

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

A Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
STEVEN ORECK

Intel/Surgeon, U.S. Navy, Cold War/Persian Gulf War/Iraq War

2008

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Oreck, Steven., (b.1948). Oral History Interview, 2008.

Approximate length: 1 hour 44 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

Steven Oreck discusses his service in the U.S. Navy both active duty and as a reservist during the Cold War, the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War. He comments on Officer Candidate School at Pensacola [Florida] and why he enlisted in the Navy as well as his experience at the Armed Forces Air Intelligence Center at Lowry Air Force Base [Denver]. Oreck outlines his active duty service with the VP Squadron in Maine and his intelligence responsibilities during the Cold War. He explains his transition into the Reserves and his role as a reservist. He describes his deployment to Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia during the Persian Gulf War as an orthopedic surgeon and his time in Kuwait City attached to an Explosive Ordnance Disposal Group. Oreck discusses his career as a reservist following his return to the United States, serving as the Regimental Surgeon for the 23rd Marines, the Marine Air-Ground Taskforce Surgeon, and the Group Surgeon for the 4th Marine Logistics Group. He explains how the Navy Reserve changed following the terrorists attack on September 11, 2001. Oreck also mentions his job during the Iraq war at the Marine Corps Operations Center in Washington D.C. Lastly, he reflects on his overall experience with the Navy.

Biographical Sketch:

Steven Oreck (b.1948) began his Navy career in 1970 with Officer Candidate School. Oreck worked as an intelligence officer with the VP Squadron and then entered the reserves with the VP Squadron as a medical student designator. While in the reserves, he was deployed in the First Gulf War and then worked with Fleet Hospital Units stateside until he was called to work in the Marine Corps Operation Center during the Iraq War.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2008.

Transcribed by the Audio Transcription Center, 2015.

Reviewed by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Abstract written by Claire Steffen, 2015.

Interview Transcript:

[File 1]

Kurtz: --and I'm sitting here seeing if the machine works, and it looks like--

[break in recording][00:10]

Kurtz: --eenth, 2008. I'm--my name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm interviewing Steve Oreck in his home in Madison, Wisconsin. Steve, when and where were you born?

Oreck: New York City, July 16th, 1948.

Kurtz: July 16th, '48. And where'd you grow up?

Oreck: In New York City and in New Orleans.

Kurtz: OK. And part-time in New Orleans? Were you living both places at the same time? Or--.

Oreck: No, no, no. New York, and then we moved there.

Kurtz: OK. And is that where you went to high school, New Orleans?

Oreck: Yeah. It's where I graduated high school, was New Orleans.

Kurtz: And when was that?

Oreck: 1966.

Kurtz: 1966. And what did you do after high school?

Oreck: I went to college.

Kurtz: Where'd you go to college?

Oreck: MIT.

Kurtz: And what did you study at MIT?

Oreck: I ended up having a degree in humanities and science.

Kurtz: And what year did you graduate?

Oreck: 1970.

Kurtz: 1970. And what was going on in 1970?

Oreck: [laughs] Well, of course, the war in Vietnam was going on. Cambridge, Massachusetts--like Madison and Berkeley, was a hotbed of antiwar stuff. And senior year, I drew a low number in the first draft lottery, and so therefore, I knew when I graduated I was going to be going in. I wasn't going to go away to Canada. And so that's when I investigated and signed up for an officer program in the Navy.

Kurtz: Was there much discussion about the Vietnam War at MIT when you were there?

Oreck: A lot. A lot.

Kurtz: And what was your reaction to the discussions?

Oreck: I started out being in favor of the war, coming from a fairly conservative background. I ended up being antiwar in--not in any deeply intellectual way, but more of a well, you know, everybody on campus is antiwar. So, you know, kind of went along, that was the thing. But--.

Kurtz: Was the fact that you lived in the South for a while, did that have any impact on you?

Oreck: No, I don't think so, in that regard. It'd be more family, you know, orientation rather than anything else.

Kurtz: Did you have any brother, sisters, uncles, or father that served in World War II or Korea, or anything?

Oreck: Yeah. I mean, I was the oldest, so--but my dad served in World War II. Both of my uncles--both of his brothers--served in the service. Although, one of them after World War II. My mom's brother was in the service right after Korea in the peacetime draft, and a bunch of my mom's first cousins, who, you know, were my "uncles," in quotes, served in the service during World War II.

Kurtz: Did that make any impact? I mean, did they talk a lot about it? Or was it just something they didn't talk about?

Oreck: Well, of course, the person that I've had the most contact with was my dad, and he didn't talk--he talked a little bit about it, but at that point in my life, he did not open up. Well, later on, after I'd had a combat tour, he opened up a great deal.

Kurtz: OK. When you got your low number and it meant that you were at really-- if you didn't do something, you were going in the Army, what kind of guidance did you get from any of your family members?

Oreck: Well, interestingly enough, halfway through college, I was kind of, you know, I'm not sure what I'm doing, and I told my dad I was going to, you know, quit and join the Marines and see what was--you know, deal with things. And he said, "Bullshit, you're going to finish college." And then when the time came, you know, my senior year, then one of my family friends talked to me and said there was this program the Navy had in naval intelligence, and he thought I would find that an interesting way to serve. And another one of our family friends who'd been in during World War II, the story was he'd been in the navy, he'd been an officer on an aircraft carrier. Not a pilot, but ship's company. And he said, you know, "The ship got sunk, and I floated on a raft in the Pacific for several days, not knowing if I was going to live or die. And then when a Destroyer picked me up, you know, I got to take a brief shower and eat hot chow, and, you know, sleep in decent conditions. And, you know, if your number was up, your number was up, but at least you lived half decent, until you went." [laughs] And that held a lot of attraction for me. You know, OK, your number's up, your number's up, but at least, you know, you have--you're not eating sea rats or something. And so that influenced me, and I went in the Navy. My dad had been in the Army Air Corps, and my other one uncle had been in the Coast Guard, one had been Merchant Marine, and others had been in the Army, all in the Army. But so we really didn't have any Navy in the background, per se, but that's what--.

Kurtz: So did you join the Navy to go into--was OCS part of the package?

Oreck: Right, right. At that point in time, there were two OCS programs in the Navy. The surface guys went through Newport, and guys going into aviation went through Pensacola. And because most of the first-tour intel billets were with aviation units, it was sort of traditional that the intel officers--and you got a restricted line commission, not a regular line commission--went through Pensacola through commissioning with the pilots and the NFOs.

Kurtz: What was that OCS like?

Oreck: Well, it was not anywhere near as kind and gentle as *Officer and a Gentleman*. We had Marine Corps drill instructors, and I, for many years, remained the only doctor in my unit that could take a squad through close order drill correctly. And it was very--I thought it was pretty rugged. I mean, I was in good physical condition, so that wasn't too bad, but it was pretty rough. They rode your ass pretty good. And they didn't pull any punches. I mean, the war was going on, a lot of these guys were going to

be pilots and flight officers, and delivering ordinance in Vietnam and they would get in your face and say, you know, "You're going to be dropping ordinance near my Marines. I don't want you to screw up and hurt anybody." And I'm cleaning up the language substantially. And, you know, if you showed the slightest sign of weakness, they'd be in your face telling you could drop--you could quit any time. And, you know, telling you to save the government the money, you know, drop out now. You know, if you're going to kill yourself, slit your wrists this way instead of the other way because the other way doesn't do the job, it just makes trouble. If you're going to kill yourself, do it good. I mean, they were not kind and gentle at all. And it was tough physically. I was in very good condition, and they--I mean, it was very tough physically and mentally. And at the time, it was not fun. Looking back on it, it was--it did exactly what it was supposed to do. It toughened you up, and, you know, if someone yelled jump, you would be halfway up in the air before there was anything, you know? Or it was--.

Kurtz: Were there any interesting characters in your OCS class?

Oreck: We're all kind of in the same boat. It was interesting, of course. We're all college kids. There were a number of us, like myself, who in the brief period between graduation and reporting to OCS, had gotten married. Of course, our wives--we weren't living with our wives. There was one guy, he married a woman who had been previously married, and, like, had one kid already. They were all, like, 22, 21, 23. And he managed to knock her up in the three weeks between getting married. And he was just ecstatic. You know, we're all looking at him, "Gee, are you out of your friggin' mind? You know, what's going with--what's going through your head?" And, you know, we were kind of [inaudible]. The guys were characters, both in a good and bad way. And one of the guys in my class--he was a flight officer, you know, he graduated number one in the class academically, very bright guy, and went on to do very well throughout his training, and then was cycled to test pilot school, and ended up, after test pilot school and flying test pilot stuff for a while, ended up as a mission specialist for NASA, and flew on a number of shuttle missions. So he got into space. It was a, you know, very mixed crew.

Kurtz: OK. After OCS, what happened?

Oreck: After I got commissioned, I went to the Armed Forces Air Intelligence center in--at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, which was a joint Navy-Air Force, air intelligence school for six months.

Kurtz: What was the curriculum like there?

Oreck: You know it was interesting. I didn't find it, you know, overly, you know, "God, it's horrible, challenging stuff." But it was everything from very basic things about map reading and the different kinds of maps and charts, and stuff like that. And then different types of intelligence, how to do photo interpretation, strike planning including nuclear strike planning, which I imagine some of those details are probably still classified. You know, just everything you needed to be an intel officer with, you know, an aviation unit.

Kurtz: Was the training oriented towards Vietnam, or towards the Russian threat?

Oreck: Most of the stuff was sort of, you could use it either way. You know, planning an airstrike was planning--obviously, we weren't, the nuclear stuff and other special weapons were not--because you did weaponeering, was not oriented toward Vietnam. But a lot the instructors had had tours over there, so--.

Kurtz: So did they share their experiences?

Oreck: Mm-hmm.

Kurtz: What did they have to say about the Vietnam War?

Oreck: I never heard--the negative things I heard, other than just the usual military, you know, "I can't believe somebody has their head so far up their--type of stuff--was the way it was being run. If you heard anything negative, it was, you know, we're fiddle-farting around, and guys are getting killed unnecessarily. You know, the rules are screwed up, the commitment is screwed up, and, you know, I don't think I ever heard anybody say this was, you know, a bad thing in the sense that it was stupid to do it, as opposed to stupid the way it was being done.

Kurtz: The way it was done. OK. So what kind of assignments did you receive, then, in your tour? I mean, after your continuing to school?

Oreck: Well, what we did was, the Navy guys, we--basically, you put in a dream sheet, and that went up to Washington, and it came back down. You know, there were four of us in my class that were Navy officers, four Navy ensigns. And basically, they--if you were first in the class, you got the highest thing on your dream sheet that was available. Not what you wanted, but what--.

Kurtz: Was available.

Oreck: They basically sent to the school, these are our top four needs for the timeframe, because you might go on to additional training. So they say,

OK, the pipeline, these are the four things we need. And if you were number--I was number one in the class, one in the Navy guys, so I got the highest thing on my dream sheet, and so on and so forth. We all went to squadrons. I went to a VP squadron. We flew a P3 anti-submarine warfare aircraft, a big, four-engine land-based aircraft. And so from--.

Kurtz: Where was this squadron operating out of?

Oreck: Well, it was NAS Brunswick Maine. It was the whole port. But I went to Norfolk, Virginia for about four to six weeks for an anti-submarine warfare tactics course, learning sort of a short course in ASW tactics.

Kurtz: So this was very much a Cold War assignment then?

Oreck: Right. I mean, we did have P3 squadrons flying for both the East Coast and the West Coast, flying market time, if you're familiar with that. And flying WESTPAC, it so happened, our squadron, my particular squadron, could not go to WESTPAC.

Kurtz: Why is that?

Oreck: We have some special birds in our squadron, that on the outside, look like your standard, ordinary P3 anti-submarine warfare aircraft, OK? But they were different on the inside. I mean, most of our aircraft, you know, did the normal, you know, surface surveillance of the Russian fleet, chasing Russian submarines around, all that kind of stuff. These did special missions which, even at this late date, don't feel authorized to discuss. And because of that, we couldn't go to Southeast Asia. Which I didn't know, of course, until I arrived there. So that's where, you know, after I finished AWS tactic school, I reported as the air intelligence and photo officer to this VP squadron in Brunswick, Maine.

Kurtz: What were your duties there?

Oreck: Well, I was the intel officer. I had three safes about this size, full of classified documents that were mine. I was also the photo officer, which we took photographs of things. And so I was in charge of all that stuff. We had some photo mates that went over to the base photo lab wherever we were deployed, and it sort of worked for me. And I had an enlisted intelligence specialist who worked for me. And sort of depended whether we were at home or whether we were deployed, but I would do things like every morning, I would brief the commanding officer and the executive officer, and the other senior guys, and update intel brief every day.

Kurtz: Is that stuff that was coming from higher headquarters and what your unit was doing?

Oreck: Well, it was--you kind can kind of think of me like the newscaster. I would take stuff from unclassified sources, from the newspaper, from *Time* magazine. I would take stuff from what we used to call the yellow pages, because the secret intel summaries came out on yellow paper, and I put it together. You know, you can get a lot of good background stuff from the newspaper, or *Time*, or *Newsweek*, or whichever. And then I would put it together, and then we would have, for Jebly [??], when we were back in the States and we're flying practice missions, I would be giving the location of any Russian ships off the coast, Navy ships, or they have these, what do they call, AGIs, spy ships, listening to radio conversations, so-called fishing trawlers. You know, and that stuff would be in the brief. There'd be maps. You know, that was only one part of it. That was the daily brief. I would work with the air crew on ship recognition, aircraft recognition. You know--.

Kurtz: So did you have a quadrant of the ocean you guys were responsible for patrolling and identifying the ships?

Oreck: Depending on where we went. In other words, if we were flying out of Bermuda, there were certain things we'd do. If we were flying in the med, there were certain things we did. If you flew out--if you flew in the Western Atlantic, we'd deploy to Bermuda or the Azores or something like that, or Iceland, the number one job we had was keeping track of Russian missile submarines. These are the ones that had ballistic missiles in the back, they'd be aimed pretty much at cities. And the essence of our job, with regard to those, was to work with other tracking modalities so that we knew where they were. And if things got dicey, we could stay on top of them. And if we had the--if the word came, push a button and drop a torpedo on them before they could empty their tubes, you know, which would be a very--if we ever got that over, that would be a very bad thing. But that is only part of what we did. We had a whole raft of missions, but-

Kurtz: Yeah. Was this a seven-day-a-week job, or--.

Oreck: Well, in the States, no. I mean, in the States, it was a seven-day-a-week job in the sense that sometimes things would happen on the weekend that I had to come in. But usually, my weekends--if I didn't have the duty, my weekends were free, because weren't in an alert status. That's sort of before beepers, so, you know, we were living in Maine. And if we went--I wanted to go to Boston for the weekend, I would tell somebody, but it would not usually be a problem. We'd usually stuck around the house, you know, stuck around the neighborhood, in the sense of Costal Maine. When I was deployed, yeah, it was a seven-day-a-week job, like everything else when you're deployed.

Kurtz: OK. So will you be going then TDY, like to Bermuda in the Mediterranean from your--.

Oreck: Well, we would either send--sometimes we'd send detachments someplace, and sometimes they wanted a ground pounder along. Or the squadron would pick up, and the entire unit would decamp to Bermuda, or Rhoda, or someplace for six to nine months. You'd just--every lock, stock, and barrel, you'd go.

Kurtz: And when you said ground pounder, is that you?

Oreck: That's me.

Kurtz: OK. So you wouldn't necessarily go if one or two planes went, but if this--

Oreck: Well, I might. It all depended on what the mission was, and what the need was. One time, when we were in Bermuda, I got--basically, we launched the alert bird, and I was on the second bird out of there, 75 minutes after they said, "OK, pack your shit and go." On a mission, I was gone for two weeks.

Kurtz: OK. So the alert bird is a P3 that's sitting there, waiting to pick up a mission that's identified by somebody?

Oreck: Right.

Kurtz: And then you were on the next one?

Oreck: On a two-hour bird.

Kurtz: Yeah.

Oreck: It was a one-hour bird and a two-hour bird, basically.

Kurtz: OK. And did you fly much, other than when you were going to different--.

Oreck: I flew some missions. I flew on some missions. I didn't normally fly, though, because that would interfere with my work. And it wasn't--you know, I just went along for the ride. I really didn't have any particular function on the crew.

Kurtz: Did the Vietnam War have anything to do with what you were doing?

Oreck: Well, not really. I mean, we did not deploy to Southeast Asia. I mean, we had a lot of friends that went there. I mean, everybody had friends that

were over there. And of course, everybody knew what was going on over there. But in terms of our day-to-day mission--.

Kurtz: The Russians were still a problem there?

Oreck: Well, yeah. I mean, we were very--we were focused on Russians, of course, and then the Cubans sometimes, and the Libyans once or twice, even back then. That's-- not too long after Gaddafi threw out King Idris, I don't know, maybe five years later. And, you know, so Libya gave us a little trouble once or twice. It was primarily oriented, Cold War oriented toward the Russians and their surrogates.

Kurtz: Did you plan missions? Or what was your relationship to the mission? Or would you analyze what the missions--.

Oreck: Well, they would--you know, we would get a mission, go do something. OK? You know, go fly off this coastline, you know? Or go find this ship. And then I would be put in the loop in terms of I would prepare a packet, a recognition packet so that it was a line drawing of the ship, and its markings. And, you know, if it was a Russian ship, I would print out the name in Cyrillic characters. I taught myself how to read the Russian alphabet because I had to do that. And then, of course, I'd give a threat brief, you know? If you were flying around Cuba, where were their missile sites? What was the range of their missiles? You know, did they have any gunboats that might be out patrolling someplace? And what kind of weapons did those gunboats have, that--you know, P3 was a converted--it was an airline conversion. And, you know, it was not designed to get hit a lot. And, you know, it wasn't very maneuverable either. So the guys really wanted to know when they were in someplace that was not too friendly, you know?

Kurtz: Sure.

Oreck: And so you'd send out a threat brief and say, OK, this is what the Cuban gunboat looks like, and this is what kind of guns it has, and this is, you know, the dome of its range. And, you know, they're manually operated, or they're radar operated, and [inaudible].

Kurtz: Did the Russians every try to disguise their ships by painting them and putting different names on them?

Oreck: Oh, oh. Yeah, all the time. I mean, you'd fly a guy, look down on the left-hand side of a Russian destroyer, and it would have one painted--number painted on it, and fly off the right-hand side, and they'd have a different number painted on it. So it'd have two numbers on the same ship.

Kurtz: How did you deal with that issue?

Oreck: Well, you just noted it, and the word got out. And I remember one mission, one thing we did one time when I was in Rhoda, back in those days, the Russians kept a fairly large submarine force in the Mediterranean, mostly conventional submarines. And because of the Montreux Treaties--I think it's the Montreux Treaties--that has to do with passage through the straits, between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, submarines--Russians have the right to send as many warships as they want, but submarines have to transit the straits on the surface in daylight. So naturally, you could then snap pictures all you wanted, and they--so the Russians, instead of doing that--and of course, to get there from, say, Leningrad, they'd have to go out through the Baltic, and down the channel, or around you. So they would send submarines from their Black Sea fleet through the Atlantic, and then in through Gibraltar, and they would pull a swap. And they would pull a swap, and they would do things like pop up and down and try and confuse you as to how many submarines they had in there. And one project that I sort of was semi-in charge of, was when they did the swap you'd have RP3s and RA5 Charlies from the aircraft carrier that happened to be there, taking pictures of all the submarines. And then what you would also try and correlate, the other people correlating the sonar. But the submarines weren't all the same. You know, one might have a hatch painted a different color, one might have a different place where an escape buoy is located, because they weren't, you know, all like Model Ts, the same. So you would be able to then correlate these photos and say, "OK, you know, which subs are there and which sub's left?" And because you'd take photos when the ones were coming and photos on the way home, so you'd be able to say, "OK, here's the one with the, you know, funny painted hatch on the foredeck, that one's going home." And you would then--basically, you'd make a recognition book that says, you know, this is the--these are the Russian submarines. You know, foxtrot number 23, Juliet 14, whatever. And then the sonar guys would also correlate them with sonar signatures. And then during their six-month period, every time you saw one, you would then say, OK, he was here, now he's there. So you'd get operating patterns, because you could recognize the individual submarines. So that was--.

Kurtz: Kind of intriguing.

Oreck: The kind of thing you did. You know, you know, I mean, I wasn't doing the high--the super analysis, although I did some stuff. That was done by the bigger brains, and we were getting all the information.

Kurtz: Was that the sum and substance of your three-year enlistment, was doing all this? Or did you have another job?

Oreck: No. I mean, this was what I did. I was the intel officer. And then when it came time for me to rotate out, I had a few months left in my contract. And in 1973, the war was, in essence, over for the United States. And so they were cutting back, and they said, "Are you going to extend for orders?" In other words, would I sign on for at least another two years to get orders? And I said, no. And they said, "Well, do you want early out? Because we don't want to PCS you for four months." I said, "I'm yours." And then I went back to college, back to graduate school.

Kurtz: OK. Now, when you went to graduate school--I know you're a doctor now. Did you go to medical school at that point?

Oreck: No. I went to MIT and did two years in chemical engineering.

Kurtz: So, OK. Is there anything that took place during that time that had anything to do with your military service? Were you criticized for having been in the service, or didn't people care? Or--.

Oreck: Well, I went back to--I was also in the Reserves at that time, with VP Squadron in South Weymouth, Massachusetts.

Kurtz: Were you required to be in that squa--OK.

Oreck: No. No, I volunteered. Partially for the money, you know? I was married, and we had one kid already. And, you know--.

Kurtz: Yes, I know.

Oreck: [laughs] But I decided when I got out--I mean, when I left active duty that, I did want to go to med school, but there were certain courses I needed to take that I hadn't taken. So along the way, I, you know, was doing graduate work in engineering, because if I didn't get into med school, I had to do something with my life. And that was what I would do. I didn't really get any crap on campus. You know, the passions had faded. I did actually get crap when I applied to med school.

Kurtz: Is that right?

Oreck: Yeah, I had an interview. It was at Harvard, I'll be happy to name them. And the guy interviewing was one of a few interviews I had. But the guy interviewing me not too subtly implied that I obviously had lower moral character because I had gone in the service instead of figuring some way to get out of it or going to Canada or, you know, whatever. And that was not a pleasant few moments.

Kurtz: How did you--well, obviously, you reacted poorly to that. Did he--.

Oreck: Well, I didn't do what I wanted to do, which was reach across the table and beat the shit out of him, to not mince any words. I didn't argue with him. I mean, what's the point, you know? I mean, I also then realized that Harvard Medical School at that point was not in my future, which was OK. You know, I kind of decided that was probably not going to be a good fit in that sense.

Kurtz: So where'd you end up going?

Oreck: LSU. And I had a great time. And in fact, interestingly, at LSU--which was nice, because, you know, my family was living in New Orleans and I had a bunch of family there--there were about 15 or 20 of us in my medical school class who had been in during Vietnam, a group of veterans. Who, to some extent, hung together.

Kurtz: And is there anything that stands out about the medical school experience other than these 15 or so veterans, it stands out, that, you know, about your military experience? Now, did you continue in the reserves then?

Oreck: Well, what I did is I changed my commission from intel through medical corps. They have a special designator for--I went from being a lieutenant, or O3 intel guy to being an ensign and a medical student designator. I could have continued in the reserves as an intel officer with the VP squadron in New Orleans--or actually, and NAS New Orleans. But they said, look, you know, if we get recalled to active duty, you can't all of the sudden say "I'm a medical student, I'm not coming." And so if I wanted to have any protection from ge--.

[break in recording][31:11]

Kurtz: --when the tape clicked off. And you said you were in active reserve status. And you said you were in inactive reserve status.

Oreck: Right, right. And so I--in med school, you know, I didn't really have anything other than the fact that, you know, every now and again, some paperwork crossed my desk.

Kurtz: So you had no obligations for drills or anything like--.

Oreck: No, no, no, no, no. You see, they won't let you drill if you can't be mobilized. And I couldn't be mobilized. And I will tell you that my military experience made graduate school and medical school easy.

Kurtz: How was that?

Oreck: Well, it really--you just learn--in the service, you learn how to get organized. I mean, even the simple stuff in OCS was, you know, the first time you had to get ready for what we called a room, locker, and personnel inspection. You know, you had all these rules. Your skivvies had to be folded this, and something had to be done there. You know, holy moly, how you going to do all that stuff and do it in, you know, almost no time at all? And of course, by the time you were done with OCS, you could, you know, fall out of your rack and do that in a half a second. And, I mean, you can go back all the way to OCS, which taught me that within the limits of what God gave you--I mean, you know, if you're not seven feet tall, you're not going to be dunking basketballs in the NBA. But short of that kind, short of actual physical or mental limitations that you have, that all of your limitations were up here. You put them on your shelf, and you could do stuff that you never thought you could do simply by applying yourself. And all the military guys, if you took any 15 or 20 people in med school randomly and looked at their performance, their grades, and everything else, and then stacked them up against that group of people, there was no other group that would compare. I mean, the guys, they were older, they were married, they had kids. But they were very focused. You were very focused, and you just organized. And, you know, it's all about the mission, right? You learn that. It was all about the mission. What was my mission? Get through medical school; learn as much as I can, you know, be a good doctor. It's about the mission. And it helped you focus. And so that was the major thing. Then I went off to my postgrad training.

Kurtz: Yeah. What was that?

Oreck: Well, I did a year in Boston as a surgical intern. Then I did four years of orthopedic surgery at the University of Maryland in Baltimore, you know, with orthopedic surgery training. And then I did a year fellowship in Birmingham, Alabama in hand and microsurgery. Through my first four years, I didn't drill, because the hours were just--a combination of two things. Number one, the hours were brutal. And number two, there was no flexibility. You know, if your drill weekend was this weekend, and your active duty was this time, then that's what it was. And that was not entirely compatible with the surgical training regime. And then the Navy in the early '80s came up with what they called a primacy unit, which was a flex drill unit designed for residents in training and academic faculty so that you could be more flexible about your schedule. And you'll get your drills in other ways, that you could get drill credit for academic endeavors. So conferences and so on. And so when that came about, one of our faculty was a Navy reservist, and I said, great, good to go. And then that was in Baltimore, and then I did the same thing in Birmingham, and then, you know, we kept as an active driller from then on, until the end of my career.

Kurtz: OK. So as you--you were--well, I know the fact that you're a hand surgeon. What did that have to do with the balance of your career? After you were, you know, a hand specialist, I assume the Navy wanted you to be more of a general doctor. Is that--.

Oreck: Well, they wanted me to be--I mean, I'm board-certified in orthopedic surgery. And general orthopedic surgery, I mean, at least as far as what I would have done in the Navy--or what I did in the Navy, actually more accurately, was fairly straightforward. You know, they weren't going to expect me to go and be a spine surgeon someplace. They did have--the Navy does have fellowship-trained surgeons in hand and spine. So to do--so during my--depending which unit I was in, when I was in fleet hospital units, originally, I was an orthopedic surgeon. So I did orthopedics, and I was getting ahead of myself. In the Persian Gulf, I was the only hand guy there, so any bad hand injuries, they sort of, even if it wasn't my turn in line, they gave me. But that's what I did then. Now, of course, the other part of what you do in the Reserves is you have responsibilities. I mean, there are people, someone has to be the officer in charge of a detachment, with a training officer. And then within a structure, whether it's a fleet hospital or what have you, there are structured positions. You know, there's a commanding officer, there's an executive officer, there's the chief of surgical services, there's the head of orthopedics. I mean, there's, you know, these--the administrative half of doing things. And I did a lot of that.

Kurtz: How many doctors were in a unit like this?

Oreck: Well, that depended where you were and what time it was. I mean, I had the prod--well, the fleet hospital has--a fleet hospital, 500-bed fleet hospital with 900 people, but they weren't all in one place unless you got mobilized. Your detachment would depend on where, you know, geographically, if you were at the reserve center in Madison, the reserve center in Lacrosse. For the Wisconsin area, I was living in New Jersey at the time. So depending on what reserve center you were at, the primacy that I was in for the time I was in New Jersey--which was part of the fleet hospital--was, I don't know, anywhere, 10, 12 people, I think, small detachment.

Kurtz: And so it could be a mixture of different specialties, which would have different assignments if you were--I mean, would go to their assignments if you were mobilized.

Oreck: Right, right. You had, like everything in the reserves, to some extent, you had a peacetime assignment and a wartime assignment. So I might be the

officer in charge of detachment so-and-so, but my real job would be, say, chief of orthopedics, or whatever. You know that kind of thing.

Kurtz: When you--I'm stumbling here because I don't know much about medicine or the Navy, so--but when you drilled, what would you do during your drill?

Oreck: OK. Well, of course--well, what I did, for part of the time that I lived in New Jersey--because it was a flagstrail [??] unit, you had people doing various different things. It wasn't like, every, in this particular detachment. A normal fleet, a hospital detachment, everybody comes to the reserve center on the weekend. They do whatever training they're going to do, and then they go home. We had a different situation. So we had a number of things that we covered as doctors. There might be reserve centers that didn't have a doctor, so we would assign out and say, "OK, Joe, in February, you're going to go for a day to Reserve Center XYZ and do their physicals, because they don't have a doctor to sign off on that." I did--we would do--we split up, like, recruiting physicals, sometimes in the evening. You drive to a reserve center and do some recruiting physicals. Pretty groundwork, but it had to be done. And a marine unit was fairly close to where I lived. They didn't rate a doctor in that unit, but they had medical needs. They had a corpsman that was permanently assigned, was active duty, but I would go there, like, once a quarter and do physicals. And it was a motor transport unit so they had to get certified, do physicals, and sign off on the cards as animal handlers. Stuff like that. And--.

Kurtz: OK. So that would be all credit. You'd have an obligation to do X amount of that in a year?

Oreck: Well, you had to do 48 drills a year, just like anybody else. You had a lot of flexibility. When I was in charge, I said look, you know, we have these, you know, obligations. We have these things that need to be covered, so we'll split them up, and it won't be two owners for everybody, because getting a surgeon going to do physicals for a day is kind of dull and boring. And so we would do that. I also, personally, I lived near Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, and so they had an Army hospital there. And so what I did is every other--yeah, I think it was every other week, I'd spend half the day or a day at Fort Monmouth at the hospital--half a day, I think. And, like, do some hand surgery, and do consults. So I was working at an Army hospital, but I would actually be doing surgery.

Kurtz: And you'd be getting drill credit for that? Right.

Oreck: Drill credit for doing that.

Kurtz: Now did the fleet hospitals ever get together in one place?

Oreck: Yeah. We would have--I mean, you wouldn't get all 900 people there, some were from active duty. But we would have exercises, which might be a weekend or a long weekend. Or there was a two-week school out in California called FOTC, which was basically how do you build the thing, how do you run the thing, type of school. And all the fleet hospital units, active and reserve, went through the same school. I have a program that I set up for corpsmen who wanted to learn and qualify as cast techs. You know, putting on casting, working as orthopedic assistants. And that was--at the time, that was an on-the-job training, NEC Navy enlisting classification, like MOS for the Army. And so I've got a bunch of corpsman that, you know raise their hands and said, "OK, I want to be a cast tech." I developed a course, and both wrote a text and, you know, some myself, stole some from other places. And hands on stuff, and then they went and did an active duty, two-week time at a Navy hospital in the cast room, and we got them signed off to get their NEC as cast techs, which actually turned out to be a really good thing, because the next year, we got mobilized and we had our full quote of cast techs filled. We didn't have to try and steal them from someplace else.

Kurtz: OK. So we're talking about mobilizing. Is this, the first Gulf War?

Oreck: First Gulf War.

Kurtz: Tell us about that.

Oreck: Well, pretty straightforward. We--you know, it was--.

Kurtz: When did you get mobilized in relationship to when the kickoff of--.

Oreck: Well, we were over there before the war started. We were delayed about a month because what happened was, you know, because invasion was in the end of August, I think. No, end of July, beginning of August, was when Saddam invaded. And, you know, became obvious fairly quickly that this was going to be a bit of a buildup for kickass. And we were notified fairly early on--like, September, early October, that, you know, our name was out of the hat for this. And we got mobilized about a month later, three to four weeks later than we planned, which caused people a little bit of heartburn. Some kind of a lessons learned things. You tell people you're going to mobilize them on a given day, then mobilize them because, you know, nurses had said, OK, now put me on shift. And, you know, not putting surgeries on. And because the gear that, for our unit, there were prepositioned sets of gears in a large, about 500 standard shipping containers, was your hospital in a box. You opened it up, put it together, you had a 500-bed hospital. And of course, living quarters for

900 people and a chow hall, and everything. Little T structure, and even a fire engine, because you--.

Kurtz: You needed a fire engine. Sure.

Oreck: Needed a fire engine, in case, you know? So our gear was stored in--the gear they used for us was stored in a cave in Norway, you know, to be used in case the Russkies came across the North there, the Marines had an assignment during the Cold War, the Marine units were told off to reinforce Northern Norway. And they would do exercises about this all the time, to reinforce Norway against the Russians coming across Northern Norway, which was what's going to happen for a variety of reasons. So the gear was in a big cave there. And, you know, the idea was sort of left over from what the Germans did from World War II. We would set up the hospital at least partially in a cave and partially outside. And, you know, when I heard that there were things like that, I said, that's where I want to go because, you know, if we kick off war with the Russians, having a mountain full of rock over me sounds like a great idea. [laughs] I may have born at night, but it wasn't last night. So, but there was really crappy weather, in Norway and in the North Sea. So it took them a long time to get the gear from the cave to the ship, and onto the ship, and then ship it from Norway all the way to the Persian Gulf.

Kurtz: Where in the Persian Gulf was this hospital?

Oreck: Well, we ended up setting up near Al Jubail, about 70 miles south of the border.

Kurtz: OK. So in Kuwait?

Oreck: No, in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia.

Kurtz: OK. So when you got there, were the boxes sitting there waiting for you?

Oreck: Yeah. Well, what had happened was that there's a whole system for the way this works. You send what's called an air debt, which is a lot of CBs and a bunch of your staff, not a lot of people. And they sort of get the equipment from the port, or wherever it is, to the spot where it's supposed to be, and start sorting it out. All the boxes are coded, and so on. Then you send an advance party whose job it is to erect the tents that are living quarters. You know, unfold the cots and put them in there. And then the main body arrives, and then the main body erects the hospital. And there's a whole system. So I was one of the shift supervisors for hospital construction. And there's a whole way you do it. You know, you have different crews. One crew lays out the bags of metal braces for the tents, and the next crew lays out the bags of canvas, and then there's another

crew that comes after them that puts the metal together. And so it's all specialized, and you start at one end of the hospital and you build. You know, one end is built, and then the last crew is the so-called stuffing crew. They take the stuff out and they stuff it in the hospital. You know, they're beds or the--and so you build it from one end to the other. And when you get partway done, then you'd call up and say, OK, we're ready to start taking casualties. You don't have to be all the way finished, you just have to get a certain amount done, and then you can build the rest of the wards in the next day or two.

Kurtz: What was your job as a doctor over there?

Oreck: I was an orthopedic surgeon. I was practicing orthopedic surgery.

Kurtz: So how many operations did you have to do? What war didn't have a lot of casualties.

Oreck: No. We had--we saw the most of any Navy hospital of casualties, which wasn't, fortunately, a lot. We saw casualties from some of the Allied forces. We, of course, dealt--we had a joke that if Saddam had dropped footballs and volleyballs over the Marine camps instead of trying to fire scuds, he would have caused more casualties as the Marines beat themselves up playing sports. So we would see sports injuries. You know, a guy going to break his wrist playing sports or blow his knee out playing, you know, touch football, which was not really touch football, you know? And so we would see that kind of thing. And it would be road accidents, and we'd see that kind of thing. After the ground war stopped, we'd get survivors of a plane crash. It was a Saudi C1-30 carrying Senegalese soldiers from one of the Muslim, you know, coalition that was there. Back from Mecca, because it was the time of the hajj. And long story behind that, but the guy augered in at the field and killed most of the Senegalese on board the aircraft. And we got four or five--well, five or six--we had five or six guys on the helicopters that came in. And, you know, it was the usual thing, you'd see helicopters flying toward you. And about the same time, you saw them break for the landing spots, the loudspeaker would go off and say they were incoming wounded. And one of the guys was DOA, dead on arrival. And the other guys were bad. You know, they were a combination of broken bones, internal injuries, burns. At least one of them didn't make it. He went to--we stabilized him, then he went to a burn unit in Kuwait in Bahrain, and he didn't make it.

Kurtz: Was there any defensive perimeter set up around his hospital?

Oreck: Oh yeah. What ended up happening, we had barbed wire around us. And internally, we had a master at arms force who, we're responsible for internal security. For external security, we got a couple platoons, maybe

half the company of Reserve Infantry Marines, I think from St. Louis, who bunked in one of our tents, a couple of our tents, and they set up bunkers, picket--excuse me--outside the wire with 240 golfs and other weapons of, you know, a lot more death dealing than we had. So we just had M16s and 45s. And, you know, they were external security outside the ward.

Kurtz: Did you have any contact with the Saudi people?

Oreck: Very little. You know, we had some merchants come in to, you know the typical thing where you could get somebody's name, you know, phonetically spelled in Arabic in gold, and then you could give that to your wife, and other goodies. After the ground war was over, we had some contact with the Saudis at a hospital in Jubail, which we used for some surgery after the ground war, after the war was over, it was still there. We made arrangements to use that place for surgery, because of course, a lot of the Saudis had boogied, because, you know, Jubail was uncomfortably close to the border. A lot of the European doctors who work at the hospital had all decided that this was a good time to take a vacation in Europe. So the place was kind of standing empty. They had some nurses there, some of the administrative staff, some local docs who were doing outpatient clinic stuff. But the OR--.

[break in recording, phone ringing][51:16]

Kurtz: We can go again. How long did you stay in Saudi Arabia after the war was over?

Oreck: A few months. We were the last big medical unit out of there, because we needed--as, you know, the smaller ones that were attached directly to the Marine Corps left, the fleet hospital that was in the port. We were out in the desert. It was the fleet hospital, active duty fleet hospital in port that had been there longer than we had, plus they wanted the dock space at the port for martialing yard [??]. So they got out of there. And so we were the--you know, they had to keep surgical capability in that part of Saudi Arabia. We were it. So we cut down, took part of the hospital apart, and stuck it back in the box, and sent some people home. And then I stayed with the main party that--and then there was a rear party for finishing the dismantling. But--.

Kurtz: Did they send the boxes back to Norway then, or--.

Oreck: No, they sent them back to the States for refurbishing and, you know, all that kind of stuff. Because, I mean, you know, we'd used gear and some stuff had been broken, and all kinds of stories about that, too. But you had to improvise.

Kurtz: OK. When you got back--were you here in Madison when this--.

Oreck: No, I was in practice In New Jersey, at the time.

Kurtz: New Jersey. So when you came back, what happened as far as drill requirements and stuff like that?

Oreck: As I recall, you could bag it for three months, I think. I think that was the term. I didn't because I was in a leadership position so I, you know, was doing some stuff.

Kurtz: Did you--were you able to go right back into practice?

Oreck: Oh yeah. I mean, you know, [laughs] my--well, that's another story, but my senior partner, I mean, he almost expected me to go back to work two days after I stepped off the airplane.

Kurtz: Did you have any decompression issues or anything like this? Was this different than your regular practice? Or--.

Oreck: Oh yeah. I mean, everything was different. We had missile attacks almost every night during the war. At the end of the ground war, I was detached. Since I had a lot of field experience, I worked with Marines and stuff. And, you know, I'd been a real Navy officer, not just a doc. I was one of two guys detached to go to Kuwait City to be a doctor for the EOD group, explosive ordinance disposal group there. Two of us rotated back and forth every three, four weeks. It was American, British, and Australian divers who were cleaning out the explosives, booby traps in the port, so they could open up the port. It wasn't salvaging. They were just sanitizing the place. So I was up there for a while. And that was, you know, just, you know, sit call, and if anybody got hurt, taking care of that, and, you know, potentially dealing with diving issues. I was a sport diver, so I had some experience. You know, I wasn't hyperbaric qualifying. There was a ship out there that had a chamber on it, I knew how to--but all that administrative stuff, because we were--and here I was, literally in the port in Downtown Kuwait City. You know, no units were supposed to be inside ring three. And we were, you know, right there in the middle. And, you know, I had to figure out every day how to access medevac. And, I mean, my capabilities, they were very limited, just basically trying to keep somebody alive until they can get to an operating room. So I had to--and those were docs, you know, people recycling. And the war was over. And so every day, it was a bit of a struggle to find out who was still there, you know, what units were there, and what was the frequency even to call them on, or a landline? What kind of helicopters did we have? It was a problem that the medevac helicopters out of Kuwait International Airport,

which was a ways from us, were all Army helicopters. So they were single-engine Hueys. But all, you know, Army guys don't like flying over blue things, especially in single-engine helicopters. And so they didn't have a Stokes litter. And so that was an issue. And finally, I found the Brits, the Royal Navy, had some Sea Kings up at a place called St. George's lines. And I was able to tap into them, into their medevac frequency so that if we needed help, we could call them up. You know, we had radio capability, and we could--and there were problems with that too, because some of the radios we had didn't work too good in the middle of the city. They weren't designed for working in the middle of the city.

Kurtz: What kind of contact did you have with the Kuwaitis?

Oreck: Not a lot. I mean, myself, I had to drive around a lot. My corpsmen and I had to drive around Kuwait a lot to get hands on stuff or pick up supplies from the Army hospital at Kuwait International. We'd get replenishment of supplies. And, you know, we would--I mean, they'd wave at us, and they would be nice and friendly. I don't speak much Arabic, just a few words. I had to go through the Army Civil Affairs people to get to the Kuwaiti pest control people. It sounds crazy, but we had a problem with--we were in the port. So I had a lot of things. We had a lot of flies, because the garbage collection in the city had broken down during the war. So the parks had been turned into open-air garbage dumps. And they were burning, and that added, on top of the oil smoke, an ambiance, if you will, to the city that was different. [laughs] So I was concerned about flies. And I don't want to get too graphic, but we had burn barrels. You know what those are. And so, you know, the fly lands on what's in a burn barrel, and it lands on your chow, guess what's been--just dumped on your chow. Yeah, it's what medical people call fomites. And so we needed to control the flies, and I was concerned about rat infestation, you know, being at the port and everything. So in order to get supplies, I was able to get--I got hooked up with the Kuwaiti Ministry of Pest Control, or whatever. And I got fly bait from them, which is granular stuff. You put it in a paper plate and pour some apple juice on it. And the flies would go to that, and, you know, that would keep them off the chow. We were living in a warehouse, you know? And then we got one of the rat catchers to come out and set traps. I didn't have traps. But people understand, when you do field medicine like I did for my entire career, pretty much, I was only in hospital units. That was a unit that would go to a hard wall hospital for a miniscule proportion of my time in the Navy. And so I took a lot of correspondence courses. One of the correspondence courses I took before The Gulf War was rodent pest control for medical people, learning about pesticides and how to control rodents and pests, because when you're in the field, that's a big problem. So guess what, you know? Orthopedic surgeon taking rodent pest control. Oh, you'll never use that. BS. Eighteen months after I finished the course, this is a major concern for me in

Kuwait. So we got the rat catcher. He'd come out, and then we would, you know, escort him around when Marines would--unarmed security. We had a FAST platoon. And some fleet anti-terrorist support--and they would, you know, escort them around while I set the rat traps and checked that. We had one interesting incident with, you know, the sheik who was in charge of the port drove up one day. We had what we called Gaddafi blocks in front of our--you know, the concrete blocks, we had the zig-zag. We had those in front of the entrance to the port, of course we had a machine gun set up and, you know, we were taking fire from time to time. You know, whether it's snipers or celebrators, you didn't know, but it was coming through our compound. And so this guy shows up. And you got to understand, you know, the oil wells are burning, the garbage dumps are burning. The soot in the air, you'd run your hand over your head, and you'd be withdrawal [??] high and tight. And, you know, you'd run your hand over your head, it was like running over an engine block. You'd become greasy and oily. This guy shows up in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes. Spotless. I mean, spotless. Must have just come out of the detailer-- And gets out in his flowing white--I mean, brilliantly white dishdasha robe to talk to our Commodore, the guy who's in charge of the whole court clearance thing. And it's about a salvage issue. A ship that was down, you know, had a whole in it, and was still there. It was shallow, but it was touching bottom. And, you know, we weren't a salvage setup. We were explosive ordinance guys, you know? Bomb disposal. And so he's going through the interpreter about, you know--I mean, here's the guy who's supposedly in charge of the port, and he's asking our Commodore, "Well, what do I do?" You know, and finally, the Commodore, said--well, basically, he said, "Look in the yellow pages to find Ace Marine Towing and Salvage, and they'll come and plug the hole in the ship, and pump it out, and put it where you want it." You know, obviously this guy was the guy in charge, but there had been somebody working for him who'd get all the grunt work who either was dead, or fled, or died [inaudible].

Kurtz: He had not taken any correspondence courses [inaudible].

Oreck: No. Well, this was very typical of the Persian Gulf, is you had these guys who were the guy in charge, but their knowledge of what really went on was fairly rudimentary. And they had people, usually Arabs from other countries, or Europeans, or somebody, who had the knowledge, the technical knowledge, who did the grunt work. And, you know, but they were the managing director.

Kurtz: How was your unit's morale in the time you were over there?

Oreck: Fabulously high. I mean, it was very high. Of course, after the war, and when we were sticking around, people wanted to go home. They didn't see themselves busy. I mean, morale didn't get bad, but it wasn't--but, I mean,

there was--I mean, the morale was outstanding. I mean, and you're talking about people, doctors, nurses, other people that have been pulled away from their civilian jobs, from their families. For many people, they took a huge financial cut during the time that they were over there. And not only just the doctor, but some other people had higher paying jobs, and they weren't, you know--they weren't getting the dough they were getting. And--.

[File 2] [break in recording 00:00-00:15]

Kurtz: --and, you know, the tape's still working. You were talking about what you were doing in Kuwait City. Is there anything else that we haven't covered that was a highlight?

Oreck: Well, it was a very interesting time. And I do--I mean it was--I have photographs of me in a house that had been commandeered by the Iraqis, obviously some rich person lived there. In the basement, they had a huge sand table with all their projections of how they thought the Marines were going to land in Kuwait City, which was fascinating. I had one incident. My corpsmen and I, I mean, we went around the city. And it was really amazing, the Iraqis at various intersections, they had torn up the streets and sort of built these bunkers out of cobblestones. I mean, they were just pretty worthless against anything, except rifle fire. And there was ammo all over the place. I mean, you'd go to the bunker, and you'd see, you know, a dozen boxes of ammo. You know, a few standard wooden cases, green painted. And all kinds of ammo was just lying around. And we're driving back one day to the compound, and we see these kids on the side of the street, playing. They're pounding this thing against the ground. And what it is, it's an RPG round. You know, they got it by the hand--by the tail, and you got the diamond-shaped head. And they're hitting, they're just playing with it. And my corpsmen and I looked at each other, and we just shook our heads and kept driving. And the reason was neither one of us spoke enough Arabic to be able to shout at the kids and say don't do this. And, you know, we knew, in our heart of hearts, you know, what might happen. If we walk over to take it away from them, you know, the minute we get close enough, they'll hit it, and then it'll go off. And, you know, our wives get the visit from the guy in the dress uniform. And, you know, it was sort of--I mean, there were a lot of civilians being injured every day with live ammo. People with lying around were playing with it. And, you know, we kind of felt a little helpless, but, you know, it was--you know, it's not our job, and I'm sure as hell not getting killed, you know, trying to stop them. You know, if their mom or dad's not out there monitoring them, I can't do it for them.

Kurtz: Let's hop now--you're back in the United States. How did they put your unit back together after the deployment?

Oreck: Well, I mean, most of the people stuck around for a while. Some people--I mean, because we had our corps people, that we'd drawn people from other units to fill holes because we weren't 100% staffed. And then after a while, people dribbled away. Some retired, some got out, some transferred to other units. And the unit, you know, would reconstitute. But, you know, for me, I was-- a year later, I was gone. I was here in Madison.

Kurtz: OK. And would you stay in the same hospital, fleet hospital here in Madison?

Oreck: No, no. Well, the reason I came out to Madison was I came back. And I was in a group of four people. Three were partners, one was an employee. I was the number two guy; I was the second guy in the group. And the senior guy and I had it out. You know, you've got to quit the Navy, you've got to do this, you've got to do that, and we're going to do some other changes the way this group is structured, and blah-blah-blah. And--.

Kurtz: That didn't work for you.

Oreck: Well, no. And it was a long, sad story. I called the Department of Labor, who's supposed to protect you, and they said, "Well, doc"--the guy was very helpful in the sense of being personally helpful--he said, "You got two problems. Number one, you're not really an employee. You're a partner, based on paper. And so therefore, the provisions of the reemployment act are very fuzzy with--in your situation." And he says, "Number two, frankly, the guys at Justice are not interested in the problems of a rich doctor, they're interested in the guy that works for Moe's Dry Cleaning, you know, who [inaudible] job. And number three, we can't do anything until he does something." You know, which basically meant I had to then be thrown out of my partnership or be in a big legal battle before I could even ask for help, which Department of Justice might or might not give them. I talked to a private lawyer who said if I stuck around, basically, even though I had the liabilities of a partner, I would have all the job security of somebody who could be fired on five minutes notice. And so put all that together with a number of other factors, and I moved out here to Madison.

Kurtz: OK. And was there an available unit for you to go to here in Madison?

Oreck: Oh yes. There was. There was.

Kurtz: And was it, again, a fleet hospital type arrangement?

Oreck: Well, it was actually for about, oh, six months, maybe. It was a private's unit that was designed to augment Great Lakes Naval Hospital. But, not

even six months, but, like, four months later, it--four or five months later, it morphed into a fleet hospital unit.

Kurtz: Was there any problem with your employers here in Madison about being a naval doctor?

Oreck: No, not really. I mean, you know, first, I was with a private group, and then we all morphed into the university. Of course, you know, once you're with the university, it's a state business. In the NLPP group, which I was part of, it was not really a problem. I took my call, I did my work, and I didn't, you know--if I was gone for my military time, the call I missed during my military time, I made up. You know, and I didn't have any problem. At one point, for about 30 seconds, somebody said something about it. Somebody in the administration said, well, you know, something about time off, and he said, you know, you're not writing down this military time, its vacation time or something. I said, you know, under federal and state law, it's mandated that his military time is given to me at no loss and taking it without pay. And in my situation, if I wasn't working, you know, if I don't see patients for a day that comes out of my pocket. So [inaudible] going straight sour was production based. So, you know, basically, any time I took off was in my own expense, and I mentioned that to them, and, you know, mentioned that in fact, they really didn't want to run into the law on this one. And they apologized very quickly. And that was the end of that. I mean, it took about 30 seconds, so it was not--

Kurtz: Yeah. Was there any difference in this new unit that you were involved in than the one you were previously?

Oreck: Well, not really. I mean, the same mission, some of the people had deployed during the first Gulf War. And, you know, and I was rising up the food chain in terms of responsibility.

Kurtz: So is the drill situation the same thing as it was before?

Oreck: Yeah. It was a flex drill unit, this particular--there were two fleet hospital detachments here in Madison at the time. One was a flex drill unit, one was not. And we did the same thing. I mean, very, very shortly after I was here, the guy that was in charge of the flex drill unit retired. I became the officer in charge, and we had the same policies. You know, we have to train the corpsmen, we have to cover physicals in Madison, and with the Navy, and with the Marines. It was collocated Marine unit. And so we divvied it up. You know, we had a schedule, everybody pitched in. You know, some happier than others, but--and I said, you know, there's certain training we have to do to be ready. And, you know, we have to do that. And other than that [inaudible]--

Kurtz: What was the training that's different than the medical training that you had to do?

Oreck: Well, again, going to this training place out in California, there was a phase two training. You know, everything about, everything in the field. I mean, in a sense, once you get over the equipment differences and the fact you're operating in a little steel can instead of regular operating room, you know, surgery is surgery. That's not a problem. I mean, there are certain principals in war surgery that are different in civilian, but that's sort of a doctor thing that you can train for mentally, and with lectures and so forth. But all the other stuff. I mean, everything as simple as how to wear your field gear, qualifying with weapons, learning how to live in the field, learning survival in harsh environments. All that stuff.

Kurtz: Was there some lessons learned from the first Gulf War that transferred into this?

Oreck: Yeah, I think more by the people that were deployed than the official Navy structure. I think was a little, I think, less receptive to lessons learned. But yeah, I mean, those of us that were veterans applied that knowledge and, you know, copied people that weren't.

Kurtz: What was your reaction to the Madison community, which isn't the most supportive of the military?

Oreck: Well, you know, it never really affected me that bad. You know, it wasn't like during Vietnam where I'd be at an airport in a uniform and catch all sorts of nonsense. You know nobody in the group I was in or in the university ever said to me, oh, you know, you're a fascist killer or something like that. I mean, there was the politics around here, and I just sort of ignored it. I mean, you know?

Kurtz: Yeah. It's the only thing you really can do.

Oreck: I mean, you know, my office, you know, is a little in-your-face. I've got some Gulf War souvenirs hanging up on the--not gory stuff, but, you know, hanging on the wall. I've got a Semper Fi bumper sticker on my office. Yeah, everybody knows where I'm coming from. And my license plate on my car is one of the veterans--you know, one of the Navy Reserve plates. It's a military plate, and it says N-A-V-Y-M-D. You know? So there's no secret here. There's no--but I've found people to be, at least in Madison, at least fairly reasonable in terms of, you know, not being ridiculous. And I consider some of the politics in Madison, on various levels, incredibly puerile. But--.

Kurtz: Well, having lived here most of my life, I can't disagree with you. [laughs]

Oreck: I mean, you know, it's like, you know, the City Council will do things like whether or not you like Mr. Bush as president, for the City Council of Madison to waste time saying that we ought to be in our out of Iraq, or we ought or ought not to impeach Mr. Bush, you know, this is a waste of the taxpayers' money. You know, you're a private citizen make your opinions known. But City Council has no opinion.

Kurtz: I mean they have no authority.

Oreck: They can't do anything, so why don't you worry about the streets plowed, which is a little more important?

Kurtz: Yeah. Which they don't do the greatest job.

Oreck: Well, it's not--I don't complain about Madison too much for services. But the point of the matter is, you know, the politics are what they are. And, you know, since no one's thrown a rock at me or gotten in my face in a way that I can't deal with, I really don't let it bother me.

Kurtz: OK. Well, tell us about the second Gulf experience you had.

Oreck: Well, what I did after, when I moved out here, I ended up, you know, you said, moving up the food chain. And then I was executive officer of the fleet hospital I used to be with in New Jersey. So I was second in command of that. So I would fly to New Jersey every month to do my drills there. And usually, it was a three-day weekend for me. I'd fly out Thursday night, work Friday, Saturday, Sunday, come back Sunday evening. I did that for a year, then I did two years as executive officer of the fleet hospital in Minneapolis, which was just a drive. And again, that was a three-day weekend. And that's when I started my big-time commuting. And then my next job after that was regimental surgeon with the 23rd Marines. I had been with the Marines before in the past, and the regimental headquarters for the 23rd Marines is in the San Francisco Bay Area. So again, I was commuting. I would fly out on Thursday night to San Francisco, and then fly back Sunday afternoon, Sunday evening, from San Francisco back here.

Kurtz: What were the duties of the regimental surgeon?

Oreck: Many and varied. [laughs] The regimental surgeon is senior staff officer on the staff, regimental staff. You are the medical advisor to the regimental commander. So anything that affects the regimen, and there are three battalions in the regiment. So anything that any of our units or sub-units would do, or the battalion would be doing work that had a medical

implication was my job to be involved somehow. Now, of course, each battalion head was supposed to have a battalion surgeon, and an assistant battalion surgeon. So two Navy docs in each battalion. And they were sort of, you know, they didn't work for me in the chain of command, but they did work for me as regimental surgeon, in a sense. So I'd make sure everything was going right there. And just anything medical. I mean, anything stupid as, you know, dealing with what are called NOEs--we used to call them [inaudible]. Somebody gets hurt on a drill weekend, so the Navy has to take care of them, issues like that. The deployment issues. If people went overseas for exercise--this is pre-9/11, now--medical planning for exercises. For example, at one point, one active duty period for three weeks, I was the--what we call MAGTF surgeon, Marine Air-Ground Taskforce surgeon for amphibious operations. We were doing a battalion size--it was a battalion of Marines. We had attached things like artillery and tanks, and air units. And, you know, so several, 3,000 marines, and a number of sailors, trading and then going to sea for a while, and then coming and doing an amphibious assault in Southern California. I was the senior doctor for that entire evolution. So I was in charge of any-- I'd write the medical part of the operation called NQX. I was in charge of making sure we had enough corpsmen. I was in charge of all the training-- in a sense. I mean, I had a super. Didn't do it myself, but making sure that the corpsmen got training during their active duty period, coordinating the doctors from the infantry and the air wing, making sure we had medical coverage.

Kurtz: To sum it up, it's basically an administrative job rather than an operations room job?

Oreck: Right. I mean, for the headquarters company, I was a doc for that, which about 200 people. I was the doc for the headquarters company. I only had a couple of corpsmen that worked for me. If we deployed, my RAS--regimental aid station--would be very small potatoes, and I was not--unlike a battalion aid station, where the wounded might come, in get treated, and then either get shipped back or to the rear--I was not in the line to receive any wounded. I would--myself and my corpsmen would only be dealing with any illness or combat casualties within the headquarters company area. But I had tons of administrative and staff duties.

Kurtz: Now, you mentioned 9/11. This was before 9/11.

Oreck: I reported to the regiment before 9/11, that's correct.

Kurtz: Did this change at 9/11?

Oreck: Oh yeah.

Kurtz: Tell us about that, please.

Oreck: Well, I mean, it was--we--my drill weekend was the weekend after 9/11. And I managed to get to San Francisco. The planes were flying again, somewhat. You don't want to know what it cost me for the last minute tickets. But the planes were flying so we went to--and we were just--you know, what's next? The commanding officer of the 23rd Marines, which was an active duty Marine Colonel, was also the--double hatted as the Commander of the 12th Marine Corps Division which was just an administrative environment. But that was a chunk of the West Coast. So we were--we started planning about what happens if there's a terrorist event in San Francisco? You know? And we all of the sudden--normally, you know, people didn't carry--the duty didn't carry weapons. Now whoever was on duty was, you know, the NCO of the day was carrying a loaded nine-mil. And we actually cited--we put sandbag machine gun nests on two corners of the reserve center on the roof, you know, with the mounts up there. The weapons were still in the armory. And registered the beating zones [??]. I mean, this was no shit. I mean, you know, we had no idea, you know, what was going to happen next. But it was a huge pucker factor, and it was, you know, business as usual had ceased, that noon on 9/11.

Kurtz: How long did it take for things to settle down?

Oreck: Well, they didn't. I mean, they calmed down. But, you know, business as usual, it's still not business as usual. I mean, you know, it was--you know, it was, OK, now, you know, no shit, we're going to war. And in 2003, I mean, there weren't any reserve units to speak of that were--well OK, what happened was one of our battalions in 2002--and this is not isolated, there were other Marine groups that were getting called up for things. But before the Iraq War--no, excuse me, 2001, right, the invasion was the spring of 2003. So in 2001, the winter of 2001-2002, one of our three battalions was recalled to active duty, and went to Camp Pendleton. And they were the fire brigade, in a sense. Their job--excuse me--was to have a company on alert at all times. There were California Air Guard C-130s parked out at Camp Pendleton. And in less than four hours, they'd be on a C-130 going anyplace in a large chunk in the Western United States to deal with--.

Kurtz: A problem.

Oreck: --some potential terrorist-type problem. And so they were called, they were recalled to active duty. Well, I had issues that I had to deal with as a senior medical officer. Then in the fall, early fall of 2002, the Colonel came to us and said, "Guys, you're probably going to be home for

Thanksgiving, but you're not going to be home for Christmas." We were scheduled, the 23rd Marines were scheduled to be recalled to active duty as a regiment and go to Iraq. We were supposed to be--there were three regimental combat teams that were going to be--it ended up being the Hard Charges. We were going to be the fourth regimental combat team. We were going to be dismount, we were going to--as these guys flew up the road, we were going to come behind them, you know, kicking doors, take names, do what we had to do to, you know, make sure the main supply route was secure, and keep any knuckle heads from, you know, reconstituting in the rear area, that kind of thing. That was our job. And we were pretty firm on that. And that's what the Colonel told us. So at that point, the fall of 2002, early fall of 2002, you know, I went into hyperspaz. I mean, you have to understand that even before this, I would spend an hour a day on my computer, thank God, for email, you know, corresponding with--or doing work for money. You know unclassified work for my job. This was not just my drill weekend, in special active duties and conferences and all that. This was almost every weeknight, sometimes every night of the week, spending a little time doing my Navy job. And that's very time consuming. And then of course at this point--so now I'm going to have three to four battalions of infantry. I'm working with the four supply people, you know, dealing with medical issues, dealing with--you know, planning immunizations, planning the mobilization plan. You know, making sure people are ready, making sure I have enough corpsmen. You know, just absolutely going nuts six ways from Sunday while I'm still having full surgical practice. And then, basically, even though the Marine boss over there was screaming for us, we didn't get called up. The regiment didn't go, as that--our battalion that had already been called up for active duty was supposed to get off, like, in January, and they were told, "Nope, you're not going home," and they got on a plane and they went to Iraq. And they were one of two Reserve Infantry battalions who were in the fight in the beginning of the war. I mean, they were there from the beginning. So, you know, we're sitting there for a while with our thumbs up our butts. And finally, you know, the word came out. "No, it's just, it's not happening."--which was a disappointment to us. And to editorialize, it was a huge mistake. The job that we were supposed to do that was, oh no, we're not going to need that job, we don't want--.

Kurtz: So this was part of this question of not enough troops.

Oreck: Oh yeah. Big time. And it had consequences. I could personally attest to that. So anyway, so we're not going anywhere. We're kind of, you know, stood down from hyperspaz mode that winter. And during the winter, I got a call from the Division Surgeon. You know, my sort of uberboss on the medical dotted line, who I knew very well. And he called me up, and he said, "Look, Steve, I know you had intel experience and so on. If this thing

steps off, headquarters Marine Corps is going to need watch standers for the operations center. We have a medical desk, and they don't have any--they can't have people staffing 24/7, and I know you have experience in this kind of thing. You know, could you do this?" And I said, "Sure, you know, good to go." I said, "Let me just double check with my boss." Colonel said, "Yeah, you know, no problem, you're not doing anything. So, you know, as long as the understanding is if we need you, we call you up and you come back." You know, I told that to the Division Surgeon, he said cool, no problem. He said, you know, "I'll call you if I need you." I said, "OK, no problem." So one Thursday morning, a little time later, I get a call from this guy and he says, "Steve, remember we talked about this?" "Yeah." He said, "You good to go?" I said, "Yeah, good to go. No problem." He says, "Good." It's Thursday morning. He says, "Good, I need you in Washington, six o'clock, Monday."

Kurtz: Oh boy.

Oreck: So I said--well, [inaudible] I said, "Well, can I--you want my senior chief there? He's an E8 enlisted--do you want my senior chief there to also stand watch?" He said, "Yeah, we could use a senior chief, he wants to come." I said, "Great, let me get back to you in a couple minutes." Put down the phone, called my senior chief who lives in California. I said, "Senior chief, you want to do this?" He said, "Sure, Captain, good to go." And so I called him back, and while I was calling the surgeon back, the senior chief was calling the reserve center in California that managed our administrative stuff and said, you know, we need orders, and we need them this afternoon. And I put down the phone and went out to my office said and said, "Cancel everything. I'll tell you when I'm coming back." Came home, packed my bag, and, you know, flew to Washington on Sunday, and was there for about a month. You know, and the war didn't last that long, so--and my time in D.C. consisted of working in an operations center. You know, it was three shifts a day. You were there about nine, nine and a half hours with overlapping shifts. You know, and one of these rooms, like, gets more, you have to go through a couple of doors, and passes and cameras, and, you know, secret squirrel, and all the rest of that.

Kurtz: Didn't it seem kind of strange to be in an operations center for a war when the environment you were in wasn't like a war?

Oreck: Well, I mean, it was--you know, obviously, I wasn't in the combat zone. But, you know, through the miracles of modern communications and stuff like that, you could--and we weren't controlling things.

Kurtz: Well, I didn't ask the question right. I mean, I understand that you understood what was going on with the war and all of that. But when you

left after your shift, it was just like being in Downtown Madison, wasn't it?

Oreck: Right. I mean, it was--there was no sense--you know, it wasn't like World War II where, you know; most males of a certain age were walking around in uniform all the time, or anything of it. There was no sense, sort of, when you left the building, we were staying in a hotel on the other--in the headquarters of Marine Corps on one side of Brockton National Cemetery, not too far from the Pentagon. You know, and we were staying in a hotel on the other side of the cemetery. It wasn't that far away. You know, five-minute drive, 10-minute drive. But I mean, you know, you drove there. Once you kind of left the environment, then there was no--you know, you went on the George Washington Parkway, which runs along the Potomac River there, and you get from one place to another. And near the Pentagon exit, you had Humvees with machine guns on top of it. But other than--once you passed away from that, there was absolutely no sense that anything was going on unless you went back to the hotel and turned on CNN.

Kurtz: So did your 23rd Marines ever get called to active duty for the war?

Oreck: The regiment as such did individual battalions, yes.

Kurtz: OK. So the headquarters didn't get deployed, but the battalions did?

Oreck: Yeah. We had some individual people go from the headquarters. But we never went as a headquarters [inaudible].

Kurtz: Did you retire then from that unit? Is that--

Oreck: No, no, no, no. I was there for four years. I did two tours, back-to-back tours as the regimental surgeon. And then I left that assignment, and was assigned as group surgeon for the 4th Marine Logistics Group. Now, it used to be called the FSSG. TO understand that, you have to understand a little bit about the way the Marine Corps is organized. The Fleet Marine Forces, which is the guys at the sharp end, if you will, are organized. There's division, there's wing, and there's group. Division is infantry and tanks and tracks and artillery, and those kind of trigger pullers. The air wing is--.

Kurtz: I got to turn the tape over.

[break in recording, tape flip][30:27]

Oreck: The division is the trigger pullers, basically. The air wing is, you know, everything that flies, and the air control units and anti-aircraft and stuff like

that. And group is combat service support. You know, trucks, heavy maintenance, heavy--construction engineering, not combat engineering. Echelon two medical, medical battalion, dental battalion, that kind of stuff. Communications battalion, higher order comm. That kind of thing. And so on active duty, there's the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Division, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Air Wing--excuse me--1st, 2nd, and 3rd Marine Logistics Groups, and then the Reserve Marines, there's the 4th Marine Division, 4th Marine Air Wing, and 4th Marine Logistics Group. So it mirrors the active duty structure pretty closely. So you have, just like on active duty, where you have a division surgeon who is the medical advisor and guru to the Commanding General of the division, and you have the Wing Surgeon for the Wing Commander, you have the group surgeon who is the senior staff, medical staff person for the Commanding General, the 4th Marine Logistics Group. And that was my job. And that was--I had no--basically, no hands-on medical responsibility. You know, I would have, you know, guys on the staff come to me and say, "Hey, I got a bad shoulder," or "You want to take a look at this?"-- you're an orthopedic surgeon. You know, or they'd have, you know, a medical problem in their family and they'd ask me questions about that. But in terms of actually holding sick call or doing any surgery, that was not part of my normal duty. I was strictly a senior staff--a general staff officer. And that was very busy. Extremely busy. That was in New Orleans, which was a good deal because headquarters Marine Force Reserve is in New Orleans. It was a good deal for me, because I'd fly to New Orleans for three or four days every month and stay with my brother and his wife and my nieces and nephew, and see my dad. And, you know, it was a nice way to end. That was the last tour I had. Extremely busy. You know, two hours a night on the computer. We had, you know, all kinds of issues. We had people going to Iraq all the time, or Afghanistan, you know? So we had issues there. We had, just all kinds of issues. And then we also had a operation plan role. Our headquarters had been changed from an administrative headquarters to a deploying headquarters. And had there been a war in Korea, our job was to go to Korea and be the rear area logistics managers. OK? The third MLG would be up front doing tactical logistics, you know, making sure the beans and bullets got to the individual units. We would be in the rear, integrating everything that came in from the States, and forwarding that, as well as dealing with host nation support, and just a whole raft of things. So we had a--so that was unclassified. We had a big, thick, secret operations plan, you know? And there was medical in there. And I wrote that, basically. I--it was a very sketchy outline, and I rewrote the entire classified medical and medical logistics portion of that, which was, you know, something you had to do. And the interface with the Army, and it was--I went over to Korea several times. And it was one of my dream jobs. I knew I wasn't going to make flag officer, I wasn't going to get a star, even though I'd been very busy in the reserves. There were certain things I had to do get my--you know, get your ticket punched. And

because I was so busy here in practice and everything else, I really did not have the time to get those extra ticket punches that would have made me in the top five for a star. I was told at one point that my name came up, I was on the shortlist, but not the short-shortlist.

Kurtz: How many slots--star slots were there?

Oreck: Not many. And they were cutting down, too. You know, that was OK. At one point, I wanted to have a star, and then I realized--also, I'm not the kind of the guy that pussyfoot or be terribly political.

Kurtz: Oh, come on. [laughs]

Oreck: I remember one surgeon's meeting, you know, the Surgeon General of the Navy is going on about some stuff. This is a three-star Admiral. And I stand up. You know, I'm a Captain, so I'm not totally--you know, I'm not J. S. Ragman. But, you know, I ask a rather pointed question. You know, an important question, and respectfully. But, you know, something I thought was key was when I was a regimental surgeon, key to our mission, an issue about, you know, doing our mission. Now, and this was after I went to war. And the response of the SG was "Captain Oreck, sit down, shut up, there will be no more questions." He walks out. Well, you know, right then and there, while I was congratulated by many of my peers by having the balls to ask the question, you know, it was--.

Kurtz: Your ticket remains unpunched when those things happen.

Oreck: Well, you know, it was not--this particular Vice Admiral was never going to be giving me the big smiley thumbs up to join the Admiral's Club. Which was OK, you know? At that point in my career, it was much more important for me to do what I thought was the right thing and have the respect of the people that worked for me than it was to be able to get a star. So to be--if you're in field medicine, and you're with the Marines--which was my real love--to be the division surgeon or the wing surgeon or the group surgeon is really--was the top job you could get as a Captain. There were a couple of really good ones, working at Headquarters Marine Corps and a couple other things. But to me, of course, I couldn't be the wing surgeon because I wasn't a flight surgeon. So, you know, getting group or division was, to me, a dream job. That was an affirmation of all the time I had put in the Navy, and so that's what I retired out of.

Kurtz: OK. How would you assess your Navy career, personally? Do you think it--were you satisfied with it? You feel--.

Oreck: I'll tell you, it probably was the most gratifying professional experience of my life. I mean, I really have enjoyed being a surgeon in private practice,

and university practice, taking care of people, and making a difference in people's lives and, you know, doing some good things. But overall, you know, my time in the Navy has been, you know, tremendously satisfying. I mean, there were huge frustrations. Huge frustrations. You know, beating my head against the wall about this, that, and the next thing, stuff you couldn't get done, or, you know, other stuff. But, you know, the satisfaction--I mean, I personally saved one Marine's life in the Gulf War. I actually put a Marine's ankle back together with an Air Force doc in Korea one time. It was an interesting story, but not relevant. But overall, you know, and having the respect. I liked working with the Marines. It was real clear, if you put out 100%, they'd do anything for you. If you put out 95%, if you fell down in front of them, they wouldn't lift their foot. And to be accepted by that group of people, and, you know, were complimented heavily, and, you know, "We like you here, doc," and, you know, that kind of thing, to be accepted and have them trust me, and feel that I was looking out for their health, and that they trusted me to put them back together if they got broken and so forth, was tremendously satisfying.

Kurtz: We've covered a lot of ground. Is there any ground we haven't covered that we should have?

Oreck: Well, I have to give my wife a lot of credit. She put up with this crap for a long time. And, you know--

Kurtz: That's why your house is getting remodeled now. [laughs]

Oreck: No, no, no. That's separate. But it's--you know, and it was tough on her, and it was tough sometimes on my kids. But, you know, I wouldn't trade it for anything. It's--you know, I--I guess I really regret that more people don't take advantage that, you know, it's a hard--even before the war in Iraq, , hard to recruit doctors to join the Reserves. It's hard to recruit people to do this. And they don't understand, you know, how important it is. And that's a frustration to me. I mean, now I miss it. I went down to Great Lakes last week, and was invited to be a speaker at the 4th Marine Division Services Conference on a particular medical issue. Saw a lot of my old friends, which, you know, I had to promise my wife they weren't going to give a mickey and shanghai me off to Iraq. But, you know, I miss the guys, I miss the--I mean, they're the best people I've worked with. Not that I've worked with bad people here, but, you know, in my medical practice, but the guys in the service I've worked with, officer and enlisted, with a few exceptions, of course, were the best people. And I think the reservists, in a way, because they were making a double sacrifice. You know, it was--you know, most people, it cost them money, every day they spent in uniform. You know, it cost them extra time. And they were good people, and they were doing this, and they had a common sense of

mission, and did it because they love their country and felt a sense of obligation, and were just good folks. And that was the best thing about it.

Kurtz: There's no better way to end it.

[end of interview]