

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
ELROY SCHEER
Radioman, Navy, World War II.

2002

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Scheer, Elroy, (1922-). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 45 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Elroy “Buck” Scheer, a Grafton, Wisconsin native, discusses his World War II service as a radioman in the Navy aboard the *USS Salamaua*. Scheer mentions enlisting, boot camp at Great Lakes (Illinois), radio school at Northwestern University (Illinois), and assignment to the USS Salamaua (CVE-96). During the Battle of Lingayen Gulf, he describes a kamikaze attack on his ship including the damage, the heroic efforts of the fire patrol, and the return to the States for repairs. He speaks of the initiation ritual he went through when he crossed the equator. Scheer touches upon reassignment to a fleet oil tanker and seeing Pacific islands such as Hawaii, Midway, and Saipan. He discusses using Morse code, concerns about Japanese interception of radio signals, and receiving messages about the liberation of the Philippines. He talks about spending two months in Nagasaki (Japan) after the atomic bomb was dropped and portrays the destruction he witnessed. Scheer touches on having reunions with other radio operators.

Biographical Sketch:

Scheer served in the Navy from 1943 through 1946. He served in the Pacific theater on an escort aircraft carrier in Task Force 57 and on a fleet oil tanker. After the war, he operated a painting business, Buck Scheer and Son, with his father and settled in Grafton (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Luke Kadybeck, 2002

Transcribed by Noreen Warren, 2010

Checked and corrected by Calvin John Pike, 2011

Corrections typed in by Angelica Engel, 2011

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

Luke: February 13, 2002. Elroy Scheer, World War II, US Navy, Radioman, Second Class. Alright, were you drafted or did you enlist?

Elroy: I volunteered.

Luke: Alright. What year did you—

Elroy: November of 1943.

Luke: November. Where were you living at the time that you were enlisted?

Elroy: I was living in the town of Grafton.

Luke: Okay. What made you decide to volunteer?

Elroy: Well, my number would have been up to be drafted, so I figured I'd go and I'd volunteer.

Luke: Okay. Do you recall your first days of service?

Elroy: Yeah, I went to boot camp on [Naval Station] Great Lakes.

Luke: Great Lakes, where's that?

Elroy: In Illinois.

Luke: Okay. Great Lakes, Illinois.

Elroy: Yeah.

Luke: After boot camp where did you go?

Elroy: After boot camp, I went to Northwestern University, the radio school.

Luke: Northwestern University, radio school.

Elroy: That was in Evanston, Illinois.

Luke: Pardon me?

Elroy: Evanston, Illinois.

Luke: Evanston, Illinois. How do you spell Evan—?

Elroy: "E-v-e-n."

Luke: Okay

Elroy: "E-s-t-o-n." I believe it is.

Luke: "E-s-t-o-n."

Elroy: I'm not very sure.

Luke: Okay. Do you remember arriving and what it was like?

Elroy: Yeah, it was a strange place where we had a lot of different people other than what was in boot camp with me. We had to make little changes with some stuff.

Luke: Okay, well, what was your job or assignment as radioman?

Elroy: As radioman, I had to type code. We had the Morse code, and I would come in over the air and, with it, we'd type messages and stuff.

Luke: So you would receive and—

Elroy: I'd receive, and while we were at radio school, and so we'd learn to send too.

Luke: Okay. How was radioman second class different than radioman, like, first class?

Elroy: Well, it just says you had a higher rating and that you were supposed to know a little bit more than the—and they just assumed that—originally from first class.

Luke: So second class was higher than first class.

Elroy: Yeah, second class was higher.

Luke: Okay.

Elroy: But, I should have really said different. Radioman, we started out as a fair receiver and we went to seaman first class, seaman second class, and then we got the rating of radioman first class, radioman second. Our radioman first class was higher.

Luke: Okay, so radioman first class was higher than—

Elroy: Than radioman second class.

Luke: Okay, and then—

Elroy: And then you got radioman third, radioman second and radioman first. Then you go to chief petty officer.

Luke: Okay.

Elroy: It's a long time. I don't remember. [Both laugh].

Luke: So, alright, were there many casualties in your unit?

Elroy: What do you—do you mean while we were hit?

Luke: Anytime during your service.

Elroy: In the time of service—well, we were hit by the kamikazes. There were 80 people hurt and 15 died, I believe.

Luke: 80 people hurt—

Elroy: —were hurt and 15 died.

Luke: Did you feel a lot of pressure or stress as radioman or—?

Elroy: Yeah, there was quite a bit of stress. Stress and tension.

Luke: Tell me about some of your most memorable experiences.

Elroy: Oh, I could see a lot of concrete by the ocean. That was more the carrier. We never got too close to land, but when—after we were hit, we came back to the United States and I was reassigned to a tanker. And we went over to Pearl Harbor and we were there for a couple of days and then the war ended. But, by being on that tanker, I got to see a lot of concrete, got to see Midway. And do you want all that now?

Luke: [unintelligible]

Elroy: We got to see Midway. We was over on Saipan—

Luke: How do you spell that? “S-a-i--”

Elroy: “-p-a-n.” And when we left Saipan, then I got to see Iwo Jima from aboard ship.

Luke: How do you spell Iwo Jima?

Elroy: "I-w-o J-i-m-a."

Luke: Okay.

Elroy: Then we went to Japan and I was at Nagasaki about two months after the bomb was dropped. I got to go to Tokyo, Yokohama—

Luke: Yokohama?

Elroy: Yokohama, "Y-o-k-o--" It's—you got me on that. "Yo-ko-ha-ma."

Luke: Okay.

Elroy: And while we were there we went to Jinsen, Korea, to deliver diesel fuel.

Luke: Okay.

Elroy: And I think that's it. Oh, I got to see [unintelligible] Island. We had a recreation party there and that. And that's just about—

Luke: Okay. Were you ever awarded any medals or citations?

Elroy: I've got medals. I got two Battle Stars from the Asiatic-Pacific Theatre at the Philippine Islands.

Luke: Wait. Hold on. Okay, two—

Elroy: Two.

Luke: Battle Stars.

Elroy: Battle Stars from Lingayen Gulf and Leyte.

Luke: Lingayen?

Elroy: Lingayen.

Luke: Lingayen Gulf.

Elroy: At Leyte. It's at the bottom—

Luke: Okay, and Ley—

- Elroy: Leyte. “L-e-y-t-e.” And I got medals. The four medals I got, one is for the Asiatic-Pacific Theatre, [one is for] the American Campaign, [one is for] World War Two and this is the Navy Occupation. So you got four.
- Luke: Okay, okay. I get it. That’s enough. What were they?
- Elroy: The one is for the Asiatic-Pacific Theater.
- Luke: Asia—?
- Elroy: Asiatic.
- Luke: Asiatic, okay. What’s the Asiatic-Pacific Theatre?
- Elroy: And that is the Battle of the Philippines and such.
- Luke: Okay, and what were the other ones?
- Elroy: And the other one is the—I got to look at this myself. Oh, this was the World War II medal.
- Luke: Okay.
- Elroy: This is World War II.
- Luke: Okay, this is the third one [unintelligible] and Occupation Service?
- Elroy: Occupation Service, yeah.
- Luke: And—
- Elroy: Then the other one is the Asiatic—is that—and this is the American Campaign.
- Luke: Okay.
- Elroy: Which is easy to—these is the war from 1941-45.
- Luke: Alright. Tell about when your ship was hit by a kamikaze.
- Elroy: Okay. I was on radio watch that morning and all of a sudden we were called to general quarters. And then we heard a loud explosion when the kamikaze hit on the right deck. It went through the hanger deck and it came out underwater in the engine room.
- Luke: You were on radio duty that morning?

- Elroy: Well, that Jap plane had two bombs aboard and only one bomb exploded. It pierced the hull of the ship and that's where we had gotten flooded and stuff.
- Luke: Actually, I can copy that from the tape.
- Elroy: Okay. Well, when the general quarters sounded, then—
- Luke: What's a gen—?
- Elroy: General quarters. That's when we got enemy aircraft and such. It's just like a fire drill in the school. When it hits, it—they have the general quarters, and each—everybody is assigned to different areas of the ship. And, when general quarters are sounded, then all the bulkhead doors would be closed. And that would save you from sinking, because if we wouldn't have been isolated to two areas, then the ship would have gone down. This way, it just flooded and then the other sections of the ship stayed afloat.
- Luke: Okay.
- Elroy: And—
- Luke: So, it's kinda like battle stations.
- Elroy: Yeah, it's—yeah, it's pre-battle battle stations, and it was our line of general quarters then.
- Luke: Okay.
- Elroy: So it—and then, after that, we had—there were fires and stuff, and I salute the fire patrol. They got the fires under control on the hanger deck because that wasn't underwater. It was just the engine room and the kitchen area that was flooded. And then, when we were hit, then we were like a lone duck. We were—they'd leave you alone, you know, but they did send one tug boat alongside with additional pumps so that they could pump water out and bring the level down. And while they were doing that, they had divers that went and plugged up the holes where the bomb had gone through.
- Luke: Oh, I see.
- Elroy: So, that was it, but then we—
- Luke: What? Do you remember the date?

Elroy: It was January the 13th at nine o'clock in the morning, 1945.

Luke: January 13th.

Elroy: 1945.

Luke: 9 a.m. 1945.

Elroy: Yes.

Luke: So this was pretty close to the end of the war?

Elroy: Let's see. The end of the war was in August. August. So you had February, March, April, May, June, so now you had about six months in between that.

Luke: So, I see. Fairly close.

Elroy: Yeah, then, after we were hit and had the ship stabilized, then we only had the forward engine room and that didn't give you much speed or anything. Because we made it over to—I believe it was—for the—they put us in dry dock and then they made some more repairs, and from there on we went to Pearl Harbor. And then we unloaded the ammunition and stuff that was good. And the planes that were good, we unloaded those, and then we went back to the States. We got back to San Francisco on the 26th of February, 1945. Then I came home on leave, where I was reassigned to the tanker. And the tanker I got aboard with was in Miami.

Luke: How did you entertain yourselves?

Elroy: What?

Luke: How did—how did you guys entertain yourselves?

Elroy: Entertain? We had movies—periodically you had movies, and, when we were off of duty, we'd probably play some cards or something like that.

Luke: Did you ever have like entertainers come on board or—

Elroy: No, not that I remember. Not aboard the carrier.

Luke: Okay.

Elroy: But, yeah, that's something that we'd never had like that while we were aboard.

- Luke: Okay. What kind of pranks or practical jokes would people pull?
- Elroy: No, I don't believe I ever did.
- Luke: That's fine. Do you recall any particularly humorous or unusual event that occurred while you were on board?
- Elroy: Oh, yeah, when we crossed the equator, then you had more like an initiation or whatever. I'll show you some. This was when we crossed the equator. Then we had the initiation, and you could call that humorous. But, I was there—we did—there is one picture—right, there is a picture. They had like a knife with a small electrical charge on it. It had a delay, and, all the underdogs or whatever, they had a table. And they'd collected some of their mail and they'd just take [the knife] and they would get a slight shock. And then on the stern of the ship, they had a big tank. They'd have garbage and water in it. So, we had a go into that tank with the garbage and come out and we had to crawl through a long sleeve. And there were guys with paddles. They would paddle your butt, you know. And then this guy—they had this guy smeared with grease and he would have to go up with—and kiss a greased phallus, and that was so you listened. And that was the initiation in recruiting. This was the tanker that I was on after last, but this was when I went to radio school at Northwestern.
- Luke: Which one?
- Elroy: This would be—this is Northwestern where I went to radio school.
- Luke: Okay.
- Elroy: And here's the university. Here's the building where we had our bunks and stayed in. These are your different classes that we had been in, the sixth through—and I think I went to sixth and commander, but that was radio school, and that was a two year course, and the feedback was in sixteen weeks.
- Luke: So—
- Elroy: And I think that it started with about 300 people and we ended up with about 200 that graduated. But—well, and then while we were at radio school—ah, there was one right on North Division there and then they had a raft, which was like a Liberty Ship with just the flight deck on it. And I think it was the planes from Glenview Naval Station that come in and they would practice landing and taking off on that ship. And not too many—I think it was last year there was an article in the paper where somebody—

some divers had gone down and they found some of the airplanes that had sank or whatever. And they had quite a story on that, but that was all through the World War II. And they had to have places for these people to have classes and stuff.

Luke: Okay, well, after you were so—

Elroy: And this shows some pictures in Nagasaki and then places were I was at. This was Nagasaki. This was the ship yard and this is the way after the [atomic] bomb got through. You see, this is really the series all tangled and messed.

Luke: That was after the—

Elroy: That was after the atomic bomb.

Luke: Okay.

Elroy: And we were—like I say, the war ended in August and we were there about two months after the war ended. And one of the questions was about radioactivity but the government said it was all clear, so we just took to believe them. That's the way it went. But, this is some of the destruction at Nagasaki. I think it was tense for a while driving around when a thousand people were dying. These are just mementos from Tokyo, stuff like that. I saw the Emperor's Palace. We couldn't get up near it because of the moat and stuff. Here it is. It shows the moat and the stuff from the Emperor's Palace. And we were right here, but we got close enough that we could take pictures and stuff.

Luke: Cool.

Elroy: And, here, this is the moat that leads to the Emperor's Palace--but they had American Soldiers here to keep us out from some of the area. But I was lucky that I, that we could take pictures at that time. We got some awesome mementos—in remembrance.

Luke: Okay. Can you recall the day your service ended?

Elroy: The day the service ended, that was a happy day [laughs]. It was May. May of '46, when I got discharged. I got discharged from [unintelligible].

Luke: Do you have a particular date or just May? That's fine if you don't.

Elroy: I think I got it on here. That was April 26th, 1946.

Luke: Oh, April, okay, so April 1946.

- Elroy: Yep.
- Luke: What did you do in the days and weeks that followed your discharge?
- Elroy: I was just bumming around and then I went back to my former employer. It was a person I knew, Harry Zones. I had a job there for a while, and then I left my—I made enough money on that job so then I went and I worked for Junger, Stowe and Reems.
- Luke: Who?
- Elroy: Junger, Stowe and Reems?
- Luke: Okay.
- Elroy: J-u-n-g-e-r.
- Luke: Did you make any close friendships while in your service?
- Elroy: Yeah, there was a—“Radio Operators” is ten couples who get together with [each other] every couple years. Have like a reunion and we just—Rita, my wife and I, just hosted one this last year. And then we found out [about] another guy who had died and another one is pretty ill. He couldn’t even come so—but we had an enjoyable time. We write to each other, talk on the phone and stuff like that. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**
- Luke: Ok, what did you go on to do with your career after the war?
- Elroy: I went on—I went into the painting business with my dad, painting walls and things.
- Luke: So painting and wallpaper?
- Elroy: Yeah.
- Luke: Do you have a name of the business? Or—
- Elroy: “Buck Scheer and Son.” It’s called “Buck Scheer and Son,” and my dad’s name was Frank, and—
- Luke: Buck Scheer and Son. Okay. How has your service and experiences affected your life?
- Elroy: Oh, I think that it would be a good experience. It would be an experience where you learn that you had to take orders and live by them.

- Luke: So you learn discipline?
- Elroy: Discipline, yeah. We learned discipline and comradeship as it turns out.
- Luke: That's about it. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we haven't covered? Anything at all. Go ahead.
- Elroy: I know one thing that I probably shouldn't say. That—but I—being a radio operator, I had a chance to get a hold of some messages, you know, but you're paid to have been taking stuff, and the—there was one item where on that liberation of the Philippines, there were an attack with 800 ships involved. It was the largest task force in the history of the United States Navy.
- Luke: So, the liberation of the Philippines—
- Elroy: The Philippines.
- Luke: Was the largest—
- Elroy: Task force in the history of the United States Navy.
- Luke: The liberation of--the largest task force.
- Elroy: In the history of the United States Navy.
- Luke: [Reading to himself]. Wow, 70 miles long. That's pretty good.
- Elroy: Yeah, and aboard ship, the radio operators would put up like a newspaper and this came over the press. And they were like the Associated Press and that's how we knew that it was the largest task group.
- Luke: I just remembered some more questions. What—I don't think I asked this. No. What made you decide to join the Navy?
- Elroy: What made me decide to join the Navy? I had a couple cousins that joined the Army, and they'd write and tell me of how they had to sleep in fox holes and they had the mud and stuff. And that's why I decided to join the Navy. And I had one son. He was in the Korean War. He also joined the Navy, so—
- Luke: I just had a question and I forgot it. Did you choose to be a radioman or was that what you just got assigned?

- Elroy: That's what I got to—they give you an aptitude test and stuff and I got—they got a rating that showed that you qualified for radio operator. I qualified for either radioman or signalman, and I choose to be a radioman.
- Luke: Cool.
- Elroy: And that's how you were chosen for that. That's all. That would come just before I go for graduation from boot camp. Then that's how they take you and place you. I think there were 300 of us. Let's see. There were 300 and some people, and, out of that, only about 200 made it through radio school. What they were looking for amazed me. Radio school was hard. And this is scoreboard aboard the carrier—
- Luke: Scoreboard?
- Elroy: You put that on the bridge of the ship. You put down how many airplanes—Japanese airplanes—were shot down, how many Japanese small craft (that would be a cruiser or a battleship), and this would be the liberation on the island.
- Luke: Oh, okay.
- Elroy: And that's how the famous Jap got down. It's amazing, so—
- Luke: I remember one other question I had. Did you only use Morse code or did you use any other codes?
- Elroy: Well, as a radio operator, I used Morse code and I would be by, like, the key and stuff, and the signalman would have the flags and stuff. But I would be included also. Well, they raised the flags accordingly and—because we'd have to keep radio silence and you couldn't just break in and send messages because the Japs would have their direction finders on and so they would know where you're at. So, a lot of times when there was a message shipped, you would see the signalman sending up their flags and stuff and already have their signal light that the guy would send to the troops, because, by radio, we would give away position and stuff.
- Luke: So they could trace it?
- Elroy: They could trace it then.
- Luke: Because I've read about different radios and stuff about all sorts of different kinds of codes they had during World War II.
- Elroy: Yeah.

Luke: During World War II, like, I read something about a Navaho Code.

Elroy: Oh, that was—how the heck did you hear that? That was some tribe of Indians, I think, wasn't it?

Luke: Yeah. It was.

Elroy: Yeah, I have read something like that, too.

Luke: Because that was the Navaho, we don't need to tape this.

Elroy: Yeah.

[End of Interview]