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Interview of William F. Burns, Major General USA (retired)

William F. Burns
La Salle University

Anthony Delcollo
La Salle University

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FIELD NOTES

Interviewee: William F. Burns, Major General USA (retired)
Interviewer: Anthony Delcollo
Interview date: March 14, 2008
Location: General Burn's home at 320 Union Hall Road, Carlisle PA, 17013

The Interviewee:

Major General William F. Burns (b. 23 June 1932 in Scranton PA) grew up in a number of places during the time of the great depression and spent much of his childhood living in the greater Philadelphia area. General Burns attended middle school, high school, and college in Philadelphia. He attended La Salle College High School and La Salle College (now La Salle University), graduating from La Salle in 1954. He was part of the ROTC during college and joined the Army after graduation around the time that he married his wife to whom he is still married. General Burns went on to serve as a diplomat to the Soviet Union during the cold war, and participated in the SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty) talks as the chief U.S. diplomat. Among other notable highlights of his career, General Burns served as the director of the United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency from 1988 to 1989 and served as the first U. S. special envoy to denuclearization talks with various former Soviet Socialist Republics. General Burns spoke extensively about his early life and college years, which covered material of biographical and cultural interest. Topics touched upon in the concluding sections of the interview deal with his later career. Larger issues concerning military and diplomatic history will need to be addressed more closely in subsequent projects.

The Interviewer:

I, Anthony Nicholas Delcollo (b. 9 October 1985 in Little Rock Arkansas), am General Burns' former student for his Foreign Policy: Negotiations class taught during the Fall 2006 semester at La Salle University. I grew up in Wilmington Delaware, in the suburban community of Marshallton. I will be graduating from La Salle University on May 11th with a B. A. in Medieval European History and Western Philosophy. During the summer, I will complete my M.A. in Early American History from La Salle and graduate in the fall. Ultimately, I will begin law school in the fall 2009 semester at one of several East Coast universities.

Background:

I conducted this interview as part of the requirements for the completion of the HIS 650 course taught by Dr. Barbara Allen of the La Salle History Department. It immediately occurred to me to interview the Major General for this project, as he is not only an important historical figure but also of the proper age for such an interview as well as a graduate from La Salle. I had recalled General Burn's e-mail address from my time as his student, and sent him an e-mail requesting his permission to conduct the interview. He consented, and in subsequent e-mails we set down a place, date and time for the interview. I prepared for the interview with the numerous materials made available to me from newspapers, magazines and official brief biographies of General Burns coming

from the La Salle archives. Pursuant to that point, I must thank Brother Joe Grabenstein for his help in gathering the materials and making photocopies.

I arrived at the interview site, General Burn's house in Carlisle PA, later than I had hoped because of traffic and problems with the in-car satellite navigation system I had been using to supplement the General's directions. All told I stayed at the general's house for about five hours and gathered a little more than three hours of interview. At the time the general's wife had returned from the hospital, so brief interruptions occurred throughout the interview.

Description of the Interview:

After some delays, I arrived at the General's on the afternoon of 14 March. The general greeted me at the door, and informed me that some interruptions might occur due to his wife's condition. The General then lead me to a sitting room with a fire place and several large bookshelves. The room was well lit and decorated with memorabilia from the General's travels and awards from the General's career. What I saw of the house was clean and well organized, with many items on display but no feeling of clutter or overcrowding. The general was seated on a diagonal to me in an armchair, and I sat on a small couch to his right. I placed the recording device on a table roughly equidistant from us both, and commenced the interview.

The interview progressed very smoothly. General Burns rarely hesitated in answering questions aside from the time he occasionally took to recall one detail or another. He seemed to be comfortable throughout the interview and happy to be involved, despite the distraction offered by his wife's condition. There were some technical and logistical complications arising during the interview. The interview was interrupted several times, once simply to take a break, once when a man came to call at the door, and several other times due to the phone ringing. The interruptions amounted to merely minor distractions, as it was very easy to pick up the flow of the interview where it was left off, and often were so instantaneous that they did not necessitate the pausing of the recording. As to technical difficulties, I noticed after the interview that there was some odd background noise being picked up by the recorder that would obscure the General's voice to varying degrees. It might have been the fire place. In any case, I used an audio mixing program to isolate the noise and remove it from the recording files as much as I could, which has made the General's occasionally soft spoken way of talking more audible. Also, there are several instances of the recording device being shifted that cause an annoying sound but generally do not detract from the content of the General's words.

Note on recording:

I used an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder WS-311M for the interview. I uploaded my recording from the recorder directly to my Dell Dimension 8400 desktop computer via a USB port. I was able to convert the files from *wma* to *wav* once on my computer, and subsequently burned them to CD in *wav* format. I formatted the CD as a data disk, and included on the CD each of the recording files along with copies of my transcript, field notes, and log. I used NCH Express Scribe for my transcription, and played by the recordings to check over for any mistakes.

Editing the Transcript:

My editing decisions included:

- 1) Keeping the interview as true to form as possible with the recording
- 2) Omitting misplaced words and sounds that are obviously superfluous or distracting from important content (this includes unimportant false starts)
- 3) Using a dash to indicate instances where a sentence is cut off mid speech
- 4) Using parenthesis to indicate minor notes I added for the sake of clarification
- 5) Placing information about pauses and visual cues or nonverbal sounds in brackets
- 6) Using empty brackets to indicate inaudible words or phrases
- 7) Placing a time indicator at or near the top of each page
- 8) Using exclamation points to indicate emphasis
- 9) Using quotation marks to indicate reported speech

Due to the brief period of time available to complete the process and fully edit my sound files by using the audio mixer, I simply looked up names that seemed difficult to spell. With my busy schedule, and his most likely busier schedule, it would have been very difficult to rely on the General to aid throughout the entirety of editing process. Therefore, the editing was a solo initiative on my part.

Follow-up:

Dr. Allen has agreed to deposit these field notes, the transcription, the log, and the recordings with the La Salle University Archives. A copy of these materials will also be sent to Major General William F. Burns. The General has expressed an interest in having me return and complete sections of the interview concerning his military and diplomatic career. I have great interest in this, and will probably conduct follow up interviews after the completion of this project and after my graduation from my undergraduate course of study. Unfortunately, due to time restrictions and other obligations, I had not had as much leeway as I would like as far as perusing specifics about certain names that I couldn't make out from rougher spots of the recording, as well as certain other areas regarding spellings of things that I couldn't readily find through other channels. Therefore, another future project would include a more comprehensive edit of the current transcript done in conjunction with General Burns, as well as the creation of a complete transcript of the two sound files that remain in log format.