

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN R. SCHEER
Aviation Ordnanceman, Navy, Gulf War
1997

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Scheer, John R., (1957-). Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 40 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Scheer, a Madison (Wisconsin) native, discusses his service from the mid-1970s through the 1990s in the U.S. Navy as an aviation ordnance man including combat during the Persian Gulf War. Scheer chose the Navy because he was fond of the uniforms and enlisted in 1975. He came from a military family and even though the Vietnam War was just concluding, it had no impact on his decision to join the service. Scheer talks about his initial induction in Milwaukee (Wisconsin) and then his boot camp experience at Great Lakes (Illinois) where he learned damage control, fire-fighting, and basic seamanship. He did very well at his academics at Great Lakes so he was offered aviation ordnance and attended school in Millington (Tennessee) for three months. Scheer touches upon his first duty station at Naval Air Station Agana (Guam) and his daily duties and recreation. He characterizes the Navy under President Carter as being “really lax” as far as the haircuts and discipline was concerned. Scheer describes how the Navy improved under President Reagan with better equipment and pay raises. He got out of the Navy briefly in 1979, but wasn’t able to live comfortably with the economy the way it was at that time. So he went back into the Navy in 1980. Scheer speaks about the drug and alcohol problems of the 1970s and how the drug use declined greatly under the Navy’s “zero tolerance” regulations. He reports on being stationed at Whidbey Island (Washington) and on being aboard the USS Kennedy when the Marine barracks were attacked at Beirut. Scheer witnessed the battleship New Jersey launching ordnance at targets off the coast of Lebanon. He speaks of Russian Bears often flying overhead, keeping tabs on American vessels. Scheer was then stationed in Bremerton (Washington) and then got orders to Fallon (Nevada) where he spent two years. He chats about being stationed on the USS Ranger, an aircraft carrier, during the Gulf War and how his particular unit dropped 1,144 tons of ordnance (often with written messages to Saddam) on the enemy. Scheer remembers the fantastic amount of support he and others received from the States; his thoughts on public attitudes and the media’s role contrasted with what happened during and after the Vietnam War. Scheer goes into great detail about the death of one of the pilots from his squadron, what type of ordnance they were dropping, and the targets that they sought.

Biographical Sketch

Scheer (1957-), served as an aviation ordnanceman from the mid-1970s through the 1990s. He served during the bombing of the Marine barracks at Beirut and was involved in the Gulf War in which his unit dropped 1,144 tons of ordnance.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997.

Transcribed by Jennifer L. Stake, 2005.

Transcription edited by Damon R. Bach & John J. McNally, 2006.

Interview transcript

- Mark: Okay. Today's date is May the 16th, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this morning with Mr. John Scheer, originally of Madison, Wisconsin, veteran of the US Navy through the 1970s through the 1990s. Good morning. Thanks for coming in.
- Scheer: Well, thank you very much, Mark.
- Mark: Um. I suppose we should start at the top. Why don't you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the military.
- Scheer: Well, I was born and raised here in Madison, um, graduated LaFollette High School in 1975, and right after that—well, before that I was working at Ponderosa Steakhouse over on the east co—east side and decided to join—actually, I was—the year before I joined the Navy, I was one signature away from joining the Marine Corps, but my dad talked me out of that, so—
- Mark: Why? What was the—
- Scheer: I had a buddy that was in the Marines, and he tried to talk me into going in, and—but my dad talked me out of it, and then I joined the Navy a year later.
- Mark: What were your father's concerns? They were just—
- Scheer: The Marine Corps.
- Mark: Too tough?
- Scheer: Yeah. (Laughter.)
- Mark: They actually end up in combat a lot?
- Scheer: Exactly. Those are the guys that do the fighting, so—

- Mark: Now, as we were discussing, your father was a veteran?
- Scheer: Right. He's a—he was in Pearl Harbor when it was bombed on May 7th, 1941—
or December 7th, 1941.
- Mark: Now, I always ask people, enlistees, then, is why they chose the service branch
that they did. How come you chose the Navy? Was it because of your father,
was it—
- Scheer: Well, my—
- Mark: —you liked sailing, whatever the case may be?
- Scheer: My father was in the Army Air Corps.
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Scheer: So it wasn't that. The uniforms.
- Mark: I see.
- Scheer: When I joined—you know, the cracker jacks, I really liked them and—but when
I joined, it was Admiral Zumwalt was CNO.
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Scheer: And he had changed everybody's uniforms, so I didn't get the uniform I wanted.
So—eventually I did.
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Scheer: That—that was the main reason is because I liked the uniforms, and I didn't want
to join the Air Force.
- Mark: Uh-huh. That's the one I joined.

Scheer: Was it? (Laughter.)

Mark: Now, you enlisted at the tail end of the Vietnam period. I mean, you're—you've got just a couple of years on me yet. In terms of your memory, you remember a lot more than people in that period. And the military service in the 1970s, shall we say, was not universally popular.

Scheer: Exactly.

Mark: Did that impact on your decision at all? And what were—just more generally, what were your—what were your recollections of the Vietnam War, and did it have any impact on your decision to enlist?

Scheer: The—the Vietnam War really didn't have an impact on my decision. It—it—I didn't even really think about it, to tell you the truth, you know. I—I was 18 years old, and just actually just wanted to get the hell out of Madison— (Laughter.)—is about the best way to put it. And my recollections was stationed with four or five guys that had been over on the USS Oriskany and a few of the other aircraft carriers during the Vietnam War. Other than the stories they told, I was stationed on Guam my first duty station, and just the stories that they told us about sitting, you know, out off Yankee Station and loading A-4s and dropping bombs.

Mark: So there was no—there was no controversy, there was no—

Scheer: No, none at all.

Mark: None of your relatives or friends were saying, "What do you want to join the military for," or anything like that?

Scheer: No, because all of my relatives and—you know, had been in the military and are Democrats was my—about the best way to put it. And my friends, three of them joined the Marine Corps at the same time, so I really had no problems with—

Mark: So why don't you just walk me through your induction process. I mean, you probably had to go and get the physical in Milwaukee somewhere, and then you get on a plane to go off to basic training. Just sort of walk me through the—

Scheer: Okay.

Mark: —process.

Scheer: Well, I—I signed the papers over here in the—in the recruiting station on East Washington Avenue here in Madison and then went to Milwaukee, like you said, to go through MEPPS (Military Entrance Processing Station) and signed the papers and did all the hoorah down there. But then I had to come back home and get a medical record, because when I was in high school, I had broken my leg. And I had to get a waiver from the doctor saying it's okay. And then I went back down to MEPPS, got on a bus, went to Chicago, because I went to boot camp at Great Lakes, and spent a night in Chicago. Boy, if that wasn't an—an awakening.

Mark: Downtown somewhere?

Scheer: Downtown Chicago right on—what is it, Michigan or State or one of those roads.

Mark: An awakening in what way?

Scheer: Well, coming from Madison and going down to Chicago was like—you know, because Madison in the '70s is nothing like Madison in the '90s or anything.

Mark: It was a much smaller town.

Scheer: It was. And it had much smaller town feeling and atmosphere. And I went to Chicago, and I was like, wow, you know. (Laughter.)

Mark: You hadn't been there before?

Scheer: I hadn't been there. I hadn't been out of Madison.

Mark: Hmm.

Scheer: So, um, but then I ended up in boot camp, went to—it was June 9th, and the rest is history.

- Mark: Not that—and—well, that's what we're here for.
- Scheer: Yeah. (Laughter.)
- Mark: At the time, Navy boot camp was how long? Eight weeks or so or—
- Scheer: It was 12 weeks.
- Mark: 12 weeks.
- Scheer: Yeah.
- Mark: And what sort of training did you do specifically? I mean, how much of that was in the classroom, how much of that was on the rifle range, how much—
- Scheer: Well—
- Mark: —of that was marching and drilling and the—
- Scheer: We—we never did any—
- Mark: —kind of stereotypical things?
- Scheer: We never did any rifle range stuff, which I got mad about, but that's okay. Um. I'd say between marching and classroom, it was 50-50 at the time. And we did a lot of like the damage control stuff, the fire fighting, which I enjoyed a lot, you know, and got—went in the tear gas house and had to take the mask off and the whole bit and—um, we learned basic seamanship, and just general military life pretty much.
- Mark: Some people don't adapt well to military life. Were there some who dropped out of the program at some point?
- Scheer: Oh, yes.

- Mark: Who got recycled?
- Scheer: Oh, yes.
- Mark: That's probably the same term you had when I was in.
- Scheer: Uh-huh.
- Mark: Did it happen fairly frequently do you think or—
- Scheer: Not really. We had one guy that dropped out of our company, and we picked one guy up in our company, so it wasn't, you know, like there was 30, 40 people doing it. It was—it wasn't that tough.
- Mark: Yeah. In terms of the discipline, I know there's a lot of screaming and yelling and name-calling.
- Scheer: Exactly.
- Mark: Harsh language—
- Scheer: Right.
- Mark: —of that type of thing. Any of that a shock to you?
- Scheer: Other than getting woken up at five o'clock in the morning by getting a trash can thrown on me, no. No, I had—the language was a little rough for me, but I got used to it.
- Mark: Any physical thing?
- Scheer: Oh, there was holds.
- Mark: You were not—they were not—the drill sergeant, whatever they would call them in the Air Force, I can't even remember anymore, were not allowed to touch you.

Talk to World War II guys, they got taken behind the shed fairly frequently. Um, none of that sort of thing in the post Vietnam period when you enlisted?

Scheer: Well, they weren't that hard on it. I mean, I—I saw a company commander smack a guy.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: You know, and it—it was no big deal, you know, then. Now—now you go to jail—

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: —but—as far as the physical activity goes, I'd just come—when—I hate—high school played football, wrestled, played soccer. So physical, it was nothing. It was a piece of cake.

Mark: No one would have remarked on such a thing?

Scheer: Right.

Mark: Now, you mentioned going to Chicago was a sort of eye-opening experience. Now, basic training brings together lots of different people from all different parts of the country. I'd imagine that must have been an interesting experience as well.

Scheer: The biggest thing was we had a really good mixture, because we had a kid from the hills of South Carolina, and we had a guy from Panama.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: So it was like—I mean, I was exposed to—you know, I thought—I thought Wisconsin was the world, and then come to find out I wasn't even close. We had a guy from San Diego and a mixture of all kinds.

Mark: Everyone seemed to get along, though?

- Scheer: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We got—we got along really well.
- Mark: No rebel still fighting the Civil War or anything like that?
- Scheer: No. We never had—nothing that I saw, anyway. It was—it was a great group, bunch of guys.
- Mark: Yeah. So after boot camp, you had to go off to some technical training somewhere?
- Scheer: Right.
- Mark: Did you enter the Navy with the understanding that you would go into a certain field or did you just take a pot shot and see what would happen?
- Scheer: I—I just took a pot shot, didn't sign up for anything. As a matter of fact, we call it “A” school in the Navy, and I went down to—I was—after boot camp, I went to Apprentice Training Battalion is what they call it. It was still in Great Lakes, and it's just across the street from the boot camp, but what it is is learning how to become a boson's mate, which is scraping paint and painting ships and—and I had orders to USS Simon Lake. It's a Sub Tender out of Rota, Spain, but I had—they offered me an “A” school because I did so well in my academics in boot camp. They offered me mess specialist, which is a cook, aviation ordnance man, which is the one I took, and ocean system specialist with—which is more or less weather—you know, weather guy and stuff like that. So I took aviation ordnance and went to Millington, Tennessee for school for three—three months.
- Mark: Did you—were you disappointed with what you ended up with or did you like that?
- Scheer: I enjoyed the work. I enjoyed it. It was—you know, because it was guns and bombs and missiles—
- Mark: And planes—(Unintelligible).
- Scheer: You stuck—yeah, planes, you know. I guess I got that from my father, the planes thing. And I enjoyed it, I really did. (Unintelligible.) I liked the job, I liked the people. It's just I didn't like going away. Six to nine months at a time was too long, so—

Mark: Um. So you go through boot camp, you go through your technical training, you probably got some leave, and then you go off to really be in the navy now. Where did you go, and—and what did you do?

Scheer: Naval Air Station, Agaña, Guam.

Mark: That's a long ways away.

Scheer: Yeah, 15 months. I spent 15 months on Agaña, Guam, and—

Mark: Now, was that considered overseas? I mean, it's American territory, but it's like way over there.

Scheer: It—it was considered overseas.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: And essentially what we did was magazines. We took care of the magazines, stored 'em, delivered weapons to the—the various squadrons that were there, and snorkeled a lot. (Laughter.) The place is gorgeous and we did a lot of—a lot of snorkeling and skin diving and stuff like that.

Mark: Not too bad, I suppose?

Scheer: Oh, no, it was—the duty was good except for isolation.

Mark: Now—now, you were in the military during the period, you know, the post Vietnam period and then the post Reagan buildup. I mean, I entered after Reagan had become president, and they started to build up the military with—with more financial incentives—

Scheer: Uh-huh.

Mark: —and such things. But you were in the military during the time that this transition occurred. I'm interested in sort of sailor's eye view of what Navy life

was like before and after 1980. Was it as dramatic as people would lead you to believe?

Scheer: I think it was. I mean, it was like when—when Carter was in and Zumwalt was the CNO, it was really lax. I mean, the military decorum was almost nil, seriously. I think I—

Mark: So you mean like hair regulations?

Scheer: Exactly. Hair regulations. I mean, I had it down the middle of my ears for a lot of time, a lot of the period. And I think for that four years I saluted three people. And, you know, it was really lax.

Mark: Now, was it a good thing, bad thing or just different? I mean—

Scheer: I thought it was a bad thing, to tell you the truth, because you got to have—you got to have that discipline in the military if you want a military force.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: And then when Reagan took over and we got the new CNO in, and then they cut out beards, which made me mad. They couldn't—they couldn't—

Mark: That sucked.

Scheer: —save that. (Laughter.) And—but the transition was—it was slow enough to where you really didn't see it, you know, because you had to get rid of the old dinosaurs first, you know, the old way—

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: —and then phase in the new people.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: And that's what they're feeling now, they're feeling the same thing now with the downsizing and everything else and the women going into combatants, and the people are starting to feel it.

- Mark: Um. So after 1980, there was a little more esprit de corp?
- Scheer: Right.
- Mark: One—what about in terms of facilities and equipment and that sort of thing? One of the characteristics of the Reagan period was ballooning defense budgets. I mean, how did that impact on you? Did you get better equipment, did you get—
- Scheer: Definitely. Our—our equipment definitely improved, and—jeez, the—the upkeep of the equipment was—it was a lot better, too. You know, before, it wasn't—it wasn't rare to use a rusted out vamp-hammer, you know, or a screw—or a screw driver that was broke three or four times, and you'd just as soon fix it because you don't have the money to buy a new one. But, you know, once Reagan and then the ballooning defense budget program like you said, things were just so much better. I mean, parts were more available. Sure, you can talk about the \$600 ashtray and stuff like that, but—
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Scheer: And then they came out with, "Buy our spare smart," and people were aware of finding stuff like that, and I thought it was a whole lot better.
- Mark: Now, what about your personal income, without prying too much? I mean, one of the characteristics was the pay raises.
- Scheer: Yeah.
- Mark: Did—did you see that coming?
- Scheer: Oh.
- Mark: Other than the fact to you personally?
- Scheer: I loved it. I thought it was fantastic.
- Mark: I mean, for example, now, if you joined in '75, your reenlistment would have

come up, gee, '79 or so. You know, I'm wondering if increasing—increasing pay and better equipment, um, was a factor in your deciding to reenlist—

Scheer: I didn't—

Mark: —and then reenlist again.

Scheer: Well, actually what happened is in June of '79, I got out for six months. I came back to Madison here, worked at West Town, JC Penney's out at West Town for six months. And my wife was working at Bridgeman's. I don't know if you remember where that's at, over by the—

Mark: No. Got here as a grad student about nine years ago.

Scheer: Oh.

Mark: That was before my time.

Scheer: Yeah. And she was a waitress, and we had to save her tips to pay rent a couple of times, and I said, "I'm going back in."

Mark: Going back in.

Scheer: The economy was just—it was in between Carter and Reagan—

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: —and it was like—it was bad. (Laughter.) So we—I rejoined.

Mark: So once you rejoined and then the pay scale started to go up, you must have thought you were in hog heaven.

Scheer: Oh, it was great. You know, it was—I mean, I was making 3.30 an hour working on the loading dock over at Penney's, and then I go back in the navy. I went back in as an E-4, and we were making 900 bucks a month. I mean, it was like tripling my pay that I was making, and it was—and we were living in base

housing. We were sitting on top of the world at that time.

Mark: Yeah, I assume. Going back to the morale thing again, I mean one of the things about the late Vietnam and post Vietnam period is the drug and alcohol abuse in the military. Um, what were your recollections of such a thing in the '70s, and did that change then?

Scheer: Oh, definitely. Oh, yeah, I mean, drug and alcohol, it was the norm, you know. If—if you didn't—

Mark: Go to the barracks, people smoking weed. Would they actually do that in the barracks?

Scheer: Oh, yes.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: Oh, yeah. I had a few roommates that did that. And it was—it was—I mean, if—it was the norm. If you didn't do it, you were chastised. You know, and eventually it—it shifted to zero tolerance, you know, just—just say no type things to drugs. But the alcohol was still—and I believe is still there. You know, a sailor works hard and then plays hard—

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: —that type of a mystique. I think it's still there.

Mark: So the—so the drug problem has been—well, it's never gone, but it's been greatly alleviated.

Scheer: Right.

Mark: But alcohol remains popular, shall we say.

Scheer: Right.

- Mark: And isn't it—isn't it—in your experience, I mean, that's all I can add, is it—does it ever like get in the way of operations, I mean, duty and stuff? Or is it just, you know, a lot of young guys going out and having a hangover?
- Scheer: It—the—the oddity is someone drunk on duty, okay. And it's just a lot of young guys going out partying till four in the morning, getting two hours of sleep, and then going to work. You know.
- Mark: A lot like a college student?
- Scheer: Yeah, right, exactly. You know, and a couple of times we were in the Philippines went out till two, three in the morning and had to get up at five to load bombs in 90 degree heat. Didn't do too good to a hangover, but—
- Mark: Nothing to impact operations—
- Scheer: No, no.
- Mark: —or endanger people?
- Scheer: Not at all.
- Mark: Nothing like that?
- Scheer: No.
- Mark: Some of the—the early '80s, then, there were several mini little conflicts. You listed a couple of them on here.
- Scheer: Right.
- Mark: You've got Lebanon, for example. How about if we just—why don't you just tell me about some of the duty stations you were at between, say, Guam and the Mediterranean, which you apparently went to then in the early '80s. You've got Whidbey Island on here, for example.

- Scheer: Right. Whid—I went—I was stationed at NAS Agaña, Guam for 15 months. And then I got orders to VA 165 in Whidbey Island, Washington. It was an A-6 squadron, and we deployed on board the Constellation then went on board the Ranger. That was in the late '70s.
- Mark: And you just patrolled the Pacific or something?
- Scheer: More or less. We just, you know, went out there and presence known type thing, show of force that, you know—let the presence be known that we're here.
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Scheer: And then in 1980, I got stationed at Whidbey Island for two years shore leave. '82 I went to VAQ 137, which was a electronic warfare squadron out of Whidbey Island. And then that's when we were on board the Kennedy when we—when the marine barracks blew up in Beirut, and we retaliated.
- Mark: Uh-huh. So when that happened, you were away?
- Scheer: We were in the middle. We were right off the coast playing games. And then this happened, and we were called to Lebanon and watched the New Jersey throw old Volkswagens at them.
- Mark: Now, you mentioned playing games. What do you mean by that ostensibly?
- Scheer: Well, playing war games. You know, you go out there and—
- Mark: You mean exercises?
- Scheer: Exercises, yeah, that's the word.
- Mark: This is like a—I have spoken to a couple friends, been in the military myself and in this context talking to people as well. Now, the Cold War was going on, and there was sometimes cat and mouse I think—
- Scheer: Oh, definitely.

Mark: —between the Soviets and that type of thing, the Kadafi's Line of Death, I mean, all these little things going on.

Scheer: Right.

Mark: You experienced some of those.

Scheer: Right. I mean, Kadafi's Line of Death, we—we'd go, "Bring it on," you know, "Come on." And, you know, we always had—you know, playing rope around the trawlers, Russian trawlers; were always Bears, Russian bombers, you know, we always had F-14, had a five-minute alert in case Bears flew over. And, I mean, more than once, we had a Russian Bear fly over the top of our ship.

Mark: That's like in the Pacific somewhere?

Scheer: Right. That—that was—you get up north up by Japan and stuff, and they'd fly over quite frequently. They used to call it Bear Alley.

Mark: So they're checking on you; you're checking on them?

Scheer: Sure.

Mark: Any shots fired, exchanged?

Scheer: No, just—just watching each other. We had a few greetings exchanged, you know, a few visual greetings, shall we say.

Mark: How's that?

Scheer: Well, the flipping off and stuff.

Mark: Oh, I see.

Scheer: We had a couple guys moon a trawler once. (Laughter.) It was—it was interesting.

Mark: Hmm. Um, so in the Mediterranean, the Lebanon operation, now, at the time you were in aircraft ordnance?

Scheer: Correct.

Mark: The barracks had blown up, and of course that—we had been in before it blew up even, had Marines in there like a year before that. Things happened afterwards, I mean, pilots shot down inside the column.

Scheer: That was off our ship.

Mark: Yeah—oh, the—Robert Goodman—

Scheer: Right.

Mark: —that was—you're saying was off your ship?

Scheer: Right.

Mark: So why don't you just describe your role in those operations. You were sent to the Mediterranean with knowledge that you were going to be going to Lebanon era—area or called into there and some—(Unintelligible.)

Scheer: We were called in there. We were—just had pulled out of Naples, Italy, and they called us off to—to run—run over there. And what we were doing—we—we—we were an electronic jamming squadron, you know, jammed enemy radar and stuff. So as an ordnance man, I really didn't have that much to do, so I volunteered my services to the attack squadron and said, "We're on board," and I assisted them in loading bombs because they had a few people that kind of fell out. So we helped them. I loaded Goodman's plane, as a matter of fact.

Mark: Is that right?

Scheer: Yeah.

Mark: So the day-to-day is prepare the planes, they go, then you're back at the ship?

Scheer: And you're getting the next launch ready to go, generally, loading, you know. In an attack squadron, you generally send off four aircraft loaded, and you'd have four that would recover on the next recovery after the launch. And you'd have to turn them around, reload them, rearm them and get them ready to go for the launch before those ones you just launched come back. (Laughter.)

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: And it's just a cycle, and you keep doing that until flight ops or until they're done.

Mark: Uh-huh. Did you have an end date, like you were going to be there for certain amount of time and then go back and be relieved or just—or you thought you were going to be there indefinitely?

Scheer: We were there until we were relieved. We would be relieved on station is what they told us.

Mark: So what was the—is the typical sailor's view of this operation? I hesitate to call it a campaign. You know, I was—talk about the Vietnam syndrome after the Vietnam War and not wanting to get involved, not wanting to get your hands tied, and yet it was a very limited sort of operation. What—you know, what was the—

Scheer: Scuttlebutt? That's the Navy term.

Mark: Yeah. What—what—did you discuss what was going on while you were there and what you thought of it?

Scheer: Well, actually what it came down to is we wanted to go in there and kick ass, because, I mean, they killed Marines.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: And they weren't doing nothing but sleeping. You know, I could see it if it was at war; but these guys were in bed. And we wanted to go in there, we really did. And it—you know, the Vietnam War never really came up and limited campaign or nothing like that. It was just they killed some guys that were asleep was what

it came down to, so—

Mark: So did you feel constrained? Did you think we were doing enough or—

Scheer: I don't think we did enough, you know, because we sent—we sent one—one strike in. And then they said, "No more," you know. I think it was just to let Kaddafi know that, "We're here, and we are not afraid to use what we have." But I think we should have done more.

Mark: So you were eventually relieved, and then it was back to—

Scheer: We—

Mark: —regular military duties?

Scheer: Right. Yeah, we pulled out of there, and we went back to Norfolk, Virginia; six-hour plane flight from Norfolk to Whidbey, because we were still stationed out of Whidbey Island. And then it was just—then we went on board the Ranger, yeah. And I got advanced to E-6 on board the Ranger. And we were on cruise, and I get a message saying I'm getting transferred to the Ranger. Well, we get back to port, come to find out it was going to dry dock in Bremerton, Washington. So we spent a year in Bremerton and then got orders to Fallon, Nevada, spent two years in Fallon. And we were there when *Top Gun* was filmed. You could see our house.

Mark: Exciting?

Scheer: For me it was. But for these guys, they really didn't see much. You know, for their family, they didn't see much. Because all they saw was a bunch of planes flying around, which they usually did anyway. And then we went back up to Whidbey. I got orders to VA 155, and that's the squadron I was in when we went to the Gulf.

Mark: Okay. So why don't you describe the Gulf, your experience there. I mean, it seemed to have all of a sudden happened. There it was. So when you—when you first learned about the invasion of Kuwait, was it on CNN like everyone else, I'd imagine?

Scheer: Yes. That's where we found out. You know, it was—as a matter of fact, we found out before we left, and they told us that we were going there. And we—

Mark: Right away?

Scheer: Oh, yeah. We were going there for Desert Shield. They said it could escalate, they didn't know what was going to happen. So we trained all the way across to see how fast we could load bombs. And we had to load—we were loading thousand-pound bombs by hand, and we had to see how fast we could do it. That's—that's how we trained all the way across. And I'm glad they made us do it.

Mark: Now, when you're in the Persian Gulf campaign, you were on which ship again?

Scheer: The Ranger.

Mark: The Ranger.

Scheer: Yes.

Mark: Which is an aircraft carrier?

Scheer: Right. USS Ranger. And the BA 160—155, the Silver Foxes, which is just established. (Unintelligible.) We dropped 1,144 tons of ordnance on them.

Mark: Eventually.

Scheer: Our squadron alone.

Mark: Yeah, eventually.

Scheer: (Unintelligible.)

Mark: Now, you went—you went there early, it was like August or September of 1990?

Scheer: Right.

- Mark: And—and it was a full five months or so before the actual combat operations started. So during this operation Desert Shield, were you just floating around the Gulf out there?
- Scheer: Doing normal everyday ops, you know, they're—the—the pilots are flying over and checking and making sure that everything's going fine because—you know, presence again and floating around in the Gulf waiting. And they finally gave us the order, so—
- Mark: Now, there's a—of course, a massive military buildup. That's one of the great stories of logistical achievement, getting this huge force there, but you're just sort of off in the ocean by yourself then?
- Scheer: Right.
- Mark: You probably didn't see much of that?
- Scheer: The best of what I did see, though, is they have a picture of it is the all four carriers inside the Gulf. And they said it could never happen because it's not big enough.
- Mark: Hmm.
- Scheer: But yet we had four carriers in the Gulf.
- Mark: Did—did you get on shore at all? I mean, did you get any leave or anything? Were you pretty much all business there?
- Scheer: We went to Abu Dhabi, which is the southern tip of the United Arab Emirates. We went in there, and that was—that was an eye-opener, too.
- Mark: How so? How is that?
- Scheer: Well, it was during Ramadan, too. And—
- Mark: Austere?

Scheer: Austere.

Mark: An austere environment?

Scheer: Yes. Yes, it was. And I kind of—I was kind of taken aback, because I mean the cheapest car I saw there was a Mercedes.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: I mean, the place was like unbelievably rich. It was just—I've never seen anything like that. And gold was like dirt cheap, you know. And the people were weird, but—(Laughter.) Yeah, it was—you know, I mean, it was during Ramadan, and, you know, you couldn't look at the women during the day; and if you walked by a temple, you couldn't look at it and stuff like that.

Mark: Now, this was the largest military campaign—the country's largest military campaign since the Vietnam War. Of course, I was here during this period, and there were countless comparisons between the Persian Gulf War and Vietnam War. In a ship in the gulf actually in a combat situation, did you think about that much? And even in a larger sense, did you have an idea of the public attitudes and debate going on—

Scheer: Oh, yeah.

Mark: —about the war?

Scheer: Yeah, we got—we got, you know, CNN all the time. And we heard about that. And a couple of the kids that worked for me mentioned that they would, you know, like to do the Vietnam vets right. And that's the way we felt when we went in is we're going to make up for it because everybody was comparing it to Vietnam.

Mark: So you were conscious of this at this point?

Scheer: Oh, definitely.

Mark: You said in Beirut that the Vietnam thing really—

Scheer: That really—

Mark: —hadn't been on people's minds. It was much more so in the Persian Gulf?

Scheer: Exactly. I think because the media brought it up, because they compared it so much because this could have turned into another Vietnam.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: You know, so easy.

Mark: Um. Then in terms of public support, you know, with the yellow ribbons and the writing campaigns and all this sort of thing, um, how did that impact upon guys on the ship? Were you too busy, were you grateful? I mean, do you recall—

Scheer: I mean, it was—it was—it was the best help we could ever get. I mean, it was—it was fantastic, especially the letters from the kids from around the country. And we'd answer them, you know. I knew a guy that didn't have anybody to write to, and he took four or five of them, you know, just—just get mail actually. But, you know, the care packages that used to send homemade cookies and candy, stuff from home, even—even old magazines or newspapers that they rolled up to keep the fruit, we read them. You know, just stuff from home.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: It was good. It was—it was fantastic.

Mark: So January 17th was when the actual combat operation started. Why don't you just walk me through your experience of the actual beginning of the air war. I'd imagine it was probably a couple days of preparation. You must have had some idea that something was going to happen real soon. Why don't you just walk me through your experience with that.

Scheer: Well, two or three days prior our—our branch officer, we called him a gunner, and he come in and said, "We're going to do it. We're going." And we started getting the kids prepared because, you know, I had been through Beirut before.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: And I knew how people act when the shooting starts. You know, and we got them ready and –

Mark: To get them ready, what do you do?

Scheer: Psychologically. You know, physically, they're there. I mean, you know, because we've been training all this time, and it's just mentally we had to get them prepared to, "This is what's happening. We're going to be

[End of Tape One, Side One]

working hard, and there's not going to be a break. And we might have to, you know, fight back, if you know what I mean. You know, we might get attacked." We just had to get them mentally prepared.

Mark: Do you think they weren't?

Scheer: Oh, yes.

Mark: I mean, was it much of a challenge to get these guys prepared or were they pretty—I mean, do they not understand; did they go into it blindly or is it possible to prepare these guys, get them in this mode?

Scheer: It—it's possible to get them somewhat—you know, not all the way, of course, because you can't explain the way it's going to be. But as far as motivation goes, these kids, I mean, they were tired of loading bombs for nothing. You know, now we could actually do our job. You know, it—it's crass to say, but our job is, you know, war. And that's—that's what ordnance was, and we finally got to do our job.

Mark: So—so loading the bombs for an actual military purpose, is—is that a morale builder, you think?

Scheer: It was at the time. I think it was, because, you know, we finally got to do—like I said, we finally got to do our job.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: You know, it's—we're not going out and blowing up sand no more.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: We're actually being a military force.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: And it was—the kids kind of—some of the kids got kind of gung ho about it.

Mark: Well, that's—they're supposed to.

Scheer: Yes, right.

Mark: Now, the—the air campaign lasted about six weeks, then?

Scheer: Yeah.

Mark: I mean, before the actual ground war started. It was about six weeks.

Scheer: Right.

Mark: Planes taking off, coming back, taking off, coming back. I'd imagine it got pretty routine.

Scheer: Well, we were—

Mark: I mean, how much different was that than the actual training, really?

Scheer: Well, we were the night shift carrier. In other words, we launched—we launched at night. There was four carriers in the Gulf, like I said. Two of them were day check, and two of them were night check. And we were one of the night check ones. And I got—I got tapes at home, because the commanding officer would come over the loudspeaker and announce the launch for every launch that we

made at midnight. I was in bed, but anyway. But, yeah, it was—it was—it was like the training, but it wasn't, because we knew what they were doing. You know, we knew they were—where they were going. And another thing is everybody on the ship would come up and write messages to Saddam on the bombs, you know, that type of thing. And—but it was like it, but it wasn't, you know, because we were still loading bombs, but we knew where those bombs were going, and what they were doing, so—

Mark: I had a question, but I just lost it. I hate—I hate it when that happens. So then the ground war started, and—and then it was pretty much over. I mean, the—like real soon.

Scheer: Right.

Mark: Did you—did you lose any pilots off your ship?

Scheer: Yes, we did, we lost, um—we lost one aircraft. They were—it was the first couple days of the war, and the guy that—one of the guys that was in the plane was a really close friend. He was a—we played hockey, and he was my division officer, and he was also my load—load officer on a—on a load team we had. And he was really close. And he—they zigged when they should have zagged and got hit by a SAM. So—

Mark: So was he killed or did he become a prisoner?

Scheer: No, he was—they—they were both killed. They didn't get out of it.

Mark: Did that affect the morale on the ship at all? I mean, was it a motivating factor, depressing factor or was it much thought of?

Scheer: For our—for our squadron for a while it was pretty devastating. We were—because, you know, they both—both of these people were very well liked, and it kind of hit hard. And then we had a memorial service for them, because about three weeks into the—into the air campaign, we got to pull back for a little bit, take a little bit of a break, you know, had a day or two off. And then we had to go back up and here were them two days off for a memorial service. And that pretty well—the ship was pretty well, you know, not really down, but intense—

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: —I guess is about the best way to put it.

Mark: More serious, I suppose—

Scheer: Right. Exactly.

Mark: —when the gravity of what you were doing—

Scheer: It hit home.

Mark: —struck home.

Scheer: Right.

Mark: Yeah. Well, you know, a lot of Americans viewed the Gulf War as a sort of bloodless war, but that's—that's not your perspective now.

Scheer: Not really, no. Because—because like I said, it did hit home.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: You know. And it wasn't bloodless, we lost some people.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: Some good people.

Mark: Um. So the ground war started, you got notice—did you get any advanced notice of that or did you see that on CNN, too?

Scheer: No, we—we knew.

Mark: You knew that was coming?

Scheer: Yeah. Like probably two or three days before it was put out to the media, because we had to turl—curl back a little bit. And we switched from—we were

dropping conventional ordnance to the smart bombs is the way the media put it. That's what we started dropping.

Mark: As the—as the ground campaign went on?

Scheer: Right.

Mark: Smart bombs is a tactical weapon?

Scheer: Right.

Mark: As opposed to a more strategic—well, I don't know.

Scheer: Ire—our bombs were just saturation sort of—

Mark: Going after troop concentrations and ammo dumps and that type of thing—

Scheer: Right.

Mark: —whereas the smart bomb needs to be more precise to get the right—

Scheer: Exactly.

Mark: —so the types of ordnance changed when the ground war started?

Scheer: Yeah. We went from like smart bombs and also cluster bombs, which is a clam shape munition that has 747 bomblets inside of it. It was like taking a handful of pebbles and throwing it in water.

Mark: Right.

Scheer: It's more—

Mark: Now, that's more antipersonnel.

- Scheer: Exactly; antipersonnel, antimaterial.
- Mark: Yeah. So—well, I don't know, from your perspective, did the—the pre and post ground war period, you were—before the ground war started, you were dropping more of the conventional big boom—
- Scheer: Iron bombs.
- Mark: —type of bombs.
- Scheer: Uh-huh.
- Mark: From your perspective, did you have any idea what it was they were going after or were there just so many targets and so many planes that you really didn't know?
- Scheer: Well, like I said, the commanding officer would come over and advise—or announce the launches, and they'd also tell them where they were going and tell us where they were going, so—
- Mark: So you had some idea that it was—it was so-and-so barracks or so-and-so ammo dump or so and—
- Scheer: Generally an oil refinery or ammo dump.
- Mark: That's what—that's what I was getting to. What was it they were going after?
- Scheer: Yeah, usually ammo dumps or refineries. One—one pilot, they were going to—going to go to a ship and blow up this ship that was tied—moored to the pier. Well, he said he missed—(Laughter.)—and he hit a building, and the building was evacuated, of course, but he was supposed to hit this ship and missed. I thought that was pretty funny.
- Mark: Well, you know, watching it—watching—watching it on the news, you get the impression at the time—and it's one of the more frank estimates that have come out—you get the impression that every bomb hit every target—

Scheer: Oh, no.

Mark: —whatever the case may be. Did you know that at the time on the ship that, you know, war is a messy thing and that sort of thing happens? I mean, were you aware of that at the time?

Scheer: Oh, yeah. Oh, definitely, yeah. We had—and also they told us—did you ever hear about the term highway to hell?

Mark: Yeah.

Scheer: Okay. Yeah, they told us about that.

Mark: So you knew that—that had happened?

Scheer: Oh, yeah. The pilots would come back and say, well, I couldn't find nothing, so I blew up highway to hell again. You know. And that's where they usually went. They had a box, a kill box.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Scheer: And if you didn't—if you didn't—couldn't get to your target or if your target was already destroyed because from what they —from what they told us is there was just so many planes in the air going to so many different targets that they more or less had to wait in line to drop their bombs. And if your target was already destroyed, you went to this kill zone and just—just dropped them.

Mark: Where there's always something—

Scheer: Exactly. So—

Mark: So then when the ground war started, it became more tactical.

Scheer: Uh-huh.

Mark: The loop and the ordnance changed?

Scheer: Right.

Mark: It's now more, you know, getting to more tank and troop concentration—

Scheer: Exactly.

Mark: —and that type of thing. Now, that didn't last too long, the hun—famous hundred hours.

Scheer: Hundred hours, yeah.

Mark: Yeah. And then once the—you know, once the Iraqis had been ejected from Kuwait, then what happened?

Scheer: We—

Mark: You weren't dropping bombs anymore; right? I'd imagine there was still sorties, I mean.

Mark: We more or less kicked back for a couple of days—**[Tape ends abruptly]**