

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Lt. Col. Roger Walden

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Walden, Roger, 1922-2013
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden,
<b>Dates:</b>	April 8, 2005 and June 29, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2005 and 2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:14:22).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Paratrooper Lt. Col. Roger Walden (1922 - 2013 ) was a member of the “Sweet Sixteen,” the first African American paratroopers in United States history. He also served in the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, the “Triple Nickel,” and was later promoted as a Major. Walden was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on April 8, 2005 and June 29, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2005_102
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Pioneering paratrooper Roger Stanley Walden was born on May 21, 1922 in Des Moines, Iowa. Attending St. Anselm’s School in Chicago and Barber Intermediate School, Munger School, and Chadsey Schools in Detroit, Walden graduated from Eastern High School in 1941.

A tool apprentice at Ford at the onset of World War II, Walden enlisted on December 7, 1942. Assigned to the 365th Infantry Regiment, Walden volunteered for the first black test platoon of 20 paratroopers. At Parachute School in Fort Benning, Georgia, Walden and fifteen others earned their parachute wings as the Sweet Sixteen in February of 1944, becoming the first African American paratroopers in United States military history. Promoted to sergeant in the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, Walden and his group were transferred to Camp Mackall, North Carolina. Walden received his commission as a second lieutenant of infantry in March of 1945 when he finished Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning. After receiving special training to combat Japanese balloon bombs at Camp Pendleton, Oregon, the 555th was soon deployed as Army fire jumpers. Shipped to Gifu, Honshu, Japan in 1949, Walden served as commander of Company A of the 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division of the Far East Command. In 1950, Walden as a captain commanded Company F in Pusan, Korea and he was made a Battalion S4 before being rotated back to the United States. Promoted to Major, Walden served in Europe from 1957 to 1960 with the 3rd Armored Rifle Battalion, 51st Infantry, 4th Armored Group.

Earning his B.A. degree in social studies from San Francisco State University under the Army’s Bootstrap Program, Walden was promoted to lieutenant colonel. He taught military science at Central State University until his retirement in 1966. Walden worked as manager of the City of Detroit’s Vacant Housing Rehabilitation Program until 1984.

Walden passed away on September 17, 2013.

## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden was conducted by Denise Gines and Larry Crowe on April 8, 2005 and June 29, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Paratrooper Lt. Col. Roger Walden (1922 - 2013 ) was a member of the "Sweet Sixteen," the first African American paratroopers in United States history. He also served in the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion, the "Triple Nickel," and was later promoted as a Major.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Walden, Roger, 1922-2013

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Walden, Roger, 1922-2013--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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United States. Army

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## Occupations:

Paratrooper

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MilitaryMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, April 8, 2005 and June 29, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, Section A2005\_102\_001\_001, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Lt. Col. Roger Walden was born on May 21, 1922 in Des Moines, Iowa. His mother, Ellen Parkey, was born in Straight Creek, Kentucky; some of her ancestors fought in the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry Regiment during the Civil War. Walden's father, Virgil Walden, a descendant of free blacks from North Carolina, was born in Newton, Iowa. He fought in World War I. After Walden's parent met, they moved to Buxton, Iowa where his father worked as a coal miner. They divorced when he was young, and Walden was sent to Chicago, Illinois to live with a maternal aunt, Nora Alison, and attend St. Anselm's School. After the onset of the Great Depression, his relatives were too poor to care for him, so he returned to Des Moines to live with his father. There, Walden played inside cattle pens despite the danger and snuck cherries from his uncle's cherry tree. As a young teenager, Walden moved to his uncle's home in Detroit, Michigan. He attended several public schools before graduating from Eastern High School in 1941.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, Section A2005\_102\_001\_002, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Lt. Col. Roger Walden lived with his father, who worked as an engineer and taught him to play conqurian, in Des Moines, Iowa. Walden's father was unable to provide for him due to the Great Depression, so around the age of thirteen, he moved to Detroit, Michigan to live with his aunt and Uncle Harold Julius Walden, who worked as a chauffeur and gardener. At Eastern High School, he enjoyed his shop and math classes, played tennis, and worked at a bookstore and a tailor shop after school. After graduating in 1941, Walden apprenticed with Ford Motor Company, helping to manufacture an anti-aircraft device. In December 1942, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to Camp Atterbury in Indiana for basic training with the 365th Infantry Regiment. Disliking the regiment due to soldiers' pranks and its casual manner, Walden volunteered to join a new test platoon for black paratroopers. His training occurred at segregated Fort Benning, Georgia.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, Section A2005\_102\_001\_003, TRT: 0:30:10 ?

Lt. Col. Roger Walden was one of twenty volunteers that began training to become the 555th Parachute Infantry Company, the first black test platoon of paratroopers in the U.S. Army; seventeen successfully finished. The company was trained by white non-commissioned officers at Fort Benning, Georgia, whom Walden disliked but trusted to train the group properly. The training involved intense physical conditioning and test jumps from a platform in a mock-up of a Douglas C-47 Skytrain, from a 250-foot tower and from a plane. Walden became one of the "sweet sixteen," the men who passed paratrooper training on their first attempt; a seventeenth from the platoon was delayed by attending his father's funeral and had to finish with a white battalion. Walden continued on to specialized training, where he learned to be a jump master, communicate in Morse Code and jump with a homing pigeon. Walden recalls the first time he jumped from a plane, his desire to succeed and the publicity the company received.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, Section A2005\_102\_001\_004, TRT: 0:30:50 ?

Lt. Col. Roger Walden was taught to handle additional equipment needed for combat during parachute jumps, such as explosive devices, the SCR-300 radio, and rope and supplies for becoming untangled from trees. During World War II, Walden completed Officer Candidate School. Assigned to Pendleton Army Air Force Base in Oregon, he and fellow paratroopers fought fires caused by

Japanese fire balloon attacks. Walden was promoted to staff officer, then first lieutenant. He led a platoon in the 24th Infantry Division at the end of the 1940s. Due to a shortage of black captains at the onset of the Korean War, he was one of the few first lieutenants to lead an infantry company, and was promoted to captain in 1950. Upon landing in Busan, South Korea, Walden participated in the advance to the Yalu River and the Battle of the Chongchon River. After the decisive Chinese victory in the latter, he commanded his infantry company during the retreat south and protected a regimental command post during the ensuing confusion.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, Section A2005\_102\_001\_005, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Lt. Col. Roger Walden served in the 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion under Major General James M. Gavin, an advocate of integrating the U.S. military. Walden was transferred to the 188th Parachute Infantry Regiment, where he served as regimental adjutant until coming under investigation for communist sympathies. He was accused of attending a meeting with Paul Robeson, who had been invited by Walden's father-in-law, Reverend Charles A. Hill, to his church, but Walden had never even met Robeson. At the end of the Second Red Scare, he was transferred to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, promoted to major and then G2 executive officer in the 82nd Airborne Division. In 1957, he was assigned to Kirch-Goens, Germany with the 4th Armored Group, which was stationed against a potential invasion by the Soviet Union. After completing his bachelor's degree at San Francisco State College, Walden became professor of military science at Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio in 1963. He retired from the service in 1966.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, Section A2005\_102\_002\_006, TRT: 0:28:30 ?

Lt. Col. Roger Walden joined the Detroit Housing Commission in Detroit, Michigan in the late 1960s, after retiring from the U.S. Army. He worked for the city's Vacant Housing Rehabilitation Program, which acquired abandoned homes to repair and sell to new homeowners. The City of Detroit also provided financial assistance to prospective homebuyers in the wake of cutbacks from the major automobile companies based nearby. Walden particularly focused on the Virginia Park neighborhood in Detroit, and worked with local community organizations to promote VHR. After marrying his third wife, Wendy Brierly, he helped raise her son, Allen Brierly, while raising his own son, Roger Walden, Jr., both teenagers at the time. Since leaving the housing commission in 1984, Walden has remained retired. In describing his hopes and concerns for the African American community, Walden notes the importance of education and the benefits of a college degree. He concludes the tape by reflecting upon his legacy.

Video Oral History Interview with Lt. Col. Roger Walden, Section A2005\_102\_002\_007, TRT: 0:15:32 ?

Lt. Col. Roger Walden narrates his photographs.