

**Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center**

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
THOMAS C. SCHMITZ
Security Police, Air Force, Vietnam War

2016

OH
2061

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Schmitz, Thomas. (b. 1948). Oral History Interview, 2016.

Approximate length: 1 hour 19 minutes

Contact WVM Research Center for access to original recording.

Abstract:

In this oral history interview, Thomas C. Schmitz discusses his eight years in the Air Force and specifically his tour in Vietnam, where he was stationed at Phu Cat Air Base and participated in regular sniper ambush missions. After receiving his draft notice in 1967, Schmitz decided to enlist in the Air Force. He did his basic training in Amarillo, TX and from there trained for as a part of the Security Police. In March of 1968 he was deployed to Vietnam where he was based at Phu Cat. After his tour he returned state side and was then reassigned. He stayed in the Air Force for eight years, moving between multiple bases in multiple locations, including Wisconsin, Washington, Texas and Canada.

Specific topics covered in the interview include: Working security for a USO show during which Schmitz got to chat with Ann Margaret, the details of how the sniper ambush missions worked, a close call in which Schmitz was saved from a bullet by a M16 magazine that he was wearing in a bandolier, an orphanage near the Air Base where many American service men spent time and volunteered, sentiments about anti-war protestors and the lack of communication with family and friends about the war, and details about Schmitz's service in Canada. The interview concludes with reflections about serving in the military and Schmitz's opinions about the gap (or lack thereof) between veterans and civilians.

Biographical Sketch:

Schmitz (b. 1948) served eight years with the US Air Force as a Security Policeman including one overseas tour in Vietnam.

Archivists' Note:

Transcriptions are a reflection of the original oral history recording. Due to human and machine fallibility transcripts often contain small errors. Transcripts may not have been transcribed from the original recording medium. It is strongly suggested that researchers engage with the oral history recording as well as the transcript.

Interviewed by Ellen Brooks, 2016.

Transcribed by Audio Transcription Center, 2017.

Reviewed by Tristan Krause, 2017.

Abstract written by Ellen Brooks, 2016.

Interview Transcript:

[Beginning of OH2061.Schmitz]

Brooks: Today is Thursday, February 11, 2016. This is an interview with Thomas Schmitz. Do you prefer Tom? Do you have a—

Schmitz: Sure.

Brooks: —Tom's good. Who served with the Air Force during the Vietnam War. The interview is being conducted by the Madison Public Library. The interviewer is Ellen Brooks, and the interview is being recorded for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum Oral History Program. All right, so if we can just start at the beginning so we can get a little background on you. If you can just tell me where and when you were born.

Schmitz: I was born on May 6, 1948 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Brooks: Okay, and did you grow up in Milwaukee?

Schmitz: Yes.

Brooks: Okay. So, can you tell me a little bit about your early life and your childhood in Milwaukee?

Schmitz: Oh, went to St. Rose Grade School. High school, I went to Cathedral High School for two—three years and then I transferred to West Division High School for my final year. Met my future wife there, so that was a good thing, and after I got out of high school, I worked at the Harley Davidson Motorcycle Company for about six months before I got an invitation from the government and I joined the Air Force thinking that I—you know—maybe I wouldn't get the Vietnam, and six months later, I was in Vietnam, so that didn't work out.

Brooks: And do you remember, kind of, hearing anything about the war while you were in high school or building up to that notice that you got?

Schmitz: Nothing.

Brooks: Nothing?

Schmitz: Nothing. At that time, there weren't anti-war protestors; there weren't—There might have been news reels and I probably just didn't pay any attention to them—

Brooks: And just for a little bit more context, what did your parents do for a living?

Schmitz: Father deceased when I was young. My mother, was a addressograph person at the Hardish-Viger[??]_Corporation in Milwaukee. Addressograph—when they—before they had labels, they had something that looked like a dog tag, about that long, with a name, address, and information to people they'd mail things to and the addressograph person basically made those labels. So that's what she did.

Brooks: Hm. And any siblings?

Schmitz: I have three older brothers and one sister.

Brooks: Okay. Is your sister younger then?

Schmitz: Yes. I'm the youngest.

Brooks: Okay. All right. And did any of your brothers get drafted before you?

Schmitz: My oldest brother [sighs] who was deathly afraid of water, joined the Navy, [laughs] and when some guy decided that he wanted to teach him how to swim by throwing him in the pool of water, he freaked out and I think he hit the guy [laughs], so he was discharged. Now, I had a brother that joined the Air Force, and he really wanted to join. He really wanted to get in there, but he had so many allergies. I remember, growing up, we had to watch what he ate. He had so many allergies that pretty much anything he ate in the military caused a reaction and they finally says, "This ain't gonna work out," and they gave him a medical discharge.

Brooks: So, do you remember your first reaction when you got your draft notice?

Schmitz: [Pauses] It's kind of numb. It's like, well for us guys, the day we get married, it's kind of, [laughs] you know, numb. It's like, you don't remember what reaction you had. You're more or less, "Oh my God. Now what?" You know?

Brooks: Hm. And when was that? What year?

Schmitz: Sixty-seven.

Brooks: And what had you been doing at Harley Davidson? You said you worked there for about six months?

Schmitz: Yeah. I was on the assembly line putting together Super Glide—the big bikes.

Brooks: Okay. And is that, kind of, what you first saw yourself doing for the future? Did you have kind of a plan for a career?

Schmitz: Didn't have any plans, you know. When you're young you don't—you plan about an hour ahead of time.

Brooks: [Laughs]. Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, tell me a little bit about—so you decided to join the Air Force. What happens next after you sign up?

Schmitz: Well, we had the physical, which was your standard physical. They made sure you had enough fingers to shoot a gun and, you know—the normal things they did. You went to basic training. I went to—in Texas—Amarillo, Texas, basic training. I signed up to be an air traffic controller. They had other ideas. I ended up in security police, so I took security police training. Stationed at—gosh. I was about six bases in the eight years I was in the military. Don't remember what base I was at when I got orders for Vietnam, but a lot of guys were getting orders about the same time.

[00:05:23]

Brooks: Mm. And why had you wanted to be an air traffic controller?

Schmitz: Safe. [laughs]. And also, I figured if I got the training, when I got out, I could—it was good money—good job security.

Brooks: True. So tell me more about what it means to be security police for the Air Force.

Schmitz: At most bases, you are either in the assembly or in the flight line securing the aircraft, or you are at the front gate, or you are at base housing patrol or town patrol. Those were the duties, and I did all of them.

Brooks: And when you went to basic, did you go with anyone that you knew? Did you go with any friends?

Schmitz: No. No.

Brooks: Did you—were there any memorable people from basic or from any of your training in the States?

Schmitz: Oh, yes. Basic training, there's—of course, the drill sergeants were gung-ho and, “You do what I say or I'm going to kick your butt,” type thing, and this one guy says, “If anybody thinks they can kick my butt, come forward.” Well now, there was this big dude from—I found out he was from the inner city of New York. He came forward, and he was a big, Black guy, and he says, “Bring it on.” So—I didn't see him after that. I don't know if he—they didn't take anything like that. They took it pretty seriously when somebody would say something like that, so I don't know what happened to him, but—yeah, there were quite a few people. One guy named Brownley[sp??]. I seen him after—in Vietnam, I seen him. He was stationed at another base and I went there and met him, but that—he's the only guy that I can remember from basic training that I had contact with.

Brooks: And how did you do in basic training in terms of all the physical stuff they put you through?

Schmitz: No problem. I just—I think early on, I learned how to play the game. Whatever they wanted. If you—wanted them to yell, you'd yell. If you wanted them to, you know, do a chant, you did a chant. I—some of the guys in there, you could tell there were from military schools. They were all gung-ho, spitting polish and they took everything real serious and I never did.

Brooks: [Laughs]. So, when you got your orders to go to Vietnam, what was that like?

Schmitz: A lot that goes through your mind, you know. You heard stories from some of the guys that came back and they talked about losing friends, and they suggested that the—you don't have friends over there because, If you lose them, it's tough. You know, so you just don't have friends. They also mentioned the first thing you do is you roll in the dirt and scuff up your boots because the enemy looks for raw recruits, and you don't want to have a target on your back, so.

Brooks: What was your reaction to all that?

Schmitz: I was ready. I said, "Let's do this." What could you say? You get ready. Physically, psychologically. I think psychologically most, is you get ready for what may come up, and what I didn't understand until I got over there, is you talk to ten veterans that were in different parts of the country, and you get ten different views on what the war was like because every area was different. You know, some people see a lot of—seen a lot of action. Others not so much, you know? So it was—I think it was probably like most wars. It depended where you were and what you were doing. It's—you get different versions, and they're all right.

Brooks: And did the Air Force or the military do anything that you remembered to kind of prepare you psychologically?

[00:09:44]

Schmitz: Not psychologically. I went through what's called AZR training. It was pre-combat training. Played war games out in the field. It was somewhere in Texas. I don't remember where. Fort Collins? I don't know. Somewhere in Texas it was, and, you know, they explode things around you so you get the feel for not freaking when something explodes by you. You'd have—you'd fall and shoot your weapon and then roll and then stand up and—which you never did in the real world; you never stood up. [Laughs] You're always crouching or laying down and crawling or hiding in the bushes. At least, I would—that's what I did. I was in the sniper ambush team and we—night work and hiding in the bushes type of thing.

Brooks: So you got your orders, and then what happened?

Schmitz: Well, like I said, went through the AZR training and then got on a—I believe it was a Tiger Flight. At that time, Tiger Flights were run by—from what I understand, it's some government agency that took us in and took us out, and landed. First thing I remember is getting off the plane, then getting this rush of hot air coming at you and then the smell. It takes a while for the smell [laughs]. You know, they don't have a real great sewage system there, and the odors and the smell and—a lot of the odors were actually from cooking. They cook—we're used to the American way of cooking. They had spices and they had different things they put in their meals and that added to the aroma, so it was different.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. And were you—when you were deployed, were you with a unit or were you on your own with other individuals, or—

Schmitz: I was stationed at Phù Cát Air Base and Phù Cát had a big contingent of F16 fighter jets and with that there's a bomb dump, which was on the opposite side of the base for security reasons, and then we had a contingent of rescue helicopters. Mainly it was the rescue helicopters were for downed pilots, but also if a other branch of service had a lot of mass casualties, we would help them. You know, but—in our job, I got involved in what was called Cobra Flight, and Cobra Flight—unlike most air bases who rely on the Army, the ROK Marines, the Aussies, on the outer perimeter, any time there was any kind of incoming fire fights or incoming rounds, you'd have to coordinate with all these different things. Is somebody drunk and just shooting something off, or was it a mistake, or are you doing a drill, or what? And by that time it was all over, so somebody came up with the idea of training our own people. So Cobra Flight had three mortar pits, three armored personnel carriers (APCs)—they're a—look like tanks and then the back would come back and you'd deploy from it—a TESI, which is intrusion detection things. They had monitor devices all around the base. Don't know how many; don't know where they were. They were out there before I actually got there, so I don't know, and they could detect movement on the outer perimeter, which was our area, and they could tell the difference between a python, a cat, a water buffalo, or a human. You know, these guys were good. They were called—I don't know what TESI stood for, but I'm sure, being the military, it stood for something. [Laughs].

And then there was the sniper ambush team. We'd go out after dark and come in right before light and we'd usually go in the area where the TESI unit said there was some activity and we'd just kind of intercept. You know, say, "Surprise!" [Laughs] and that was our job. It was interesting; it was called a sniper ambush team, but I don't think anybody ever sniped. [Laughs]. It was just ambush, you know. Securing the perimeter, so.

Brooks: So it was your responsibility to go out and find out why—where the activity was coming from, basically that was detected?

Schmitz: Yeah. There was about a one-mile radius around the base which was our area, you know, to protect.

Brooks: Can you describe Phù Cát a little bit for us?

Schmitz: Phù Cát was a pretty large base. It [papers rustling]—it was right outside of Qui Nhon in the [papers rustling]—I know—I looked at a map recently [papers rustling] and most of the villages and the names that were there at that time weren't [papers rustling]—aren't there anymore. They renamed everything.

[00:15:02]

It had a lot of, like I said, aircraft. It had NCO Club and an Officer's Club. NCO Club was interesting. Guys would come in from the field and they'd let it all hang out. You know, usually have too much to drink, and then there was the USO Shows, which was interesting. I had the opportunity to be on the security detail when Ann Margaret came over with Bob Hope. And it was funny. I mentioned to her, I says, "If things get bad, I'll push you to the ground, get on top of you and protect you," and she smiled and she says, "Yeah, in your dreams." [Laughs]

Brooks: [Laughs]

Schmitz: And she had her own personal security detail too, so we were just kind of auxiliaries, but—

Brooks: Did you have a chance to chat with Bob Hope at all?

Schmitz: No. No. He was by himself in a separate area.

Brooks: What did you think of those shows, just kind of as entertainment?

Schmitz: I thought it was great. We also had Sig Sikowitz, which was, I believe, out of Chicago. He was a big deejay and his guests were the Doublemint Twins. Now you're too young to understand. Doublemint Gum used to have commercials where there were twins, girls, and they'd like to tap dances and stuff like that. Usually kind of nerdy people and when they appeared on stage, they did their tap dance and they had the short-shorts on which were popular at that time when— and then the red, white, and blue tops and they were as nerdy as they were in commercials in real life, just—[laughs] Yeah, okay. But they were round-eyes, so that was okay.

Brooks: And so do you think those shows kind of served their purpose in terms of morale and—

Schmitz: Oh yeah.

Brooks: – everything?

Schmitz: Oh yeah. Yeah. People would come—we had guys come in from the field that I'd never seen before, but you could tell they lived out there in the field. You could tell by their eyes. They had the wide eyes, and that's—you can always tell a combat veteran who's lived out in the field all the time. Their eyes are wide and they're always—they're looking left and right and even when they're having fun, they're on guard and that's what it is.

Brooks: So tell me a little bit about the living conditions, then, on the base.

Schmitz: We had it nice. We had barracks and [papers rustling] it was barracks that were built before we were there and we had Vietnamese women come and clean the barracks for us, and—it was funny. We'd introduce—a lot of these ladies would bring their kids with them and we introduced them to things like Santa Claus. They didn't understand that whole concept, so it wasn't bad. And then at night, you know, when it got dark, we'd go out and do our thing out in the field and come back. And then, about four of us at a time would go up to Hill 151, which was a large hill right outside the base, a strategic location that if the enemy got ahold of it, it would—be bad for us because that was an ideal location—so we spent a couple weeks up there at a time, in holding down the hill.

Brooks: You said that was groups of about four of you—

Schmitz: Yeah, about four of us.

Brooks: – at once?

Schmitz: There was a fifty-caliber machine guns. There were Claymore mines all around and no foliage at all on the slopes of the top of the field. I'm not sure if it was Agent Orange or whatever, but as far as I know, nobody's been affected by it. You know, you hear these horror stories and my guess is that it probably was defoliated long before I was there so there was no residue, so no problems, and [pauses]. We lived in like an underground bunker. And—

Brooks: That's when you were up on the hill?

Schmitz: Up on the hill. Yeah. You had one guy there that just had a real bad attitude and while they were up there, I'm guessing they had something going on at the base like a USO Show, and he brought a helicopter up there with two ladies in it that were waving and this guy with the bad attitude turned around and mooned them, so [laughs] the helicopter quickly took off, but you know, that was his thing, so there's all different personalities there.

[00:20:04]

Brooks: And when did you get there? When did you—

Schmitz: In March of '67 to March of '68, or was it March of '68 to March of '69? One of those two.

Brooks: You said you were drafted in '67, so I think probably '68.

Schmitz: Yup. Yup.

Brooks: Makes more sense. I think that's what you put on your other paper here, too, so I'm sure it all kind of runs together at that stage. And so how many of you were usually on the sniper ambush missions?

Schmitz: Two to four.

Brooks: Wow, so that's small.

Schmitz: Yeah. Well, you didn't want a bunch of people out there because then it'd draw too much attention. And there were certain rules. You didn't—you made sure your dog tags were taped together so they didn't make any noise. If you had—most of us had extra M-16 magazines. Make sure it was a full one so it didn't jiggle, and little things like making sure that your canteen wasn't half full because half-full canteens slush and you can hear that stuff at night from way far away. So what we'd usually do was share a canteen; when it was empty, then share another canteen and, you know. Little things that you'd never think about but they were important. One thing that was interesting is during the daytime, we would reconnoiter the area we were going to ambush that night, but we'd also reconnoiter a couple other areas because we didn't know who was watching. You didn't want to go to one area and then the enemy's watching and say, "Well, that's where they're going to be tonight." So we'd go to a couple different areas so they never knew where we were going to be that night. That's one of the little things we did.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Was there anything memorable about your first mission?

Schmitz: Other than being scared? [Laughs]. No, not really. You just kind of—not necessarily back-to-back, but you'd watch this part of it and if you were two of us, the other guy would watch that part of it. If there were four of us, we'd get together and say, "Okay, you watch there. You watch there. You watch there," and we'd watch for movement and sometimes we'd see them. Sometimes not.

Brooks: How often would you find something, and how often would it be—

Schmitz: More often we wouldn't find anything. There was probably—we were probably seven days a week, or seven to ten days a week depending on how much activity, and then get a day or two off, and I say, maybe three or four times in the whole

year, we actually came up on something. Most of the time you could hear something out there, but you couldn't see them. And sometimes during the day we'd go back and find things out there. You know like [pauses], we could tell where people were walking out there, they—and why they didn't open fire, the only thing I can guess is that they didn't want to give away the fact that they were out there for just two or three—you know. If they're going to do damage, they want to take out the bomb dump. Take out some of the aircraft, and that's what we were out there for, to prevent that from happening, so, that would be my guess is they just didn't want to confront us.

Brooks: And then how did you spend your days off usually then?

Schmitz: Usually I—well, at first, a lot of drinking [laughs], partying, but right on one side of our base was an orphanage that I—you know. And I looked at some of the oral histories in the online things, and I think that was standard almost. You know, the guys seeing so much violence that they kind of balanced it out by working at a local orphanage and working with the orphans. The good and the bad, balanced it out. And like most of them, we'd call home—call home, no. There wasn't Skype and there wasn't email. So we'd write home and say, "Get some clothes. Send it to us." [coughs]. And they did. Usually the family and friends would get with either a church organization amongst themselves and pack up some clothes and we'd take it over there.

[00:24:39]

Now an interesting thing, I got to know the French nuns who ran the orphanage and one of the nuns mentioned that once or twice a week, kids would disappear at night and I thought—I asked her, I says, "Did they just take off because they wanted to get back to their village or whatever?" and she said, "No." They had no village to get back to—no [coughs]—no family to get back to. I said, "Well what's going on?" She was up-front and honest. She says, the flesh peddlers were taking them from their cots at night and they probably ended up in either Saigon or maybe the Philippines, or wherever. And I said, "Well, do you report it to the police?" and they says, "Yeah, the police were sympathetic, but they reminded me that there was a war going on." They didn't have people to secure the perimeter of the orphanage. And I said, "Well, how about the base commander?" I said, "Did you ask them?" And they said, "Well, we talked to the prior base commander, and he says it would have been a political nightmare if one of his guys were killed or one of his guys killed somebody else or there was a fire and maybe a child was killed or injured. He says, we'd love to do it and just like the local police, he says, we're sympathetic, but we can't do anything about it." And we had a saying in the military, "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission." So a bunch of us guys got together and talked to other guys and we pulled security at the orphanage at night and what was great is there was a waiting list of guys that wanted to do that on their day off, so. And this whole thing came about six months before I came back, and in that six months, not one kid disappeared,

and—but what I often wondered about—I’m guessing that they kept the thing going after I left, but I was wondering, when we came out of Vietnam, what happened to that orphanage and those nuns? Especially if somebody said they were American sympathizers. They had American troops—what happened? So, don’t know, but.

Brooks: Did you ever tell any of your officers, or did the word spread up the chain that you guys were providing security?

Schmitz: Oh no. We kept it to ourselves. If it did, they’d probably tell us we couldn’t do it anymore, so we just kept it among the security police.

Brooks: And the French nuns, could they speak English?

Schmitz: Yes. Yes. Yes. And most of the kids—or not most of the kids. A lot of the kids you could tell they were—they had French features, so. I’m guessing that’s why the French nuns got involved. That’d just be a guess, but.

Brooks: Did you learn any Vietnamese while you were there?

Schmitz: Yeah, but you don’t want to ask me [laughs].

Brooks: Okay. [Laughs].

Schmitz: Just—

Brooks: Not polite conversation Vietnamese?

Schmitz: Not polite—GI conversation. “Di di mao,” which means “Get out of here,” and “Lai dai,” which means “Stand still.” Yeah, those things were some of them.

Brooks: Did you have any other interactions with any of the civilians—the Vietnamese civilians?

Schmitz: Yeah. We had a bunch of kids—we called them “the dead end kids.” They were kids from the local village and they were real good confidential informants. They would tell us what’s happening at the village. What was going on; who was there, who was not, whatever. Like that, and, you know, we’d give them some K-rations and smokes and stuff like that. They were probably eleven to fourteen years old and they were pretty decent informants. We’d checked on a couple things they’d say early on and they were true, so we trusted what they said and—yeah, they were pretty good informants. The downside of it is all the sudden, they all disappeared. We can only suspect that somebody found out that they were dealing with the American troops and that wasn’t real good. [papers rustling] I’ve got a picture of them here, somewhere. But anyways—yeah, we’d call them the dead end kids.

Brooks: And how did you communicate with them?

Schmitz: They spoke English. Yeah. A lot of the kids there. I don't know if they learned it in school, although this is a small village [coughs], so I don't know if they had schooling, but—or maybe they just picked it up. They didn't speak perfect English, but enough to get by. [Papers rustling]. I can't find—I have a picture of them somewhere; I can't find it.

[00:30:18]

Brooks: Nope? That's okay.

Schmitz: Nope.

Brooks: We can take a look later. Was there anything else kind of about daily life at the base that, you know, was kind of interesting or stands out? Anything kind of unexpected?

Schmitz: Yeah. I did all my work at night, so I slept a lot during the day and got woke up that the—one part of our base was under attack. It was the one by the bomb dump. Now I did all my work at night, and I put my M-16 magazines in a pouch, and another way you could carry magazines is, there was a bandolier you wore, you know, right here. It was cloth and had pockets, but that was too noisy and too clumsy for night work, so I never ever used one of those. So here it is daytime and we're under attack by the bomb dump and I went down to the place where we picked up our extra ammo, and they didn't have that little extra magazines. All they had was these bandoliers, so I said, "Ah, it's daytime. What the heck? I'll try one." So I slung one over me and went out there. By the time I got out there, it was pretty much all over. There was a couple of rounds coming in, a couple of rounds going out. I think by the time I got there, there was a maybe ten-minute firefight and it was all over, which was okay with me [laughs]. So when you come in from something like this, the first thing you do is you clean your weapon because the M-16 was notorious for clogging up, so you didn't want any dirt. The next thing you do is you clean your magazines because if your magazines are dirty, it's going to get in the workings of the M-16 and it's gonna clog [laughs], so you check your—so I went to pull out a magazine from the pouch and I notice there was a hole there in the pouch, and I pull out the magazine and there's a round in the magazine, and I thought, "God this is the only time I ever, ever wore one of those bandoliers and it worked." [Both laugh].

So that—I guess that's—and I donated that magazine to the museum, but yeah. That's one—and I didn't think anything of it then, but when you come back and years later you think about those things and you go, "Wow." I was lucky.

Brooks: Where about would the bullet have hit you?

Schmitz: Probably right about here.

Brooks: The middle of your chest?

Schmitz: Yeah.

Brooks: Wow. That's amazing.

Schmitz: I had that magazine and I have a footlocker that I have like a tape recorder and the tapes that I sent and stuff like that, and in there I had that magazine for years, and I thought, "It's collecting dust. I wonder if they'd like it," so I donated it to the museum.

Brooks: Yeah. Yeah, it's great. It's a great story, and it's, you know, we have a lot in the collection. It's always nice to have, like, those pieces that have those stories behind them. Someone could just pick it up and be like, "Oh, this is neat," but when you actually know where it's been and what it did, it's very neat. Yeah. Was that the closest call that you had while you were there?

Schmitz: Yeah. There—there's—it was interesting. Years later, after I got back, I had some surgery on my back. I had—what was it—skin cancer. Little spots. What they do is they dig out a plug and then they send it in for—and twice, they found little shrapnel piece, little shreds that I never knew was there and I says, "Wow, is that interesting." And he says, "Not really." He says, "We see a lot of this stuff." He says, "Guys that were in a situation where things were blowing up around them, they have little shreds of shrapnel that they carry their whole life that they never know is there." So.

Brooks: So you don't know specifically when those got in there?

Schmitz: No. Have no idea.

Brooks: Mm-hmm.

Schmitz: That's about it.

Brooks: So, anything else about just everyday life on the base?

[00:34:37]

Schmitz: Pretty boring. We did have a duck roast once. We had a dog named Bullet. He was our mascot. Of course, his name was Bullet and guys from the helicopter, the rescue guys, [clears throat] had a duck pond [coughs] and Bullet got lose one day and started chasing the ducks around because they're area was—oh, probably about a block away from our area, [coughs], and one of the guys kicked the dog,

broke his leg. Well, we did a nighttime ambush and had a duck roast that night. In fact, I have pictures of the duck roast [laughs], so kind of payback. Yeah we— You look for things to do, but some of them, some of them—to do, and most of the time, your off duty was catching up on sleep, eating, drinking, and writing letters home or, in my case, I recorded a lot of letters home, and that was pretty much it.

Brooks: What do you remember saying in those letters that you sent home?

Schmitz: Nothing that would worry my folks. I had a picture of me and, [inaudible] had put the face paint on, camouflage paint, and I sent it to a buddy of mine that was in Vietnam who I grew up with and somehow or why—I'm not sure why—he sent it home to my girlfriend who was—ended up being my wife. And she thought I was in some kind of a fire or something where my face was all burned and, I mentioned to her, “No, that’s just, you know,” and—she wouldn’t even know what I was doing over there. She knew I was in the Air Force and I was in the security police, but she had no idea what I was doing over there, and you don’t share those things generally, with your family, because you don’t want them to worry.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. So what types of things would you say?

Schmitz: Ah, just boring, everyday stuff. We were out—I did deal with the front gate for a while, and I thought one of the interesting things they said is if a Vietnamese woman comes in and she has large breasts—the Vietnamese women had small breasts. If there was large breasts, she probably has explosives, so pull her to the side and check it out, and never ran into one, but I thought, “That’s interesting.” Some of these things you never think of it, and they knew that a certain percent of the ladies that came in—and we had hired some guys to come in and do various works around the base. Some of them were spies and worked with the VC [Viet Cong]. Another thing we looked for was scratches on the ankles or legs because that means they were out in the bush that night doing bad things. So there was things you looked for when people came in, but that’s it.

Brooks: Yeah. And when you got letters and things back from home, what did they usually say in them?

Schmitz: We miss you. Can’t wait until you get back. Take care of yourself. You know, the normal things you’d expect.

Brooks: Was there anything about kind of the political feelings that were happening towards the war? Did you hear about that in any way?

Schmitz: In no way at all. We were—the first time I knew something was different was coming back, we got a debriefing and they suggested that when—before we got on the plane, we change into civilian clothes. When we get to the airport, we’d be

in civilian clothes. Well, [laughs] that doesn't work too well because we had the short hair and most of the protestors had long hair. I did run into an interesting thing. I was looking at the different VFW posts, and [coughs] the Legion posts, visiting them, and once place I bellied up to the bar and they were talking about what they did. Their mission made the Vietnam War shorter and they saved more lives. You know, everyone was boasting about, yeah, how they did, and they asked me and I said, "You know who saved the most lives?" I said, "Probably the anti-war protestors because they stuck to their guns. They changed the opinions of the average person and because of that, I think we pulled out earlier." They didn't like that at all. I kind of left quickly [laughs] because—and I still think that they had a lot to do with the war being over quicker than it would have if they—if there weren't protestors, so.

[00:39:55]

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Do you remember—can you tell me a little bit about how you ended up getting—you weren't discharged at that time, right? You were just sent back State side?

Schmitz: Yeah.

Brooks: So did you have—was it like a point system, or was it just that your time was up that you were sent back?

Schmitz: Well, when I was stationed up in Canada, I—my first four years was up, and they asked me if I wanted to stay in and I said, "I'll stay in if I can cross-train into something other than security police." Because I was up in Canada when the original Pierre Trudeau and his wife, Margaret—Hot woman. Phew! When they were in power and the Quebec Lacroix[sp??] was a radical group that was really gaining power in Quebec and they were asking Quebec to secede from the Canadian government and be its own country and it looked like they might win, and we were stationed up there on assignment and we were told that there was an aircraft waiting on the runway, and if the Quebec Lacroix[??] won, just take bare minimum of what you have, jump on that plane, and get the heck out of here. Never happened, but that was int—and I found that if you volunteer for—I wouldn't say elite. I wouldn't go that—unique. SEALs are elite. Rangers are elite. Unique. We were unique groups that I volunteered for. It didn't seem like you were in the military. I didn't want to play the military game. I was never probably military material, but I found if I volunteered for things like this assignment up in Canada, that I'd have a better life, and a more—almost normal life. And it worked out, so I always was involved in unique things.

Brooks: So just to take you back to Vietnam, what was it—when you were leaving there, was it just that your year was up?

Schmitz: Yes.

Brooks: Was that—so your tour of duty was up?

Schmitz: Mm-hmm.

Brooks: Do you remember—sometimes when I talk to people who were over in Vietnam, they talk a lot about the, kind of that anticipation leading up to going back home and that that is maybe, probably the worst period of time because they're worried that something will happen to them before—

Schmitz: No, I—

Brooks: —they can get on the plane.

Schmitz: I think, amongst the feelings you have is you're leaving people behind, you know. What's going to happen to them? And for the most part, you never know. You've lost track of them. Even with the internet, looking up names, you don't know. No. I didn't have any anticipation that I was—the plane was going to be shot down or whatever like that, and I had some concerns because by the time we got back, we heard about the anti-war movement. My concern was, how's my family gonna approach me or not approach me? Well, as it turned out, none of them wanted to talk about it, and I think this was pretty common, where families are glad you're back. We went to church every day, and all these things, but they didn't want to hear. They didn't want to talk about it, and I think that was pretty common.

Brooks: What about your girlfriend or your friends?

Schmitz: My girlfriend—even in all the years we were married—we were married for twenty-six years before she passed—never really talked about it, and she never asked. As I said, I—sometimes the kids would see one of these fake war shows on TV. You look at it and you say, “Yeah. Right.” [Laughs]. Here's Chuck Norris and fifty guys are shooting at him and none of them hit him and he stands up and (mimics rapid gun shots) and they all go down like dominos and I'm thinking, “Yeah, right.” And then they'd ask me and I'd start telling them war stories and their eyes would glass over, and I could tell they weren't interested, so you just don't talk about it.

Brooks: And so you changed into plain clothes when you got off the airplane. Did you—was there anything else? Did you see any protestors, or did you get hassled at all those first few days?

[00:44:46]

Schmitz: No. We—I forgot where we landed. I seen some Hare Krishnas, but I didn't see any protestors, no. A couple people, I could tell they were kind of looking at me funny because, I had short hair and they probably knew I was in military or

something like that, but no. Nobody said anything to me. You hear people making—this person said this to me, or that to me, and—didn't see any of that.

Brooks: And so by that time, did you know—you're going to have to fill me in a little bit about, you ended up staying in the Air Force.

Schmitz: Mm-hmm.

Brooks: Was there a point in time when they asked you, "Are you going to be staying in?" or were you—

Schmitz: Yeah, when I was stationed up in Canada my four years were up, and they said, "Would you stay in?" and I says, "If I cross-train," and they asked, "What did we want to cross-train in," and I said, "Computers." And if you have it in writing—by this time I learned you need it in writing [laughs] because I know the air traffic control thing. So they put it in writing and I figured, well I could go back and be a cop, and even at that time, I thought, "Oh, that's an iffy thing." So I decided to stay in and train with computers, and that's what I did. I spent the next four years and then after that, in the military—I don't know if all the branches are the same, but in the Air Force, you had to take a promotion test, and by that time, the war was totally over and there were so many people coming back and so, I was a staff sergeant and staff sergeants were a dime a dozen, and they would take your promotion test scores plus your time in service, plus some other things—I'm not sure what they were—and even though I maxed the score, I wasn't even close for being promoted and so I figured, "Okay. It's time to leave. This is a dead-end job." And that's what I did, and I spent the rest of my career developing and creating computer systems for, you know—I was a consultant at one time. Most of my career I spent with the telephone company.

Brooks: And so, was there anything else about—either about your time in Vietnam or your time right after Vietnam that you want to mention?

Schmitz: I killed a snake. [Laughs] I was laying in the bushes one day and I felt something against me and I says, "Is this guy I'm with getting creepy on me?" [Laughs] and it was a big python. [Papers rustle] I have a picture in here some—and I knew not to shoot it and give away our position, so I just took out my bayonet and did one in the head. Brought it back and we had some guys from Hawaii and when they knew I had a snake, "Oh can we have the meat?" Because they had a Bunsen burner set up there and they'd cook their meals in the barracks, so I skinned it. I kept the skin and I had it for years and don't know what happened to it. I had it for a lot of years and it—I don't know. But anyway, I gave them the meat and they made a dish and they gave me some of it and it was pretty good. It did taste like chicken.

Brooks: Did it?

Schmitz: [Laughs] Yes. Tough chicken, but nevertheless, chicken flavored. So yeah. That was a—that was my big thing.

Brooks: Yeah, a lot of people talk about the bugs and snakes and scorpions, I think.

Schmitz: There was some ants they were called—We called them pisser ants. They were red ants and they would literally chew the heck out of you. I remember one time I laid my beret down and kind of wiped my head and took a drink of water, and it wasn't down for very long, and it turned out I had set it on an anthill, and when I put it back on, it felt like somebody took water and put it over my head because it was just (makes swishing noise). And yeah, I took what was left in my canteen and did that, and took my shirt off and shook it off, but yeah they bit me up pretty good. And it didn't—[papers rustling] didn't—

Brooks: Oh, that's the snake huh?

Schmitz: That's the snake.

Brooks: That's huge!

Schmitz: Yeah.

Brooks: Is that you?

Schmitz: That's me.

Brooks: Yup. That snake is bigger than you are.

Schmitz: Oh, here—here's the other one. Yeah, and here's—

Brooks: That is quite a big snake.

Schmitz: Actually, he wasn't that big. There were a lot bigger ones.

Brooks: [Laughs].

Schmitz: And there's—that's how we communicated. I had my little tape recorder and my tapes.

Brooks: Mm-hmm.

Schmitz: There's getting ready for monsoon season. We had screening and we put plastic over the screens so the water wouldn't come in, and that lasted about half a day [laughs]. I get a kick out of when people say, "Oh. That's terrible rain." Well, they've never been through a monsoon season if they think it's a terrible rain.

[00:50:02]

Because it would rain for like ten, fifteen days straight, and I'm talking drenched. Nothing was dry. At the end of the day, you'd come in and you'd put on wet clothes. You'd try and get dry socks because that was the main thing, but yeah. It was bad. It was wet.

Brooks: And, so did you have your own camera, then? You have a lot of photos.

Schmitz: I had a Yashica .35mm. It was a nice camera and I lost it in a poker game.

Brooks: Oh no!

Schmitz: [Laughs] Yeah. So, I took a lot of pictures before that and some of the pictures—I bought a cheap camera. I think it was a Polaroid or—for a while there and then it got wrecked. I think it was in a monsoon and I got another cheap camera, so a lot of these pictures were from the cheap—well, a lot of them here, the better ones, were from the Yashica. These were from the Polaroid and yeah. [papers rustling]. Yeah, it's interesting when you said, "Is that a picture of you?" because my— There's the ducks. That's the before picture of the ducks. Here's the after picture. [Laughs].

Brooks: Oh, okay. [Laughs].

Schmitz: Anyway, my grandson seen a picture of me in Vietnam and he says, "Who is that?" I said, "That's me." He says, "No, Grandpa, that can't be you. He's good looking and young." [Laughs]. Okay, kid.

Brooks: You said, "Thanks."

Schmitz: There goes your inheritance.

Brooks: And so did you end up going back over to Vietnam, then?

Schmitz: No.

Brooks: No. Okay. So that was the one—just the one tour. And, so you came home not— Didn't really talk about it. Did you have any kind of a—like a homecoming party or—

Schmitz: Not really.

Brooks: —anything like that?

Schmitz: Like I said, it was—people in—even people in your family—I think people in the family basically didn't want to know, which was okay. I got—I understood that.

We had a get together and everyone says, “Well, we’re glad you’re back.” And you know, blah blah blah. Stuff like that. That’s about it.

Brooks: And how long until you were reassigned to your next duty station?

Schmitz: Almost immediately. We had a—when we came back, we had like a thirty-day leave they gave to us and then we got stationed—where was I? In Madison, Wisconsin, which was interesting because as you came into the base, there was the motor pool and there were four huge doors and the anti-war protestors, which were still going on at that time, were trying to get on the base to get to those. They thought it was the bomb dump. You know, and actually the bomb dump was way on the other side of the base and you could walk right past it and never see it because it was all underground. But they didn’t know that. They always thought those—that motor pool, those doors were the bomb dump. You know, so. We had a laugh out of that. We didn’t tell them it wasn’t. We just let them do that thing and one guy got as close as to put a bag of—I think it was dog poop or something like that against one of the doors and he thought he was the greatest thing in the world [laughs] and we just escorted him off the base. You know. It was interesting. At night, we’d go down—downtown Sun Prairie, and there was this called the Shuffle Inn. It was exotic dancers. At that time there was a lot of places like that and we’d meet some of the guys that we kicked off the base that night, and they’d buy us a beer and we’d buy them a beer and we’d joke about the dailies—the day’s events. It’s like they’re—they did their thing. We did our thing, and now we’re drinking beer, so yeah. It was kind of interesting concept.

Brooks: What was your responsibility on the base, then, in Madison?

Schmitz: [Sighs]. What did I do on Sun Prairie? I was on town patrol most of the time and we had a base housing area. I’d patrol that. Never really did anything on the flight line. I just did most—was in a cruiser. Did town patrol.

[00:54:57]

Brooks: And did you live in Madison then or in Sun Prairie?

Schmitz: Yeah. When we first moved there, we lived in—right off the main street there in Sun Prairie. I think it was on Van El Street. We lived in an attic apartment, when we first moved there, my wife and I. And it was interesting because when you sat on the couch, you had to do this because that’s where the roof—and same thing when you got in and out of the bathtub, that’s where the roof went like that. So you had to kind crawl in and crawl out and you know. The bedroom was so small that we had to take our dresser and put it out in the hallway, so that was our first place.

Brooks: And when did you get married?

Schmitz: Sixty-nine. June 14.

Brooks: So, pretty soon after you come home?

Schmitz: Came back. Came back, yeah.

Brooks: And was that had been your plan, or was it kind of spur of the moment?

Schmitz: Spur of the moment. Yeah. It turned out okay.

Brooks: Yeah?

Schmitz: Yeah, twenty-six years. Three kids. The oldest one, as much as we tried to raise her right, she still became a lawyer [laughs].

Brooks: Oh. [Laughs].

Schmitz: And one of them's living in Minnesota. Works for Frito-Lay and has a little girl about two years old, and just informed me the other day I'm going to be a grandpa again.

Brooks: Oh, congratulations.

Schmitz: There you go.

Brooks: That's great.

Schmitz: And then the youngest one lives in Whitewater, where he went to college. He—he fell in love with the area. He loves it, and he met the girl of his dreams. They met on a Beatles website, so he's—she's into Beatles as much as he is and even though they're like twenty-three years old, it's like this young love looking thing. You know, where they sit there and she has her hand in his back pocket and they're walking with each other like that. That stuff you usually see in high school. It's—so I'm thinking, more power to them, you know? That's cool.

Brooks: That's great. Did your wife and did you guys talk a little bit about what it would mean to—for her to marry someone who was in the military and the moving around and all that?

Schmitz: Yeah. Yeah, we talked a little about that. When she—when we were first gotten married, it was a—she was kind of shy. She didn't know how to communicate with people. She kept to herself, but after—there's something about the military spouses and families. They realize that they're all in this thing together, so you get friendships and she befriended some people that kind of took her under their wing and we had parties at the house and stuff like that, and she turned into a real social butterfly. She's organized this and organized that and you couldn't believe it was

the same girl I married, you know? Just total transformation for the better. So she was a good wife all the way.

Brooks: And how long were you in Madison?

Schmitz: A year.

Brooks: And then where to next?

Schmitz: Oh, Lord. I think from there we went to Canada, and from Canada, where else did we go? We were at McCoy Air Force Base in Madison. McCord Air Force Base in Washington. Canada. Washington. I was at six bases all together. In the four years we married, I think we were at like three bases.

Brooks: And I think—I mean, I’m a little surprised. I think some people might be a little surprised to know that you were stationed in Canada. What—can you tell me a little more about that and kind of what your role was up there?

Schmitz: Yeah. At the time—I know—in fact, I talked about this today. At the time—I know it’s different now. The Canadian Air Force had a decent air force, but no weapons, so—and at that time, we were sure Russia was going to attack us from the north, in other words, from Canada, so we had an agreement and we had little bomb dumps all across Canada. You know, covert things that people didn’t even know they were there and our job was to keep the war codes and keep control of those weapons and if we got contacted that there was imminent danger, we’d swap war codes and we’d hand over the weapons to the Canadian government and then they would use them to protect the North American defense system and looking at the Google map and some other sources, that’s all gone. You know, they don’t need that anymore. It’s a different type of world, different type of war, so—but that’s what we did.

[01:00:29]

And another thing, we were allowed to grow our hair long and grow beards because they wanted us to blend in with the Canadian—especially in Quebec because the Quebec Lacroix, we were told, were trying to recruit Americans that went up there to get away from the war and what we found out is that when they, the Quebec Lacroix approached the Americans, almost consistently the answer was, “We’re against the war. We’re not against America.” Consistently. And we’d write reports like that and the powers that be would say, “Come on. You’re not doing your job. Are you sure? This can’t be true.” I’d say, “Yeah, it’s true.” You know, they wanted the smoking gun. They wanted something to show that American went up there and joined the fight—anti-American, pro-whatever and it just wasn’t there, so. That’s another thing that was interesting. Real—I forgot about this! At that time, they didn’t have such a thing as a remote detonator and if the Quebec Lacroix were to take over, we had to blow up the bomb dump, you

know. And we had a—one of those plungers, every day, somebody's was the one that would stay behind and do that. And, the big joke was, "Hey Joe. I'm not feeling good today. Could you take my spot?" [Laughs]. Well, that was the joke. Nobody ever would have been serious, but.

Brooks: Because if you stay behind, then you're—That's it for you?

Schmitz: Yeah. Yeah, you'd go up with the bombs, but never happened. The other thing is, part of the agreement was we couldn't carry weapons. Only the Canadian troops that were with us could, and they were—the Canadians were heavy drinkers, the French Canadians, and they had Uzis. Now if you know anything about an Uzi, it doesn't have a safety. [Laughs]. So these guys go in, half crocked with their Uzis and we were sitting there with nothing but a smile on our face, [laughs] so that was interesting.

Brooks: Wow. And where did you live? Did you live on a base when you were there?

Schmitz: No. They didn't have a base. We just lived in a house right across from the Greyhound bus depot. People that spoke only French, except if they wanted money, then all the sudden they learned English real quick. [Laughs] But mostly French. Most of the French people were nice people. Very nice people.

Brooks: And how long were you there?

Schmitz: A year.

Brooks: About a year? Okay. And then where to next?

Schmitz: Wow.

Brooks: That was when you had to make the decision if you wanted to stay in or not, right?

Schmitz: Yeah. Yeah. Then I cross-trained in the computers and went down to—again, somewhere in Texas. I hated Texas. [Laughs]

Brooks: [Laughs]. That's probably why it's not very memorable.

Schmitz: That's true and I took a eleven week course and then I went up to—oh, that's when I went up to the McCord Air Force Base in Washington. Hey! I won a commendation medal up there. I forgot about that. One of my jobs was to convert the old civilian personnel system into a new automated civilian personnel system, and [rustling around microphone] it was—I remember reading—I learned real quick: you read everything before you do anything. So I was reading it and on one of the last pages, it said, "But before you do any of this." [Laughs] It was way at the end. Do this, and do this, and do—well I guess I must have been the only one

to read it because I'm the only one in all the Air Force that I know of that completed it on time and correctly, so they gave me a big award [laughs] for reading the manual I guess. [Laughs]. Again, the military. And that award plus a buck will get you a cup of coffee, but, It's on my records. That's it—God, it's interesting when you start talking about all the things you remember, all the things you remember that you forgot, so.

[01:05:03]

Brooks: And then, you got out. Were you in for another four years?

Schmitz: Yeah, I was in for a total of eight years.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. What was the first—what was that transition like, when you were officially a civilian again?

Schmitz: It was [pauses] interesting. I think it was to our advantage because I think at the—it's like *déjà vu* all over again. (Clears throat) At the time they looked at the military guys as well-organized, and employees were looking for people that were well-organized, and I think that's happening now too. You hear a lot about, you know, "Hire a vet because they're dependable," blah, blah, blah, blah, and that's the way it was then, so I had no problems getting a job.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Was there anything else about the lifestyle or the structure that you—either you missed or just that you noticed that kind of altered your life?

Schmitz: A lot of people, I noticed [they] didn't talk about the war, and that was okay. [Laughs] I didn't want to talk about it either, so and—they just went on with their normal lives, and I got to thinking, "They have no idea what these guys over there were going through," and I thought, "Well, that's okay too." I mean, how could they know? It's—like I say, it's like telling a stranger about rock and roll. You know, they wouldn't know. Even if you talked about it, they wouldn't understand, so no, I had no problem.

Brooks: And has that changed for you at all in terms of wanting to talk to other people or finding it—

Schmitz: Actually it's the—

Brooks: —helpful?

Schmitz: —first time I've ever talked about it, so. No. Do I have to send you—are you going to send me a bill for therapy? [Laughs].

Brooks: No, not at all.

Schmitz: Okay.

Brooks: Nope.

Schmitz: Okay.

Brooks: I try to make it very clear that I—that is not what I do.

Schmitz: Okay. Well, actually, you do, but you don't know it.

Brooks: Well, yeah. In a way, I hope that it can be therapeutic, but I'm not licensed, so I don't want it to be—

Schmitz: It's interesting the reminisce. Like, this is about a week ago, I brought this out and I think it's the first time I looked at it in years and years, and I thought, "Oh my God. I forgot about that." I forgot about the snake. I forgot about the ducks. The duck roast.

Brooks: When did you put that scrapbook together?

Schmitz: I think right after I got back. [Papers rustling]. That was the IBM-365 which was state of the art at that time. That's a card reader. Read Hall Howorith[??] code. These were the guys I was with.

Brooks: Where is that?

Schmitz: Where was it? I think that was at McCord.

Brooks: Was there a favorite place that you were stationed out of all the different bases and assignments?

Schmitz: I was outdoorsy so I liked Canada. Also for the fact that we could grow our hair long and grow a beard, but other than that—the snowmobiling, In the winter you'd go down to canoe and it would take a canoe—Canada, I think you could probably take a canoe from one side of Canada to the other because there were so many rivers, interconnecting water ways. There's just a great outdoor thing. You know. Once a year they'd have moose week during moose hunting season and they'd close down the main street which was, I think, four blocks long. Three, four blocks long. And anybody who had a moose would either mount it on the top or on the front of their car and they'd have a parade down the middle, you know. Everybody'd go, "Yay." [Laughs] So that was interesting. That's another thing I forgot about. Good Lord.

Brooks: Canadians.

Schmitz: Yeah.

Brooks: And so then when you were—you were discharged, did you come straight back to Wisconsin?

Schmitz: Yes. Yes. Yes.

Brooks: Had that always been the plan, to move back?

Schmitz: Yeah. I've been to a lot of different cities and places and Wisconsin not only was—I don't know if you realize this, it's clean here in Wisconsin. The streets are clean and it's not like that in every state. I think we don't realize how good we have it here. And the job opportunities were here. I knew the job market. I knew where to go to look for jobs and, yeah. I felt more—and my wife was here. Her family. My family, so. Yeah.

[01:09:55]

Brooks: And so, you said it was kind of tough to keep track of people and people that you'd served with and things, and you mentioned that you—did you say you went the VFW when you were chatting with those other guys about—did you join the—any groups or—

Schmitz: No. No.

Brooks: —any vets organizations? No.

Schmitz: There's all different types. One group—I think it was in Wauwatosa—I walks in and these guys are all in tiger stripes, and I—it's like none of them ever came back. You hear them talking. It was spooky. [Jar closes]. And I don't know if you've ever been to a Veteran's Day Parade. I don't know if they do it anymore, but there's usually a bunch of guys carrying a bamboo cage with somebody inside it, like, a POW-type in a scenario. These were the guys, and I says, I don't think so. And I went to one and all they were doing was swapping war stories and sometimes I think of war stories like fish stories: the longer it happened, the bigger that fish gets. And, all they were doing is drinking and swapping war stories and [inaudible]. And I found one that was involved with different civic things going on, but—it just—I don't know. I was looking for some place where I could go play some sheepshead. You know, have a beer or two, but play some—mostly play some sheepshead or something. Haven't found one yet, so I just—nah. And I live at Cloyster's Condominium which has a lot of people my age and I play sheepshead there, shoot the bull with a couple of the folks there and—it works. You got to keep sociable. You got to keep talking to people.

Brooks: And we were talking before about kind of the differences between what you experienced and what service people today experience. Is there anything that you

can think of that you would want to say to people who are considering going into the military this day and age?

Schmitz: [Sighs] It's a good opportunity to turn from a young, punk kid that steals cars to being a responsible adult, or even a responsible teenager. At the time that I went in, a lot of the judges when they got a kid in front of the court, they'd give him the opportunity to go to jail or join the military. I kind of wish they'd bring that back because I think a lot of these kids need discipline. They haven't had any growing up for various reasons and, you know. [Clears throat]. I think—and it seems like the military are respected more. I think it was at a low point when—such and such. But, what I don't get is it seems like it's a trendy thing to say, "Thank you for your service," and it's almost like a knee-jerk reaction. You know, there's—it's like when you go to customer service and the lady or guy behind the counter says, "Can I help you?" or, "We're here to help you." That's—you can tell that's just, what they're told to say and there's no emotions behind it, and I remember the first time somebody said, "Thank you for your service." It was a guy at work, and this was long before it became popular. And it was Veteran's Day, I think it was, or something like that, and he said, "Thank you for your service," and I thought, "Wow." At that time it was about thirty years since I—that's the first time in thirty years somebody said that to me. Wow. That was—that was pretty emotional, so.

Brooks: And since then, does it feel like it's kind of lost some of that emotion for you?

Schmitz: Yeah. Yeah. People say that—they know that you're a veteran and automatically, "Thank you for your service. Pretty nice weather today isn't it?"

Brooks: [Laughs].

Schmitz: So, okay. You're polite and you say, "Well thank you for thanking me," or something like that, but it's lost its meaning.

Brooks: Is there anything you'd like to see civilians do for veterans or for the military in general?

Schmitz: No, and here's my feeling. If you went over there so you'd come back to a ticker-tape parade or being pat on the back, you went over there for the wrong reason. You don't go over there for any of that stuff, and if you get it, that's a plus. Great. But no I don't expect to be treated different. Just another guy with some unusual stories, but I mean, people who were fireman or policemen or even factory workers—construction guys outside can tell you some stories they, you know.

[01:15:09]

I was talking to a guy that was laying cement when they first built the freighter years and years ago. He says, "It was all wooded area and the

mosquitos were biting like a sun of a gun. It was terrible!” And after they lay cement, they spray that kind of bluish stuff on the cement that’ll make it cure, and he noticed as soon as they spray that, all the mosquitoes left. So what they did after that is when they’d go to a site and it was a wooded area, first thing they’d do is bring that sizing and spray all around the perimeter and he says, “It works like a champ.” Yeah, just saying, he was never in the military, but he has good stories. Everyone has good stories. I’m sure you have stories of stuff when you grew up that may not be interesting to you, but other people would say, “Wow.” So no, I don’t use the fact that I was in the military or the fact that I was a veteran as a crutch or a, “I deserve this or that,” nah.

Brooks: Yeah. Well one of the things I try to do with the interviews and with the museum in general is kind of hoping to bridge that gap of civilians and veterans and just kind of help people who have never experienced it kind of put themselves in the shoes of a veteran. So, I’m always interested to see what veterans think we could do as a museum or what they’d like civilians to do or to understand.

Schmitz: I think it’s a made-up gap. I think everyone’s different. Some veterans—different personalities. Some veterans, when they came back from any war, they go ballistic and they shoot people or beat their wives or anything, and I’d say a fair amount of them would have probably done the same thing if they weren’t in the military. They went in with issues and came out with bigger issues and I don’t—I just—I think a lot of these things are made up by the media or people that think they’re doing the right thing. I just don’t think there’s an issue there. That’s my feeling. I mean, you’re not going to convince someone that’s nonmilitary to come down and see the museum. You’re not going to say, “Oh, you got to see this museum.” They don’t care, and that’s understandable. You know, they got their own lives.

Brooks: Mm-hmm. Well, I think that’s all the questions I typically ask. Is there anything else that you don’t think we covered that you want to chat about or mention?

Schmitz: There’s a bunch I’d like to mention, but I can’t. No.

Brooks: Okay. Okay, let me just check on this real quick because I usually forget something, but I think we covered a lot of the kind of reflection aspects of your service and—all right. And if you think of something, we can always add to it at a later date. All right. I’ll turn this off.

[End of OH2061.Schmitz][End of interview]