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Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN ROGER SCHROEDER
Mechanic, Army, World War II.

2005

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Schroeder, John Roger. Oral History Interview, 2005.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 38 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 38 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

John “Roger” Schroeder, a Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin native, discusses his service with the 6th Army, 3142nd Medium Automotive Maintenance Company in the Pacific Theater of World War II. Schroeder mentions being drafted, induction at Fort Sheridan (Illinois), basic and automotive training at Aberdeen Proving Grounds (Maryland), and tractor maintenance training in Atlanta (Georgia). While taking additional training at Camp Beale (California), he touches on seeing German prisoners of war and having a brief leave at home. On the troopship, he describes living conditions, eating stolen food, being segregated from the officers, and seeing someone transported between ships by bosun’s chair at Finchhaven (New Guinea). Assigned to the 3142nd Maintenance Company, Schroeder talks about living conditions in New Guinea and the Philippines and duty performing maintenance on small arms. He tells of the soldiers’ reactions to the news of the atomic bomb and the armistice. Schroeder talks about developing a painful infection in his hip, but not being sent to the hospital until he started running a fever. Sent back to the States by ambulance plane, he portrays the flight nurse, recuperating at Mayo General Hospital (Galesburg, Illinois), and being discharged. Schroeder speaks of marrying Grace, taking over his father’s insurance business, joining the VFW, and using the GI Bill for flight training. He reflects on the different treatment of enlisted men and officers, and he recalls a conversation he had with pilot from New Guinea.

Biographical Sketch:

Schroeder served in the Army from 1943 to 1946. After the war, he worked in the insurance industry for forty-one years, as well as working part-time at the Door County Historical Museum. He currently lives in his hometown of Sturgeon Bay (Wisconsin).

Interviewed by Terry MacDonald, 2005

Transcribed by Michelle C. Kreidler, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2008

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Interview Transcript:

Terry: —John Roger Schroeder, who served with the U.S. Army, the 3142 Medium Automotive Maintenance Company, assigned to the Sixth Army during World War II. The interview is being conducted at about 1:30 p.m. at the following address of 719 Memorial Drive, Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, on the following date of April 1st, 2005. The interviewer is Terry MacDonald, and Mr. Schroeder likes to be called Roger. So Roger, can you give us a little background of your life history before going into the service?

John: Well, I was born in Eglund [?] Hospital, which is now the Dorchester, and lived here all my life. I went to school—Sturgeon Bay High School and so on, and then I went to a Michigan college, Michigan Tech, and I was there about a year or so, and then I was drafted.

Terry: You got drafted. Did you get your notice from Sturgeon Bay then?

John: Yeah, from Sturgeon Bay.

Terry: Now when you got drafted, what year was that?

John: 1943.

Terry: Were there other people that went down at the time you got drafted, when you went to Milwaukee?

John: Not that I—there was a group of us from town here went down for physicals and so on, but I don't remember anybody on the morning that we were sent to Fort Sheridan.

Terry: Can you tell me, when you were down at the draft in Milwaukee, did everybody go into the Army or were some guys—

John: No. Some went into the Navy. I don't know how that was done except maybe by choice.

Terry: Did you pick the Army or did you—

John: I guess I picked the Army. [laughs]

Terry: Okay. So you went on to Fort Sheridan then?

John: Yeah. Well, that came a little later, down to Fort Sheridan, and then they gave you a lot of induction tests, you know, to see what you might be fit for and so on and so forth. And then you are there a short time and then they sent you to wherever they wanted you to go. And they sent me to Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland.

Terry: Was this for basic training, or what type of training?

John: For basic training and some automotive training.

Terry: What was your—when you went to Michigan Tech, what were you going for?

John: Mechanical engineer.

Terry: So it fell in with the automotive stuff?

John: Yeah. Um-hmm. And in Aberdeen we took basic training.

Terry: Can you describe what it was like at basic training?

John: Well, the barracks were one story, small barracks, sort of tarpaper buildings, you know, and they had a kind of a cannonball heater, coal stove, and once in a while you got assigned to take care of the stoves during the night. And I think there were four—four barracks in this company, and I can't remember exactly what they're called—charge of quarters I guess they called it, and you'd go around and fire up these stoves, keep the place warm, and that's about it. And then, of course, you would fall out in the morning.

Terry: Was there a lot of soldiers there?

John: Oh, yeah. And you'd smell this sulfur dioxide from the coal. I remember that.

Terry: Was there a haze over the camp?

John: Sort of, yeah. [laughing] And then they—this was in December. I was drafted in December, I think. This must have been in January and it was pretty cold, and we did a little field training, and I remember they ran out of overshoes and my feet got real wet and cold, and we camped out in the snow, you know, and we got pretty cold.

Terry: Yeah. Did they have—speaking of cold, did they have the clothing, was it—

John: You were issued clothing. Sure.

Terry: —for the winter? I mean, was it winter clothing?

John: Well, it was wool, you know, and you had wool underwear and long johns, and then there was—and some of them—they just ran out of overshoes is what it was, and I happened to be down sort of towards the end of the list, and there was a number of us didn't get 'em [laughs], but generally the Army was very efficient, I thought, and not bad at all. I didn't mind it at all.

- Terry: So when you went—after the basic training, what a kind of automotive training did you do?
- John: Well, they sent some of us to Atlanta, Georgia for tractor maintenance training, diesel tractor, and we were there, I think about three months, if I remember right.
- Terry: When you are describing tractors—
- John: Bulldozers.
- Terry: Okay. Construction equipment then, huh?
- John: Right, yeah. And mainly how diesel engines operated, stuff like that.
- Terry: Uh-huh. Were you assigned to a company then?
- John: No, unh-unh. And then—when was that? Anyway, when I was through there, you got a little leave. I think you came home for about a week, if I remember right.
- Terry: Was there anybody else from the area?
- John: No.
- Terry: You were by yourself then?
- John: Yeah, uh-huh. Except I did know that Bill Drab was down there, there was a big hospital there and I knew he was there, and we got together a couple times and—but he's the only one that I ever met from Sturgeon Bay down there.
- Terry: So how did you get home? Train?
- John: Train, yeah. Good old steam locomotives in those days. And then after that I think I was sent to the replacement depot in—it was in California, but I can't remember—can't think of the name right offhand. And we took more training, just infantry training and stuff like that.
- Terry: Okay. That time of year must have been like the spring or early summer, pretty warm out there?
- John: It hadn't rained for, I guess, about six months, so it was dry as a bone.
- Terry: Did you live in tents or did they have quarters for you?
- John: No. It was barracks. And there was a German prison camp there too. And we'd be marching and they'd come riding by us in the back of the truck and then they'd yell at

us, "Hey, you guys gotta walk," [Terry laughs] and stuff like that. And they seemed to always win the prize as far as managing their food supply and so on.

Terry: The food here in the States probably was pretty decent for you, huh?

John: Oh, yeah, it was good. Nothing wrong with it. A lot of griping, of course, but there was nothing wrong with it.

Terry: Did you get any leave when you were out in California?

John: That's what I'm trying to remember. I think I did. I think I came home for a short time and I—my dad said I should take a plane back, and I went to Chicago. I think I took a bus to Chicago and then caught a plane, a DC-3, and we couldn't land at Mather Field, which is—what's the capital of California?

Terry: Sacramento.

John: Sacramento. They couldn't land there; I think it was because of weather. And they landed in San Francisco and then they sent us back by bus to Sacramento and then up to Marysville. That's where this Camp Beale was, and that was a replacement depot. And from there you were sent overseas.

Terry: Okay. And then you ship out on a troop—what kind of ship did you get—

John: A troop transport.

Terry: A troop transport.

John: An attack transport it was. They had Higgins boats on it and things like that. I think there were about twenty-five hundred troops.

Terry: Now, what was the living quarters like on there for the Army?

John: Well [laughs], that—that was down three decks, and on the first night I got seasick right away, and I—the bunks, you know, were about this far apart, and so I got out and I went topside and felt a little better, and I never went back to the bunk again.

Terry: Where did you sleep?

John: I slept on the deck with a shelter half and a blanket, and it was hard, you know, but at least you slept in fresh air and so on.

Terry: So with that many men on board the ship, what was it like to go for chow then?

John: For chow you stood up to a galvanized trough kind of thing, and you ate standing up at this trough, and I suppose one of the reasons was, is because a lot of guys were

gettin' sick, they'd toss their cookies. [laughing] Then two meals a day. And then we had one guy in our group—you know, you'd befriend different people, he was a regular thief, and he'd go—he could pick the lock of the refrigerator that they had, and he'd go in and—it wasn't a refrigerator, it was some kind of a storage place, and he'd get a big can of apricots, and we'd go out near the stern of the ship, and we would eat these apricots. You know, you were—you got pretty hungry.

Terry: I'm sure.

John: And then some of the Navy cooks, they would bake cookies every day for the officers, and we'd find out when they were baking cookies, and they would slip a lot of them out through a porthole to us. There's real officer/enlisted man discrimination on a ship like that, which has to be, I guess.

Terry: And even with the Army, the Army officers, they were separated?

John: They had separate—they ate at a table and were called to dinner and so on and so forth.

Terry: Was there any room on board the ship to do much of anything, or did they have you do anything?

John: No. We just wandered around.

Terry: And where did you—where was your first port of call then whenever?

John: Finchhaven, New Guinea.

Terry: New Guinea.

John: Yeah. And then we took a fellow off a destroyer escort with one of these bosun's chairs, you know. They had this line between the ships, and then they'd run up and down the deck keeping the line taught. It was about twenty sailors on each. And this guy, they'd pull him across and he'd get dipped down in the water. [laughs] It was pretty rough, but he had been injured or something. He needed some medical attention.

Terry: Did they have some sort—

John: They had an operating room on the ship.

Terry: Oh.

John: And it was—

Terry: Did you hit any typhoons or anything like that going across?

John: No.

Terry: Just rough weather, just seas?

John: Yeah. And they kept zigzagging all the time.

Terry: Was it a convoy, or did you sail by yourself?

John: We were by ourselves. And then when we got near Finchhaven, I will never forget that, a P-38 came out, he looked us over and then he went back and did a slow roll when he saw who we were. It was really—then we were there just a short time. And I saw a boat in there, it was right next to us, that I had worked on down in the shipyard.

Terry: You helped build?

John: Yeah. It—I worked up in the engineering department. And there it was, you know, one of these British coastwise freighters. Then we went to—what was that? We never got off that ship, and they sent us up to the Philippines right away. To Leyte. And then we were in a replacement depot there, and then one night they called us out, a bunch of us, and put us on a plane, and we headed back for New Guinea and made a couple of stops in ___[??] Islands down there. In these C-47 transports you just sat along the sides, you know, and you'd get into rough areas and your barracks bags and everything else would jump up. They landed down at Finch and we were in an outfit down there, maintenance company. And that's where that 3142nd came. And then I don't know how long we were there. We were there quite a bit, and then we went back up to the Philippines.

Terry: What was the living conditions like over there in New Guinea then?

John: Oh, I got some pictures here.

Terry: Roger's got an envelope showing some of the pictures that—blown-up pictures, pretty nice pictures.

John: This is the convoy we were in.

Terry: He has one showing the convoy of ships going across the ocean and several other ones of soldiers and so forth.

John: I'm just trying to get something. My dad sent a camera with me, and it had a self-timer on it, and I would run and jump and get in the picture. In New Guinea I made that bed. It was inner tube springs. It was a pretty nice bed, actually.

Terry: Oh, yeah. He is showing a picture of a bed that he is sleeping in that he made himself.

John: And that's some of the guys there. That's me. And then, of course, I was down at the airport every chance I got. I got down there when I had time off. I just loved airplanes. That's a B-25. And then we—well, we were crossing some river up there in the Philippines. We'd be sent out to companies to look at their weapons and check them over and so on. And then in this convoy, this convoy was coming from New Guinea, headed north, and then our LST peeled off and went into Manila. And the rest of 'em, I'm pretty sure they went to Okinawa. I'm not sure.

Terry: Now, when you were in New Guinea doing maintenance, were you fixing stuff that was damaged?

John: No. Just checking—

Terry: Regular maintenance?

John: —small arms.

Terry: Oh, small arms.

John: Yeah. Just—and we'd take 'em out and test fire them and stuff like that.

Terry: Uh-huh.

John: And then we had an outfit—our outfit was near—it wasn't too far from Clark Field. St. Angelo I think is the name of the place.

Terry: In the Philippines?

John: In the Philippines, yeah. And then 1945, August of '45 came along and they dropped the atomic bomb, but we had been getting some new stuff. We would have been involved in the invasion if it ever took place.

Terry: What was the reaction of the soldiers you were with and yourself when that happened?

John: We didn't believe it. [laughs]

Terry: Oh, really?

John: An atomic bomb, what was that? Well, I guess we believed it. 'Cause a few days later the armistice was signed and so on. But then I got sick and got something in my right hip. And, you know, you'd go on sick call, and if you ran a temperature, then they would send you to a hospital. But if you didn't run a temperature, you were all right, no matter how much it hurt. But anyway—

Terry: Put you back on duty, huh?

- John: Yeah. One day—one day I said—I guess I was running a little temperature, and they put me in the hospital at Clark Field, and, I don't know, something happened, I guess I passed out or something, and put me in a room down at the end of the ward and got me down to Manila, and there they did an operation on the hip, and it—the guy said I really had a lot of pus in it and so on.
- Terry: Some sort of infection in there?
- John: Yeah. It—you could get anything there. People of our—white people just can't take a lot of that stuff.
- Terry: Before they shipped you over there, did they give you all kind of shots like they do today?
- John: Oh, yeah.
- Terry: And try to prevent most of that?
- John: One on each side at the same time. [laughing]
- Terry: They didn't use the air guns that they use today. That was all needles.
- John: They were all needles. But that was for malaria and—one was for malaria. You took your Atabrine tablets and that was supposed to prevent malaria.
- Terry: Were there a lot of soldiers got sick from that?
- John: No.
- Terry: Not where you were at?
- John: A lot of them threw it away and didn't take it.
- Terry: Oh, really?
- John: If you took it, you got real yellow. It affected your liver, I guess, or something. And, anyway, they did this operation, and next thing I knew I was on an ambulance plane for the States, and I landed in what we—it was a lot of island hopping and stuff, various places. And from—I think we landed at Hickam Field in Hawaii. I was there just about two or three hours, and I had to use the bedpan; it was fierce [laughs]. But anyway, they gave us sleeping pills and put us back on the plane, and, you know, these ambulance planes just had litters on each side.
- Terry: They were like a C-47 with just litters on them?
- John: This was a C-54.

Terry: Okay. And they had put some flight nurses with you, huh?

John: Yeah. One I really remember. She took my fatigue cap because that's the only thing I had. I didn't have any shoes or—and she wore it for the trip. I always thought that was nice. But, anyway, we landed at San Francisco, and they gave you a free call home, and I called home. They were very surprised. And then they sent me to Galesburg, Illinois, which is Mayo General Hospital, and I recuperated. And one of the things about Mayo General was my dad found out that a fellow named Chet Teske, I don't know if you've ever heard of him or not, he was from here; he was the food officer at that hospital.

Terry: Okay.

John: And, boy, did I get service. [Terry laughs] The nurse would come around, "What do you want to eat?" you know. I was down to a hundred-twenty pounds, I guess.

Terry: Yeah.

John: And then later I went to Fort Custer for rehabilitation and discharged.

Terry: What month?

John: I was discharged I think in March of '46.

Terry: Okay.

John: I was in the hospital a long time.

Terry: So when you got out, you come back to Sturgeon Bay then?

John: Yeah, uh-huh. I went to school again, but then my dad died in December of '46.

Terry: Okay.

John: And I wasn't going to continue in school. I wasn't that great a student to start with, and then around that—a little later then I met her. [laughing]

Terry: What's your wife's name?

John: Grace.

Grace: Grace.

Terry: Grace. Okay. And you got married then, huh?

- John: We were married in October of '47.
- Terry: What did you do for a living then when you—
- John: When my dad died, and he had this insurance business, and I tried, and it made a living. Grace was a nurse and she worked at Door County Memorial. And, in fact, you were director of nurses, weren't you?
- Grace: Oh, for a little while, yeah.
- Terry: Now, when you were—when you got out then, Rog, did you join any veterans' organizations at all?
- John: Chester Robertson got me into a—I don't remember whether it was the Legion or the VFW, but I've been a member of the VFW ever since then. And I wasn't too great on joining anything, but it really is a nice bunch of fellows in there now.
- Terry: But you're still pretty active today in it, right?
- John: I attend the funerals as much as I can.
- Terry: Did you use any—you know, they had some veterans benefits with the GI Bill. Were you able to use any of the benefits?
- John: Yeah. I took flight training. And George Meredith, do you remember George?
- Terry: I remember he was at the airport out there.
- John: He ran the program. And we got a private ticket. It was about eight of us, I think, were in that program. But otherwise I went down to Green Bay, and Dr. Leeson [phonetic], do you remember Dr. Leeson?
- Terry: He was one that survived the Bataan Death March in the Philippines.
- John: He was with the Veterans Administration down there.
- Terry: I didn't know that.
- John: And he examined me. He thought the leg would be all right, you know. And then you took a test to see what you were fit for, and it came out that I was fit for some kind of artwork. [both laugh] And I didn't go for that. But, anyway—**[End of Tape 1, Side 1]**—I was in the insurance business.
- Terry: Uh-huh. So how many years did you work the insurance business?
- John: Forty-one.

- Terry: Okay. Did you join any other organizations in town? [blank tape] –of Tape 1. We're speaking with Roger Schroeder, and he retired after forty-one years in the insurance business. Roger, can you—what did your military service mean to you? Did it have any impact on you as far as your life goes?
- John: Well, when you were separated, they asked you if you wanted to join the Reserves, and at that time I just didn't feel I should. But as far as the Army's concerned, I think that's a—it was a first-class organization as far as that goes. They had their faults, you know. Like in the hospitals, you know, you got the best of care, as far as I could see, except there's this big discrimination between officers and enlisted.
- Terry: They got treated that much better, huh?
- John: Well, yeah, they did, which I suppose is the way it's supposed to be. And I'll never forget one time a bunch of us had gone down to a movie at Aberdeen and we were just—just jerks, you know, [laughs]and we were walking back to the area, which was about a mile or two, and this car stopped and he said, "Come on, you guys, I'll give you a ride," and we opened the doors and we jumped in, and I jumped in the front seat next to the driver, and I looked over, here's a chicken colonel. [laughing] And he asked us where we were all from. He brought us right back to the air base. He was a regular guy.
- Terry: Yeah. What was your rank when you got out?
- John: T-5.
- Terry: T-5.
- John: Yeah.
- Terry: What was it like with—serving overseas then in the Philippines and New Guinea? Did that have any impact on you when you saw how other people lived and stuff?
- John: Well, you saw—in New Guinea, you know, the old man, he'd walk ahead with his spears and so on, and the mother, she'd follow with all the load of whatever they were carrying and children, and they all looked like they had somethin', you know, and emaciated. In the Philippines it wasn't so bad. They had sort of been Americanized.
- Terry: Uh-huh. Did your outfit ever have any reunions at all?
- John: No.
- Terry: Never had any?
- John: No.

Terry: Did you ever get back overseas at all?

John: No. One day I met a fellow in the museum. I looked at the book to see where he was from, and it was on the south side of New Guinea. What in the world is the name of that place? I'm getting old. I can't remember. Anyway, it's Port Moresby, and he put that down as his hometown, but then I caught up with him and told him I had been in Finchhaven and so on, and he says, "Well, actually, I live in Finchhaven." It's—it had grown into a—sort of a little port. It was one of the biggest bases in southwest Pacific. But, anyway, he says he has a nice home there, and he would—he was a pilot, and he would fly one of these native New Guinea fellows who had guided men across the Owen Stanleys from Port Moresby to Buna and those places on the north side of New Guinea. And the Australian government paid him a stipend every year, and he would take 'em to Port Moresby and he'd collect his stipends, and he'd fly 'em back again. Sort of interesting.

Terry: Yeah. Well, the museum, were you part-time in the museum around here?

John: Well, I'm part-time.

Terry: He is referring to the Door County Historical Museum located here in Sturgeon Bay where he has assisted for a number of years working there. Did you keep in touch with anybody you met in the Army?

John: Well, one—one day—or one—we were going out to a wedding in—what was that? What city was that? Oh, come on.

Grace: Outside of Chicago?

John: Omaha.

Grace: Omaha. Oh, yeah.

John: And this one guy I had been with for a while I remembered was from Omaha, so I looked him up in the phone book and gave him a call and said we were coming out there and I wanted to meet him—meet with him, and I had a bunch of pictures that I had fixed up to give him. And we had a nice meeting, and he had his wife with him and so on. He said—I guess I would have recognized him, you know. It had been a long time. But a year or two after that, he died, and his wife wrote to us and told us that he had died. But that's the only one. I ran into Gussie Andrew one time out in San Francisco—or out in California's capital.

Terry: Sacramento again.

John: Sacramento.

Terry: What was Gus in? Was he in the Army?

John: He was in the Army.

Terry: And he was one of the local business people in town.

John: Yeah. Well, Gussie, he ran Andries tavern, and I knew him from town. And Bill Drab. Those are the only two guys.

Terry: I'll give you the opportunity, do you have anything else you want to say about your World War II experiences?

John: Nothing really. I, I—it didn't hurt me, that's for sure. And you grow up fast, and you get to be a little more self-reliant because you're on your own—

Terry: Uh-huh.

John: —in a way. But otherwise I don't have any regrets.

[End of Interview]