

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
RICHARD SCHELLER
Medic, Navy, World War II.

1996

OH
556

OH
556

Scheller, Richard, (1924-2003). Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 115 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 115 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Richard Scheller, a Shorewood, Wis. native discusses his Navy service as a medical corpsman in World War II and his career as commandant of the Wisconsin Veterans Home at King. Scheller relates his memories of the attack on Pearl Harbor and joining the Navy Reserves and V-12 program at Lawrence University. Wanting to be in the “real Navy,” Scheller says he dropped college and the V-12 program after a year and was soon sent to Great Lakes (Illinois) for boot camp. Scheller positively describes his training there to be a pharmacist mate and of his assignment to Chelsea Naval Hospital (Boston) where he was trained as a surgical assistant by Navy nurses (WAVES). He describes Navy commissioning of famous physicians by promising them they wouldn’t leave the community. He relates that Chelsea Naval Hospital received many casualties from D-Day, with mattresses in the hallway to accommodate them all, and that it also served as a “second care hospital” for North Africa and the Mediterranean. Scheller describes as exciting the introduction of penicillin as a new drug and the hospital’s early work in reattaching nerves and blood vessels. Sent to Treasure Island (San Francisco), Scheller tells of his train ride across country, on very old sleeping and Pullman cars, where he identifies a few Navy patients encountered during his work at a psychiatric ward before receiving orders first to Base Hospital No. 10 in Oahu (Hawaii) and then to the USS Samaritan, a hospital ship. With the war ending soon thereafter, Scheller describes occupation duty in Japan and the Japanese people in Tokyo as sad looking, hungry, and beaten down. He mentions seeing radishes and other plants growing in small places, fertilized with human feces. Scheller explains that the U.S.S. Samaritan docked in Sasabo Bay and provided medical services aboard ship to Navy personnel and Marines on occupation duty. He tells of being set ashore on a beach for beer and recreation as there was no alcohol onboard Navy ships. He relates an incident when the ship rescued eight Japanese out of the ocean with no discernable hard feelings on the part of the Americans. Scheller commends the order, for all Navy personnel, to view the atom bomb devastation at Nagasaki speaking of the impact of seeing the ruins. Scheller relates his homecoming to Shorewood, Wisconsin and a summer of relaxation and partying with his buddies who were returning from the various branches of service. Using the G.I. Bill, Scheller attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, eventually earning his master’s degree in social work and working as a social worker and administrator with Milwaukee County, primarily with nursing homes. He speaks of his work with the county and provides the story of his hire at King by John Mauer, Secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. He says his greatest challenge there involved changing from a civil service to a contract service system for physicians and speaks enthusiastically about the many events celebrating the Wisconsin Veterans Home

centennial. Retiring in 1989, Scheller tells of his work as a building consultant for construction of Ainsworth Hall at King. Scheller briefly speaks of being a “poor legionnaire;” joining the elite Cudorth Post for social connections, and of attending reunions of the USS Samaritan.

.

Biographical Sketch

Richard Seller, (b. 1924) a Shorewood, Wis. resident, was a medical corpsman in the Navy during World War II, a Milwaukee County social worker and commandant at the Wisconsin Veterans Home. In 1989, he was named “Man of the Year” by the Wisconsin State Squadron of the Navy Club of the United States.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996
Transcribed by Michael Chusid, 2005.
Transcript edited by Brooke E. Perry Hoesli, 2007.

Transcribed Interview:

Mark: Today's date is July the 15th, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing oral history at King, Wisconsin today with Mr. Richard Scheller, a veteran of the U.S. Navy in World War II and former commandant of the Wisconsin Veterans' Home. Good day, and thanks for coming in.

Scheller: I'm glad to come. My serial number in the Navy was 7042609. We never forget that, you know. There was hell to pay if you couldn't tell your superior what your serial number was. So go ahead, Mark.

Mark: Well, I was just going to start out by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised, and what you were doing prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941?

Scheller: Sure. I was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1924, and I grew up in a suburb of Milwaukee called Shorewood, the first suburb north. And, um, went to grade school and high school there, and I was in high school, of course, when Germany invaded Poland.

Mark: This is something that you remember?

Scheller: No. I have no fix on that at all, Mark, but the attack on Pearl Harbor, of course, I do have a fix on. I had a weekend and, oh, a night job working at a soda fountain in the local drugstore. And it was Sunday afternoon, and I was at the drugstore as a clerk when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941. I was a senior in high school. Very, um -- It affected me greatly. My father was a Navy veteran in World War I, and when I came home that evening after working in the drugstore, I walked in the house and my mother was crying, because she was sure I was going to go to war and be killed. And I guess that could have happened, because she was eighteen years old during World War I and often spoke to us in the family of some wonderful boyfriends she had in growing up that were killed in France in the First World War. She spoke of that quite often as we grew up, and she was devastated by the thought of my going to war. My dad -- I really don't recall very much of his reaction at all.

Mark: Now was he a veteran, just by chance?

Scheller: Pardon me?

Mark: Was he a veteran?

Scheller: Yes, he was a Navy veteran of World War I. He was a yeoman at Great Lakes Naval Training Station. So I went off to college in fall --

September, 1942, having enlisted in the Navy reserve, and kind of hoping I would get into the V-12 program later on. So I got one year of college – September 1942 until June 1943 -- at Lawrence College in Appleton. And yes, I was admitted to the V-12 college program at Lawrence. I had a wonderful time there as a civilian, but I was very, very unhappy as a sailor in the V-12 program.

Mark: Why was that?

Scheller: Well, I guess because of the mandatory courses that we were required to take that I really had no great interest in. I'm thinking of spherical trigonometry, some advanced geometry, I think I had had some, but there was some advanced physics. And very frankly I found that I just made great friends in the program from the sailors who came to the V-12 program out of the fleet. But I can say this: the officers that were assigned to the college in the V-12 program were not sailors – they were inept sailors, it seems to me, in Navy uniforms. And, um, I know one was a former superintendent of schools in Northern Wisconsin. And that isn't the Navy that I expected or anticipated, and I was unhappy, and my college boyfriends were just like college boys, but I made most of my friends with the men who came from the fleet. And the more I thought about it the more I wanted to get into the real Navy, and I was a V-12 dropout.

Mark: If I may interrupt for a minute, I'm interested in why you chose the Navy specifically? There were many other service options to choose from, and you seem pretty dead-set on the Navy.

Scheller: Oh, yeah. There was no question in my mind. My father had spoken highly of it. I had an aunt who was at the time keeping company with a 30-year career chief machinist mate, and it just seemed to me that that was where I wanted to be. Maybe you will hear this, maybe you won't, but I actually liked the uniform.

Mark: I have heard that, in case you're wondering.

Scheller: I really liked the uniform. By the way, let me just add for those who hear this tape, as you know the Navy uniform and the dress blues had a button flap in the front. And there were thirteen buttons that held that flap, and they stood for the thirteen original colonies of America. That's just one of many great historical things that the Navy tradition kept alive, at least when I was there.

Mark: So you left the V-12.

Scheller: I left the V-12

Mark: And you wanted to get into what you call the real Navy. How did you go about doing that?

Scheller: Well, I knew what was going to happen. When I dropped out of V-12, I was sent to Great Lakes for boot camp. And, Mark, this was the real Navy. This was the Navy. We lived out of a sea bag. We slept on our own mattresses with our own blankets. We had hammocks, but, of course, the hammock days were gone, and we slept in bunks in barracks at Great Lakes. But I enjoyed every minute of it. We had excellent training. The chiefs – chief-petty-officers – were our trainers, and leadership was chosen from within the boot camp class. So they were boots like us, as far as the leadership, and I had a marvelous time. Just a wonderful time. And, um, I stayed in Great Lakes because I had applied for pharmacist mate school. And that was super. I really was impressed. We had such excellent teachers, and I know one of the things you are interested in in retrospect is whether I thought the training was realistic. The answer is yes. Absolutely realistic. And when I came out of pharmacist mate school, I was assigned to the U.S. Navy hospital in Boston. It was located in Chelsea, Massachusetts. And when I left Great Lakes, I was ready, willing and able to do duty as a pharmacist mate. At the time, I didn't have a rating – I was what they called a striker. All I had was a plain red cross on my left sleeve. No eagle, no stripes. Just a pharmacist mate striker. But one of the things I learned is that by far the majority of the sailors that I trained with and that I met in the Navy were responsive to a Navy slogan, and that slogan was: Be neat, be clean, be Navy. And the Navy did all it could to have us live in a clean, neat atmosphere, and gave us the opportunity to be good sailors. So I got to the Navy hospital in Boston at Chelsea Naval Hospital, and incidentally I have to provide an anecdote here I think is fantastic. Years and years after World War II, the hospital in Chelsea was closed and turned into the Massachusetts Veterans Home, and that I would end my working career at the Wisconsin Veterans Home I think is an interesting coincidence. I began my real hospital training in the Navy at that naval hospital and I finished my work career at the Wisconsin Veterans Home – kind of an interesting circle. I was assigned duty on the eye, ear, nose and throat ward of the Navy hospital in Chelsea, and one day the head nurse of the whole hospital approached me in the hallway, and she said to me, “Are you Scheller?” I said, “Yes, mam.” I think she was lieutenant commander. She said, “I want you to hold out your hands – I want to look at your hands.” So I did – I held out my hands. And she said, “We'd like you to volunteer for operating room training. Would you be interested?” I said, “Yes, I would.” And she said, “Well, okay, you're going to go into training in the operating room.” Now this was a huge hospital. A large general hospital. It took care of Navy and marine personnel from the Boston Navy Yard, and any ships or marine air force or marines that came through the area – we took care of

them. We recollection is that we had seven or eight operating room suites, and I went into training there. My trainers were all the RN's. Most of them were young ensigns, volunteered for the Navy, wonderful women, and, um, were interested in training us, because the majority of us were going to end up as the principal medical person on the smaller craft in the Navy, and some of us, of course, would end up in a different way, which I'll talk about later. So I worked at the operating room in the naval hospital in Chelsea, and I'm very proud to say that when I finished my training, I had the highest grade point of any sailor that went through operating room training at that hospital. I just loved it. We had fantastic physicians. The Navy had a way of being next to a major metropolitan area like Boston. They had a way to commission famous physicians in the community, and I believe the Navy guaranteed them they would never leave the community, but they were commissioned officers, and I'm talking commanders and captains in the Navy, who worked at the Navy hospital in Chelsea. And they were tremendous, tremendous physicians in all the specialties. All of the specialties of neurosurgery, thoracic surgery, general surgery, orthopedic surgery – just tremendous, and, um, to be influenced by those men, I think, made all of us in that operating room want to do a really, really good job, and I think we did – I think we did a wonderful job. And the men that came under our care were, of course, 90% enlisted personnel, so not only were they our patients but they were our shipmates. And, um, later on in the Navy I learned that shipmates are forever. Anecdotally, along came one day two very nice WAVES. One was named Esther, the other one – I think it was Dotty. Dotty and Esther. And I guess I got a glimmer that I was going to experience what the WAVES were meant to do. And that was to free up an enlisted man for overseas duty! [Laughs.] So I had the distinct honor of helping to train my replacement. [Laughs.] Wonderful women. Did an absolute fantastic job. And we got along fine. With all of this sex stuff we're hearing about in the military today, I can truthfully say that in our group in the operating room and, as a matter of fact, in the hospital, I was absolutely and totally unaware of any misbehavior with the WAVES or with the nurses. What happened when they went home on leave and all of that, I don't know. All I'm talking about is in the hospital and on duty – everything was on the up and up. You will recall, the Normandy invasion occurred June 6, 1944. And much to our shock and surprise, the Boston Navy Hospital in Chelsea received a tremendous number of casualties from that invasion. I don't mean this to be sour grapes, but I don't think the Navy got much press on that invasion [laughs], but there sure were an awful lot of sailors involved, and I can tell you there were an awful lot of sailors who were hurt, injured and wounded in that invasion. Because a goodly number of them came right to our hospital, and I remember one large group that came – we couldn't get them into beds fast enough, and we had mattresses on the floor in the hallway, and those that weren't real serious had a bed down on the mattresses in the hallway until triage and other things could take place

to get them in the right bed. Had another personal tragedy there, where a young man came in from the Milwaukee area, from a town call Wauwatosa, which was a western suburb of Milwaukee. This young man was an ordinary seaman on a landing craft, and his landing craft was hit, and he ended up in the ocean, and he was in the ocean for several days before he was picked up. Very seriously injured. He ended up losing both legs – his jaw was fractured, and he lost all of his teeth. And I made it my business to personally visit him a lot when he was in our hospital, before he was sent back to the Midwest. I think he was eventually sent to Great Lakes. But he was in a lot of depression, and for the record his name was Bodecker. [Supresses sob.]

Mark: If I may interrupt for a second?

Scheller: Yeah.

Mark: Before Normandy, did you see many combat casualties, or what sort of patients were you seeing besides them? There were campaigns in North Africa – did you see these sorts of casualties, or before Normandy was it sort of the general –

Scheller: Only the secondary care. Yes, there were Navy men coming in all of the time, and we functioned like any civilian hospital: automobile accidents, drunken brawls – there were all kinds of reasons for people to be hospitalized.

We must have taken out about four or five appendices a week. We fixed hernias. We did all that kind of stuff. But in addition, we did -- we were the secondary hospital for wounded, like as you say, from North Africa, from the Mediterranean. Many of those men went to England first, and then from England they were sent to the United States. We got some of them, some of them went to Norfolk, some of them, you know, went to other places. But, yes, we got those -- And there was often a lot of clean-up work that needed to be done – the kind of surgery that they may have had in England needed follow-up, and some of them were quite ill. Every once and a while, and I'm glad you mentioned that, because, I'm recalling now, every once and a while we would receive a patient with a highly communicable disease, like meningitis or something. And we had the facility in our hospital to isolate and perform all the isolation techniques required that a base hospital might not have, so they were sent to us also. By the way a lot of the other work that we did as a secondary hospital did fall to the neurosurgeons, where – who were head injuries, there were arm and leg injuries to the nervous system that needed to be reopened. Very, very primitive attempts were being made at that time to reattach nerves and blood vessels. Compared to what is being done today, it's fantastic, but we did have some successes. I'd also like to mention, when I first got

to the Navy hospital in Chelsea, we never knew what penicillin was, all we had was sulpha. And when a young man needed his appendix removed, the last thing a doctor did before he sewed him up was sprinkle sulpha powder in his wound, and so on. And it was while I was at Chelsea Naval Hospital that penicillin was beginning to be introduced into Navy medicine, and that was an exciting thing to be part of. Very exciting. So the day came when I got orders to report to the outgoing unit in Treasure Island in San Francisco. And, um, there was a troop train that left the east coast, and it was kind of an interesting thing. It was the absolute oldest sleeping cars and Pullman cars that you can imagine. I have absolutely no idea where they dredged up these old, old cars. But they had wheels and heat – no air-conditioning – they had heat, and away we went to the west coast. And the way we traveled was two men in the lower bunk and one in the upper bunk. And I'm telling you it was crowded. And the only -- And, by the way, nobody was complaining. Really. Nobody was complaining. We were on the verge of another adventure. We were going to the west coast to an outgoing unit – "O-G-U": outgoing unit – and who knows where we were going?

Mark: Now, see, I was going to ask: What does that mean precisely? You were going to go overseas –

Scheller: You were going overseas, but you didn't know where.

Mark: You were going to be assigned there.

Scheller: You were going to be assigned in this outgoing unit. And we got sandwiches all the way, milk, coffee, soda, sandwiches. There was no facility for hot food, but we didn't care.

Mark: Was this the Red Cross by any chance?

Scheller: No, never saw any of them. That was all Navy. There was one beautiful, beautiful night – midnight, and, um, we were on the top of the Rocky Mountains. It's called the Feather River Pass. And the train stopped. Apparently there was the need to wait for some other train going somewhere, and our train had to stop. So we were stopped up there, literally on the top of the world. We got dressed and got out, and walked around the track. Looked at the stars – beautiful night! I got to Treasure Island, the outgoing unit, and many of us had an opportunity, if we wanted to, to be put inside some kind of duty station while we were waiting for orders. So I volunteered to work in the hospital, and I was assigned to a psychiatric ward. This was my first exposure to psychiatric medicine and the care of the psychiatric patient. And one of the things that I learned there that will stay with me I think forever has to do, I think, with being

judgmental. In the area I was assigned there was a sailor – very green, greenhorn. He was an older gentleman – he was about forty. Had a wife and children back home. Not sure I know exactly why he was in – maybe he was drafted, I’m not sure. I know he didn’t volunteer. But anyway, he had a hysterical paralysis of one arm, and this was all new to me, I, um, had never heard of such a thing. But I was instructed and read his case file, and it was just a revelation to me that an individual could be so completely disabled from a hysterical reaction to what was going on around him. And he was going overseas, and this paralysis occurred. And we talked a lot, and he knew why he was paralyzed – why his arm was paralyzed – but of course he couldn’t will that arm to be well. And, as I say, nobody in the area was judging him as a slacker or a coward or anything – he was what he was, and he had what he had. And he ultimately was put on a track for discharge. But it was interesting to me to learn about that. Sometimes what you see needs some interpretation.

Mark: Yeah. Now the patients in the psychiatric ward – were they mostly people going over seas, or were you getting people –

Scheller: It was a mixture. I know I did a lot of special duty with a young officer. I know today he was schizophrenic. Schizophrenic as hell – very, very suicidal, and we were assigned,

END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1

or he was assigned, a 24-hour watch. He was completely up and about, but he would -- We’d have to accompany him to the toilet: he could never be alone, because they really were concerned about suicide. Charming young man, but sometimes totally and completely out of it, hearing voices and so on. So that was an interesting thing for a twenty-year-old kid to experience also. I apparently was assigned to -- Instead of going directly overseas, I was sent to a hospital in Hawaii. On Oahu up in the hills there was Base Hospital No.10, and, um, I went from San Francisco to Oahu, and, um -- I have very little recollection of that. Very little. I know I never – the Navy expression is “go ashore.” I never went on leave or went down to Honolulu. I enjoyed being up in the mountains. We had very comfortable, fully screened, airy barracks, slept under mosquito netting, and it was very pleasant. But I have thought about this interview, and, you know, I can’t remember anything about this experience at Base Hospital No. 10, until I got my orders there that said there was a hospital ship down in Honolulu waiting, and I was going to be assigned to that hospital ship. And, um, I was very pleased. Got on the ship, and the first atom bombs began to fall. The war was over, and of course the big question then was – by the way, the date was August ’45 – the big question was, gee, are we going to turn around and go home? No, that didn’t turn out to be the way it was. We -- By the way -- So this, of

course, ended any opportunity for me to be any kind of a combat veteran. So though the hospital ship – the U.S.S. Samaritan, A-H-10 – had been in a lot of combat: they had been all through the Pacific war, along with another hospital ship, the U.S.S. Bountiful, and I'll talk more about the Bountiful later. They had unloaded a lot of patients at Pearl Harbor, Honolulu, and they were going back out to sea. Well, of course, with the war ending, there wasn't much secrecy. We were told we were going straight to Japan for some kind of occupation duty. So the first thing we did was head straight for Tokyo Bay. And I'm sure the fleet commanders were there, and we stayed in Tokyo Bay for a while, and we got a chance to go into Tokyo and look around. I don't know how to describe feelings there. The people were terribly beaten down. Just sad, sad looking. And poorly dressed. And that little piece of ground between the sidewalk and the street -- They had radishes and plants growing, and of course they fertilized with human excrement, so the smell was pretty bad, but they were hungry and they were beat. It wasn't -- I was glad to get back to the ship and get out of that -- It was not any kind of a pleasant experience. By the way, in Boston at the Navy hospital, the whole kitchen crew and the people that worked on the chow line and so on were all civilians, because of the location in a large metropolitan area. The same was true in Great Lakes and other places, for those of you who may not be familiar with the military at that time. If they were close to a large metropolitan area, they did hire a lot of civilian personnel, which I'm sure they do today. But they were great people, we got along very well with our civilian friends. And by the way Boston was just a wonderful, wonderful Navy town. I had a lot of fun – I had a couple of girlfriends. It was a very, very nice place to be. And one of the thrills of being in Boston was – I can't give you the date, but it was New Year's Eve, and I was at the Boston Pops concert on New Year's Eve, and they did a fantastic job and a great concert. And to this day, when I have the chance to see the Boston Pops, that night comes back to me.

So. We're back on the ship after visiting Tokyo, and finally found out that our assignment was going to be to serve as a base hospital in Sasabo Bay, which is located on the far south end of the island of Kaijushu. And the Samaritan steamed in there, anchored, and more and more ships gathered in Sasabo to support the occupation people who were ashore, and for whatever reason they decided not to set up any medical facilities ashore, but to use the Samaritan as their base hospital. So we -- We ran landing craft like, if we were ashore, we would run ambulances. And we had a sick call. And the men came out of the landing craft with their complaints. And of course I was in surgery, and everything was just like in any other hospital. We were taking out appendices, we were fixing hernias, we were patching people up with broken bones and Jeep accidents and on and on and on. And busy -- there always seemed to be orthopedic patients. That's the group I remember the most there in Japan. I don't know why

the guys were breaking bones and having accidents. We seemed to have an awful lot of that.

Mark: You mean, Navy guys or Japanese?

Scheller: No, Navy, Navy. And marines. Navy and marines. When, um -- You may or may not know, whoever's listening to this tape, that in World War II it was absolutely forbidden to have any alcohol aboard a Navy ship. So periodically we would be taken ashore on the beach and there would be beer available, and -- Oh, baseball equipment, volleyball -- that kind of outdoor recreation and drinking beer. So that's how that happened. You mentioned, Mark, about the Japanese. There was a kind of a hulk of a Japanese watercraft, and a couple of men were rowing, actually sculling, this craft, and all of a sudden it exploded. Whether they had oil or gasoline on that thing, I don't know, but it exploded, and very close to our ship. So we put a couple of boats in the water, as did some other ships that were anchored close by, and fished eight Japanese out of the ocean there and brought them aboard, some badly hurt, badly burned, others not too bad. And I'm proud to say there wasn't a murmur on our ship, as far as taking those men aboard and taking care of them, and treating them as they came out of the water, and then sending them on their way back to the mainland. What happened to them there I don't know, but I guess everybody was more curious to be up close to these Japanese men than anything. An order went out to all Navy personnel in the area that, as they were permitted to do so, they were to be taken to Nagasaki to see the atom bomb ruins. So the U.S.S. Samaritan, all of its ship crew and the patients, we steamed into Nagasaki Harbor and rotated going ashore to view the ruins. Sometimes I think all of us have been critical of our superior officers, especially those very high up and in Washington, D.C., but I think the decision to have all of the personnel in the area visit Nagasaki was a good one.

Mark: Why's that?

Scheller: The impact. The impact was there. Remember I'm talking -- and I can't date this for sure -- but let me say I may be talking about January or February. The bomb was dropped in August. And, um, there's one of the famous pictures I saw later -- still continue to see occasionally. Maybe you recall it -- the whole area is just flattened with nothing but rubble, but there's a church standing. It seems to -- It was damaged but somehow the church was not leveled, and that was one of our spots on the tour that we were given, and a priest was there -- it was a catholic church, and I can't say it was the priest who was serving there at the time, but, um, there was a priest there: a humble, bearded man in sandals and a brown cassock, kind of just walking around. I don't even recall whether he spoke English,

but it was a good experience, I think, for all of us to view the devastation. And by the way – No, I'll refrain from any more comment on that.

Mark: No, that's fine. I was going to –

Scheller: Well, I -- None of us faulted President Truman for the bomb. [Represses sob. Long pause.] We were glad.

Mark: I was just about to ask a question anyway.

Scheller: I agree.

Mark: I was just about to ask a question.

Scheller: Yes, we were. We were proud of President Truman. Well, we continued to serve as a hospital, and some fellahs got sent home, and other fellahs – me among them – seemed to just be destined to stay out there in Japan for a long time.

Mark: Now there was a point system at the time.

Scheller: Yeah, there was. I don't remember, I don't know. And it didn't make a hell of a lot of difference. I -- My folks were happy and we were writing back and forth, and I was fine, you know, I liked the Navy very, very much. Had a great opportunity -- When the ship left Sasabo and we knew we were eventually going to end up in San Francisco, we stopped at Shanghai, and for the Navy, you're really salty if you've been to Shanghai.

Mark: Why's that?

Scheller: Well, it was a big naval thing for the whole history of the Navy. Pacific sea duty – there was Shanghai, there was Hong Kong. These were Navy towns. Very much so. Very much so. And I learned a little bit about Shanghai, how the city was divided up into nationality groups. The White Russian, the Red Russian, German, French, and as we kind of wandered -- We tried to keep moving in that town to see what we could see, and the more you move around, the more you became aware – it seemed like every few blocks you were hearing a different language. Now that's not exactly true, but there were people who were talking all kinds of different languages. And I got to go ashore there, and then I also served on the shore patrol there in Shanghai. That was somewhat uneventful. No problems at all. We left Shanghai for San Francisco, and we got word on the way to San Francisco that the Samaritan would discharge all its patients and most of the crew, and then would head up toward Bremerton, Washington, which was the place where it was commissioned, and then it

would be cut up for scrap. The U.S.S. Samaritan had originally been a troop ship, and -- Mark, I was going to bring my Blue Jacket Manual with me, issued to every sailor, and there is a picture of a troop ship, taken in the twenties, that became the U.S.S. Samaritan. But that comes back a little later in my story. The track to discharge was totally and completely uneventful. Went ashore in San Francisco on leave for a couple days. Of course, we all had a lot of money, and we stayed in a nice hotel and got a good haircut and saw some of San Francisco. And then Great Lakes again, and in May of 1946 I finally got home. Three-hundred bucks mustering out pay, as I recall. Pretty nice.

Mark: That was helpful?

Scheller: Well, it [laughs] --

Mark: Well, it's always nice to have three-hundred bucks, but then the whole point of it was to help you get a foothold in civilian life.

Scheller: Yeah, well, I had a well-to-do, supportive family -- I didn't have to be too concerned about -- So the three-hundred bucks, I had a wonderful summer. My mother and father were disappointed that I (quote) "didn't settle down" that summer. And I didn't. I was -- The guys were coming back from Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and it seemed like every week we were having a reunion with some more guys, you know.

Mark: How'd you get in touch with these guys coming back?

Scheller: I'm sorry?

Mark: How'd you get in touch with these guys coming back, 'cause there's no real coordination?

Scheller: Well, you'd have to know Shorewood. Shorewood was a small suburb -- a bedroom community for Milwaukee, and there were only at that time about 12,000 people. But it was a bedroom community. And there were some bars that we'd hang out in, and they just all show up.

Mark: You spent a lot of time, um, partying, I guess we'd say, that summer.

Scheller: Partying, yeah, and, um -- didn't do anything bad, by the way. Did some dating, and, um, just kind of hung out.

Mark: Now, of course, the fall is coming, and it's time to start thinking about school. When did you start school?

Scheller: Yeah, we did that.

Mark: Did you start school in the fall of '46?

Scheller: Yes. By the way, I have to say this. I hope that everyone who's listening to this tape feels that I'm the kind of person who is positive and up, but I went back to Lawrence that summer to see about being readmitted in the fall. And, um, I was very, very disappointed, because in my interview with the dean, the dean didn't think very much of me because I had dropped out of V-12. And, um, you have to also understand that for a small college like Lawrence -- before World War II, it had 750 students. They were beginning to be overwhelmed with students and veterans, because of the G.I. Bill, and they were pretty choosy, and I was not chosen. The dean said, "I tell you, Dick. Go to school somewhere else, and if you prove yourself, come on back and we'll talk about getting you into Lawrence again." Well, needless to say, I never went back. So, that's a negative, but I guess it has to be part of the story. So I went to UW-M -- UW-Milwaukee -- on the G.I. Bill, had a great, great experience. Became a sociology major. Did very well, by the way, in school.

Mark: So is that where you finished your bachelor's degree, then?

Scheller: Well, they had -- at that time, UW-M did not grant degrees, you had to have your senior residence in Madison. And my bachelor's degree was granted in Madison. 1949. However, I just went right on then in Madison at graduate school, in the school of social work, and spent the summer there, and then came back to Milwaukee, to the graduate school of social work at UW-Milwaukee. The G.I. Bill was absolutely great -- I didn't need it, but I took it. My father was delighted. Because I had a young brother who was a stellar student and was in the school of engineering at Northwestern. And that was a very expensive school at the time -- guess it still is, so it really worked out well for the family that I could be on the G.I. Bill. I graduated and got my master's degree in 1951, married my sweetheart of seven years, and joined the Milwaukee county government.

Mark: As a social worker.

Scheller: As a social worker. And had a long and immodestly distinguished career in county government. Belonged to the American Legion -- my dad belonged. And more as a social group -- I was a poor legionnaire, as far as the legion was concerned, but it was a heck of a good social group.

Mark: Now you were in the Cudworth Post, which is sort of the crème de la crème of the Wisconsin Legion.

Scheller: The elite post in the area. No question about it. No question. And, um, a fine place, socially.

Mark: And so you joined for social reasons.

Scheller: Yes.

Mark: So when it came to looking for a treasurer and that sort of thing, you weren't particularly interested in that?

Scheller: No, no. I wasn't. But we go along in my career, and all of a sudden one day I get a piece of mail from a reunion committee: the U.S.S. Samaritan and the Bountiful were going to have a joint reunion. Well, I'll tell you, Mark, that was great. I think they had seven – so far, and I attended five. There's going to be another one in Milwaukee in September, but I'm not going to be able to attend. But we just had a marvelous, marvelous experience at those reunions –

Mark: The first one was how long after the war?

Scheller: Well, this is -- I'm going to say about 1990. Something like that.

Mark: Quite a while.

Scheller: Yeah, yeah, yeah. An old boatswain's mate from Rockford, Illinois, who had not been on either hospital ship, but who had been on them when they were troop transports, got the idea of having a reunion for the troop transports and the hospital ships, so really there were four ships – or four crews – getting together for this reunion. Well, you know, I don't know what to say – we had a wonderful time. A lot of nostalgia. Always had the cooperation of local Navy units in providing us with color guards and chaplains for a memorial service. We were treated beautifully in whatever community we were in. We were in Denver, Toledo, Louisville, Hershey, Pennsylvania, or somewhere near there -- Couple more places, but, you know, it was always Navy, somehow. And, as I say, they dragged these chaplains out – I think some of their uniforms smelled like mothballs, but they were always able to come up with a Navy chaplain and a color guard. So, it was great. And let me close by saying that shipmates are forever.

Mark: Looks like we're gonna run out of tape here too. Let me flip it over: it's not a problem.

Scheller: This is short. Again, talking about shipmates are forever I have to say that in 1989, the Wisconsin State Squadron of the Navy Club of the United States named me Man of the Year. And, um, that was a great honor for me to receive that, 'cause I was in the process -- I was up and about, but in the process of recovering from open heart surgery and I was on the

verge of retiring from King, and I guess I needed that. And it came at the right time. I was very, very honored to receive that award. Okay.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

Mark: -- readjustment period, and then I want to get into how you got to be commandant at King and your experiences here. Um, going back to just after your discharge, you ended up in social work, and I'm interested for what reasons you got into that?

Scheller: Well, it really wasn't social work, Mark, it was sociology. And then the way the University of Wisconsin ran the program, there were a number of anthropology courses required along with the sociology, and I really got wrapped up in anthropology. Then I was also introduced to criminology, and the University of Wisconsin was privileged to have the dean of criminologists in the United States on their faculty. I think he might have been emeritus, but he was still active. His name was John Gilham. And, um, Dr. Gilham's sidekick was a fellow by the name of Marshall Clenard. I got interested in some of the social pathology, criminology -- very interested in anthropology and particularly in American Indians, some of the ancient evolutionary thoughts of the time. That was it. But then, you know, when you get close to your bachelor's degree, the thought come along: how am I going to earn a living? I was not a teacher, didn't feel like I wanted to be a teacher. And this is not to degrade teachers, but I wanted to be a doer. And I guess it was fairly [blank spot] me and my friends, by the way who I came to know in criminology and so on, who also went into social work, and then they went in that direction of corrections, juvenile detention and a variety of that.

Mark: Now we discussed your educational benefits and that type of thing. In terms of other veterans' benefits available at the time, there's the issue of housing. There was a lot of concern right after the war about housing and where we were going to put up all these veterans. Now when you were going to school in Milwaukee, did you have trouble finding a place to live?

Scheller: No, I lived there.

Mark: You lived at home.

Scheller: Yeah, it was very close.

Mark: And once you got out and got established in your profession, there ere loans available to veterans -- both state and federal.

Scheller: I didn't need it. I don't know how this is going to sound on tape, but I say I didn't need it. I had a helpful family, and I was earning a good living, and I didn't need any help. But I sure loved that three-hundred bucks that first summer!

Mark: [Laughs.] You worked for the county, Milwaukee County.

Scheller: Yes.

Mark: Now there are veterans' preference laws – did that apply to you to your knowledge? Perhaps you didn't even realize it. Was that something you were conscious of when you were going for the job there?

Scheller: No. I never worried about that. As far as I know, I never needed it. And then, you know, this is going to come back on somebody's ears, but I just going to tell you the way it is. Every time I went for a job I was the number one candidate, and I never had a problem.

Mark: Now in the Milwaukee County system you did what precisely? You were working social work, I remember.

Scheller: Well, this is the interesting thing. You got to go back to the 19-year-old kid in the hospital. And then, here I am in Milwaukee County, working in the Department of Public Welfare, and guess what? I'm a supervisor in the nursing home unit, constantly talking with the County General Hospital and with a whole cadre of nursing homes, and visiting in nursing homes, and so on. So, whom am I talking to? I'm talking to nurses, I'm talking to doctors – hey, I like this!

Mark: Now was that an accident that you ended up in that same general field, or--

Scheller: There is no such thing as an accident.

Mark: Well.

Scheller: No, my mind –

Mark: Was it your intention to do that?

Scheller: Well, it was an intention that was not high on the surface. But I liked the milieu – the medical milieu. I liked all of that. I liked in the Navy and I liked it as I -- My whole career had to do with institutional work and medically related, if you will.

Mark: Now in the social welfare field after World War II, did you have much contact with veterans or were veterans much of a concern? I know there was a kind of service office, but in your field [?] you didn't have much.

Scheller: By coincidence through another whole story, the dean of county veteran service officers was a fellow by the name of Jack Lubin, and he was the Milwaukee County veterans' service officer. You've heard of Jack?

Mark: I interviewed him actually.

Scheller: Huh?

Mark: I interviewed him. About two years ago.

Scheller: He and I became very, very personal friends, because I had been asked by the Jewish community to work for the establishment of a Jewish nursing home. They had a Jewish Home for the Aging, and I was very well known there. (By the way, I am not of that persuasion.) But in working with the Jewish community in the establishment of the Jewish nursing home, I got close to Jack Lubin. And he and I became very, very good friends. But not really work related.

Mark: And so how did you get from Milwaukee County to King.

Scheller: Oh. That's an interesting –

Mark: There's a method in my madness here, I'm tracing –

Scheller: Yeah, it's an interesting story. Um, Milwaukee County Institutions and Departments, of which I was the deputy director in my later years, got a new director. And the director was James Wiener. And James Wiener was a former Democratic legislator in Wisconsin. In the Wisconsin legislature. In fact he was the speaker. A colleague of his by the name of John Mauer was the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. And John Mauer called up James Wiener one day and said, "Jim, I'm in a spot. I need to find a really top-notch commandant for the Wisconsin Veterans Home. And I'm throwing out the net, and can you give me any help?" And Mr. Wiener said, "Well, let me think about that." So, he and I were very close, as he was the director and I was the deputy director. And in conversation, he mentioned this. And I don't know what possessed me, but I said, "Well, you know, Jim, maybe I'd be interested in that." I can't tell you my motivation at that – it just kind of came out. Maybe after thirty years in Milwaukee County I was ready to do something else. You know, I don't know. So I can't pinpoint it for you – what happened. So Jim got back to John Mauer, and John Mauer, Mike Sted, Jim Wiener and I had lunch in Milwaukee. "How do you do? I'm Dick Scheller," I said. "How

do you do? I'm John Mauer," he said. "I'm Mike Sted, and here's Jim Wiener, da, da, da." And, you know, we talked. And I put some stuff together in the form of a resume. And, Jez, I really had the credentials. I had done so much in Milwaukee County – I had spent two years as the head of the psychiatric hospital as an interim director, because the guy walked out one Sunday night, and Monday morning I was told, "Go over there and remedy [?] –" And I did, and I was there two years. You know, and I did a lot of different things. So then, um, Mike Sted was sort of acting commandant here. He invited my wife and I to come up. We visited the veterans' home. We were enthralled with the commandant's house. My wife just ate that up. We had been in institutional housing before, and we liked it. We lived on the grounds of Milwaukee County now, not for ever, but for a while. And so, Mr. Mauer asked me to start September 1, whatever year it was – '85, I think, I don't know. So I left my wife back in Milwaukee to have a rummage sale and sell the house, and I was commuting. And then all of a sudden one day, the moving van showed up and so did she, and then here we are.

Mark: So when you took over the operation here, what were your biggest challenges?

Scheller: Physicians.

Mark: Keeping them here?

Scheller: Pardon me?

Mark: Keeping them or getting them here?

Scheller: Getting rid of them.

Mark: Huh. [Laughs.]

Scheller: Um, we had a bad situation. Um, again I'm going to move into a negative mode here, and I don't really like to do that, but the facts are the facts. We had a good medical director. But the physicians provided by the civil service system left much to be desired. They were all foreign trained [shouting]. One of them could barely make himself understood in English – he was a Filipino. Been here fifteen years, and nobody could understand him. The patients – it was very hard for them to establish a relationship. So we -- I can't recite all the dynamics of this, but you can imagine through the state system, moving from a civil service to a contract service. The deputy commandant at the Wisconsin Veterans Home was named Vern Hanky, Lavern Hanky. First of all, about the finest human being that anyone could ever hope to work for. Secondly, he knew Waupaca and had been at the home, I believe, over twenty years. And he knew everything –

all of the ins and outs. The written and the unwritten. What was said and what was thought about, and he knew where all the skeletons were. So we began to talk to the local physicians here in Wapaca, and that evolved into a contract service with them, and the civil service doctors disappeared.

Mark: By attrition? Or –

Scheller: There was no job. There was no longer a civil service classification of physician at the Wisconsin Veterans Home. Period.

Mark: That must have taken some doing.

Scheller: Oh, you bet. And that's what we -- But John Mauer was completely, totally supportive of this, and it's certainly a major accomplishment here at the Wisconsin Veterans Home.

Mark: Yeah.

Scheller: And the veterans and their wives and everybody was so much better off, and everybody welcomed these doctors.

Mark: And this process took how long? Several years I would imagine.

Scheller: No, not several years. Maybe a year. Maybe shorter. We'd have to go into the files on that, Mark, my memory doesn't go along with that, I don't know. The other wonderful, wonderful thing – I'm moving to the positive now – wonderful thing was the centennial of the veterans home. And I'm sure you have stuff in your archives on that – again, tremendous support from the veterans board, the secretary of veterans affairs John Mauer, his staff, this bunch here, the community of Wapaca, everybody got excited. Governor Thompson got excited, everybody was excited about the centennial. And we had a wonderful time. And there's a wonderful book that was put together with the noble help of Cliff Borden, who was in the Department of Veterans Affairs at the time, and he worked with us, guided us and helped us put this book together. And you must have copies of that, and it's marvelous! What a wonderful year! We even celebrated – There was one day -- The actual founding of the home was in the month of October. So we decided that we would honor the first baby in the Wapaca Hospital, born in October. And there was another fantastic coincidence. That same month here at the Wisconsin Veterans Home we had a Native American, celebrating his hundredth birthday. So we brought the new baby from the hospital, and Charlie – I can't say his last name – Charlie, the hundred-year-old veteran from World War I, together. We planted a tree out here, a beautiful maple tree. The community responded with all kinds of gifts for this baby. I mean, jee, the kid had all kinds of wonderful gifts. And we honored Charlie, too. I think we honored him as much as

being a Native American veteran as we did his hundredth birthday. He was pretty good, pretty spry. The only thing is he was almost totally deaf. I tell you – you really had to get almost down next to his ear. But that was a wonderful time. And we did bury a time-capsule.

Mark: Oh, is that right? On the grounds here somewhere?

Scheller: Yes, in front of the bandstand. And there's a marker there.

Mark: I'll go have a look before I leave here today.

Scheller: Yes, there's a wonderful marker, and we had a lot of interesting stuff – I can't recite what it is. Gosh, I hope you've got a record of what's in there.

Mark: Someone does.

Scheller: And, again, the board's support on our centennial was just fantastic. And they had so much fun. I was on the job about a week, and Mary Prall was the secretary to the commandant. She came in and she said, "Mr. Scheller, there's two gentlemen from the board here to see you." Fine, glad to meet them. First – my first meeting. One of them was Bob Frautschi, and the other one -- Bob was kind of the leader -- Who was the other: there was another board member with him. Anyway, after introductions, Bob Frautschi said, "What you've got to do is you've got to put on a centennial." I've been here in the chair a week, and he said the board has a committee – maybe he was the chairman of the committee, I don't know – but he said, "Now you – you make us a centennial." Well, we made a centennial. And an awful lot of people contributed to that, and it was a fantastic, fantastic job, and a young man, who's still with us, by the name of Rich Calcott, was really the major mover and shaker on the staff to put on that centennial. Great job. Rich. Great job.

Mark: So you retired when?

Scheller: I don't know. '86.

Mark: So you weren't in that terribly long?

Scheller: I'm sorry?

Mark: You weren't in that terribly long.

Scheller: No. No, not '86. '89, excuse me. I came here in '84 or '85 and retired in '89.

Mark: Was Steve Hendricks your successor, or was there somebody in between there?

Scheller: No, Steve was my successor, but – Robert Browning said, “Grow old along with me,/ The best is yet to be.” John Mauer asked me to stay on as a consultant, working along with the architects in the design of Ainsworth Hall. So I was around here, oh, roughly half-time, for two years, working with the building committee, with all the guys in Madison, the private architects -- Well, in fact, I was in on the interviewing of the architects, you know. ‘Cause I had had multi-million dollars of construction experience with Milwaukee County, ‘cause we built a medical center. John thought that I could make a contribution, and I knew I could. And I was a little bit on the curmudgeon side of that operation. Um, I think some of the state engineers felt some barbs, but we ended up, I think, with a fine building. And we’re proud of it. So that was an interesting thing. And I remind you: the nineteen-year-old kid on the hospital ship. It just flowed, Mark, it just flowed! I’m seventy-three years old now, been retired five years or so. Great, wonderful.

Mark: Appropriate of a place to end, too. Anything you want to add? Questions or anything?

Scheller: No. Thank you for the opportunity.

Mark: Thank you for your time.

Scheller: You bet.

END OF INTERVIEW