threatened Suez Canal area in particular, and the Mediterranean Sea in general. Later, in support of the British Eighth Army, and throughout this period, this group made long range attacks on enemy port installations, shipping, airdromes, and other vitally important targets which necessitated long flights over dangerous desert terrain, enemy territory, and the Mediterranean Sea without fighter escort. The eminently successful conduct of these attacks despite intense anti aircraft fire and enemy fighter opposition was directly responsible for the weakening of the enemy in the Middle East by the disruption of their lines of supply, airdromes, shipping bases, and other vital installations. Their aircraft crews exhibited the greatest of bravery, resourcefulness, stamina, and skill, while the ground personnel performed their duties under difficult desert conditions with such initiative, untiring effort, and devotion to duty as will always be worthy of emulation.

NORTH SHORE NATIONAL BANK

SUNNYSIDERS

THE PEOPLE LIFE LOVES MOST
 ARE THE ONES WHO LOVE LIFE.

THEY BELONG TO SUNNYSIDERS.
 SHOULDN'T YOU BELONG TOO?

At 65, Dr. Irwin Williger's idea of semi-retirement is working part-time at both Holy Family Hospital in Des Plaines and Weiss Hospital, where he has been a staff physician for some 25 years. This schedule gives Dr. Williger time to pursue his hobby of being one of the country's foremost male needlepoint artisans... a hobby that has earned him national recognition just ten years after taking up the craft. Finally, he supplements all of this with weekly handball games and daily bicycle workouts of up to 25 miles a day.



How does he do it? Well, there's the loving support of wife Elinore, who Dr. Williger describes as his "best P.R. person." Elinore is also very active as a volunteer at Weiss Hospital, and as a student at Northwestern University.

The couple has travelled all over the world, and recently joined the Sunnysiders for a Discovery trip. Ever since, the Willigers have been among our most enthusiastic members.

Do you really love life? Then join the Willigers and the Sunnysiders... for people 55 or better.

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These local newspaper clippings describe the surgeon's continued use of his skilled and articulate hands in semi-retirement as a distinguished member of the American Needlepoint Guild and quotes his deceased wife Elinore.



WEEK OF MAY 3, 1978
 Admiring the award-winning needlepoint work by Dr. Irwin Williger (center), a Weiss Memorial Hospital staff physician, are his wife, Elinore (left), and Mrs. Sue Maniez, president of the Chicago area Branch of the American Needlepoint Guild. Mrs. Williger is wearing one of Dr. Williger's creations, a needlepoint vest.

NT

Weiss hospital doctor is needlepoint artisan

WHEN ELINORE Williger wants a beautiful new needlepoint purse, vest, decorative pillow or other item, she simply asks her husband, Dr. Irwin Williger, to whip one up for her. A staff physician at Weiss hospital for the past 25 years, Williger is rapidly achieving national recognition for his needlepoint work, which he modestly claims is "just a hobby."

Among his most recent honors, he was selected by the American Needlepoint guild, an international organization of needlepoint experts, to stitch the official state seal of Ohio, which was then woven into the group's State Seal Rug, to be placed on international exhibition in May.

The rug was stitched by individual members of the guild throughout the United States, and comprises seals from every state in the nation. The needlepoint creation measures

eight feet in width and twelve feet in length.

CHICAGOANS will be able to see the rug May 1-6, when it will be displayed at the Northwest National Bank of Chicago, 3985 N. Milwaukee. Later in May, the rug will be viewed in Monaco by Princess Grace, a member of the guild, and a frequent judge in international needlepoint exhibits. Following that exhibition, the rug will be presented to President Jimmy Carter at a White House ceremony. The rug will then be placed on permanent exhibit in Washington.

A family practice physician, Williger's interest in needlepoint began about ten years ago. However, according to his wife, his skill as an artisan extends to many other media, including string art, metalwork, sculpture and rug-making. Last year, he was

a prize-winner in the age 60 and over category at the Buckingham Art Fair, sponsored by the Mayor's Office of Human Services.

Many of Williger's friends, neighbors and relatives can attest to his unusual craft skills, since they are the recipients of most of his work. Although he keeps few of his creations after they are completed, he carefully photographs each one and adds it to his personal memento album, before bestowing his work on an admirer. In fact, when exhibitions are requested, said Williger, "I usually have to temporarily borrow the items from their new owners."

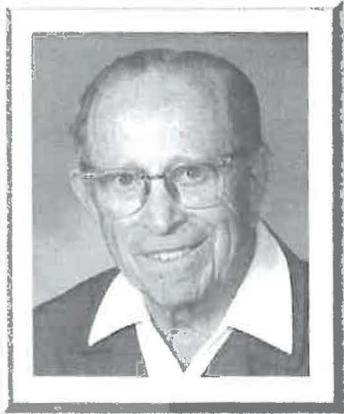
THE WILLIGERS, who live in North Town, don't find it unusual that the doctor combines a medical career with his talents as a handicraft artist. "My husband has always en-

joyed relaxing by working with his hands, and the fact that he creates such beautiful things gives us great satisfaction. The fact that he brings pleasure to others is even better," Mrs. Williger said.

Being among few male needlepointers in the United States, and one of the only men in the American Needlepoint guild, doesn't bother Williger or his wife. Said Mrs. Williger, "I share his interest in his hobbies, and I love to go along to the guild meetings with him. Besides seeing all the beautiful needlepoint work, it's a good way for me to keep an eye on him," she added with a smile. Mrs. Williger has many of her own interests, however, since she is a frequent volunteer at Weiss hospital.

Dr. Williger's continuing contributions to his communities and country

IRV WILLIGER, MD GI RECOVERY - MCS



At 90 years young, Dr. Irv Williger says the key to staying young is keeping busy and he certainly does just that. A volunteer at Mayo Clinic Scottsdale since 1995, Irv has served in three areas including radiology, the ambulatory surgery center and, for the last few years, in GI Recovery.

Originally from Chicago, Irv spends his winters in the Valley and his summers on the north side of Chicago. A life long physician, Irv says he knew right from high school that he wanted to be a doctor. After receiving his undergraduate degree from the University of Illinois in Campaign, Irv attended medical school at the University of Illinois. After completing a general surgery residency in Knoxville, Tennessee, he teamed up with a fellow resident to run a hospital in Harlan, Kentucky. Around the same time, Irv was called to active service in the Army Airforce Surgical Corp serving a total of six years. Eventually he found himself stationed in Northern Africa with the Rommel Campaign, then in Miami Beach and ultimately back to Europe to help where he served in an Army evacuation hospital following General Patton's advance across France and Germany. After returning home, Irv established a private practice in Chicago and then later became a first surgical assistant at Holy Family Hospital in Des Plaines, IL. Irv describes his years at the hospital saying "these were some of the happiest days in my life because I immensely enjoyed helping the surgeons with their surgeries."

In addition to volunteering at Mayo, Irv also serves in the emergency room at Evanston Hospital in north Chicago during the summer. He has also devoted much time to Habitat for Humanity, building homes near South Mountain. During the spring, Irv also volunteers for Cactus league baseball selling programs at Scottsdale's Giant's stadium. As a hobby, Irv enjoys being a needlepoint artist. He also enjoys playing handball, riding his bike and spending time with his three children, six grand children and many friends.

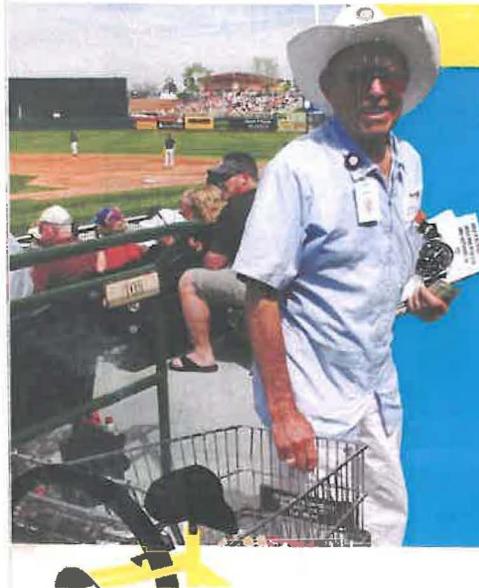
Irv says his philosophy for living is to keep busy and enjoy living and he notes, "I've got the best of two worlds, I'm here for the winter and in Chicago for the summer."

The above story appeared in the July/August 2003 issue of the Mayo Clinic *Voice Volunteer* on page 7 as part of a *Portraits In Caring* article.

Scottsdale Soul / 0409

BY MICHELLE GLICKSMAN

WHAT WILL YOU BE DOING AT 96?



TALK ABOUT HOPPING! At a recent spring training game, we caught up with still-on-the-go Irv "Doc" Williger. A member of Scottsdale Healthcare Hospital's Auxiliary, he was out and about (and up and down the stairs!) making the game an even more pleasant experience for all of us. Go Doc!

NAME: Irv "Doc" Williger

AGE: 96

WHAT ARE YOU DOING? As a member of the Scottsdale Healthcare Hospital's Auxiliary, supporting the Scottsdale Charros and spring training by selling programs.

YEARS DOING THIS: 15

WHY DO YOU DO IT? I enjoy volunteering and it gives me a chance to meet a lot of nice people.

ABOUT HOW MANY TIMES DURING A GAME DO YOU THINK YOU WALK UP AND DOWN THE STADIUM STAIRS? I walk all 20 aisles throughout the game. I climb the stairs so much that it's too many to count.

ANY THOUGHTS OF SLOWING DOWN? I was wondering if this would be my last year, but just don't know. I just take it year by year.

ANY WORDS OF WISDOM TO SHARE WITH OUR READERS? My only advice is to not give up after retiring. Keep busy!

Give Back—For Free

All of our wallets are a little thinner these days.

The above story by Michelle Glicksman appeared in the April, 2009 issue of *Scottsdale Health* magazine on page 24. Dr. Williger is inspiringly profiled at age 96 for his volunteer work as a member of the Scottsdale Healthcare Hospital Auxiliary, selling programs to benefit the Scottsdale Charros a community not-for-profit organization, working to education to strengthen youth programs. He raised more than \$20,000 selling programs for the San Francisco Giants spring training games.



Dr. Williger is pictured throwing the honorary first pitch at the San Francisco Giants spring training game in March, 2010 in Scottsdale, Arizona. Dr. Williger volunteered for many years selling programs up and down the aisles to benefit the Scottsdale Charros youth organization.

He is pictured on the left with friend Margery Waldner who was present during Dr. Williger's interview.

