

Oral Memoirs
Of
Terry W. Wheeler

An Interview Conducted by

Taylor Johnson

November 13, 2014

UCF Community Veterans History Project

University of Central Florida RICHES of Central Florida

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Interview Histories

Interviewer: Taylor Johnson

Transcriber: Taylor Johnson

The recordings and transcripts of the interview were processed in the offices of the RICHES of Central Florida Department, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida.

Project Detail

The Community Veterans History Project, a RICHES of Central Florida Project at the University of Central Florida, includes interviews with Central Florida veterans from all branches of the United States military. Beginning in 2010, the UCF Community Veterans History Project is collecting, preserving, and making accessible to the public the experiences of Central Florida's veterans so that future generations will better understand the realities of conflict. It is a collaborative endeavor supported by multiple departments and offices at UCF. The histories, which are collected by students and faculty, are archived and made digitally available through the UCF library. The UCF Community Veterans History Project will also contribute selected veterans' histories to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress.

Taylor Johnson was an undergraduate history student in Dr. Barbara Gannon's Oral History Class in the Fall of 2014.

Terry W. Wheeler was a commissioned officer in the United States Army who rose to the rank of Captain. He served from 1981 to 1990, earning the Army Service Ribbon, the Overseas Service Ribbon, the Army Achievement Medal, and the Army Commendation Medal. Mr. Wheeler served in Fort Knox, Kentucky, Schweinfurt, West Germany, and Fort Benning, Georgia.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recording and transcript of the interview with Terry W. Wheeler is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on November 13, 2014.

Abstract

Oral history interview of Terry W. Wheeler, who served in the U.S. Army, during the Cold War. Wheeler was born in Fort Lee, Virginia, in 1959. He joined the Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) and was commissioned into the Army on December 28, 1981. He earned the rank of Captain, as well as several awards and commendations: the Army Service Ribbon, the Overseas Service Ribbon, the Army Achievement Medal, and the Army Commendation Medal. Wheeler served in Fort Knox, Kentucky, Schweinfurt, West Germany, and Fort Benning, Georgia.

University of Central Florida Community Veterans History Project

A RICHES Project: Regional Initiative for Collecting the History, Experiences and Stories of Central Florida

This interview was conducted by Taylor Johnson at the University of Central Florida on November 13, 2014. Interview topics include training at Fort Knox, duties as an Armor Officer, assignment in West Germany, Fort Benning, duties as a Tank Company commander, combat simulations, resigning from the Army and attending graduate school, and employment in the private sector.

Terry W. Wheeler

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number One

Interviewed by Taylor Johnson
November 13, 2014
Orlando, Florida

0:00:00

Introduction

Johnson Today is November 13th, 2014. I'm interviewing Terry [W.] Wheeler, who served in the Army from 1981 to 1990. I'm Taylor Johnson. Mr. Wheeler served during the Cold War era. He spent time in Fort Knox, Kentucky; Schweinfurt[, Lower Franconia, Bavaria], Germany; and [U.S. Army Infantry School] Fort Benning, Georgia. My name's Taylor Johnson, again. We're interviewing Mr. Wheeler as a part of the UCF [University of Central Florida] Community Veterans History Project. We're recording this interview at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, Florida.

0:00:32

Background

Johnson So my first question is: where were you born?

Wheeler I was born in Fort Lee, Virginia.

Johnson And when were you born?

Wheeler 1959. Fort Lee is a military post, and that is the – that is the Army hospital on post[?].

Johnson So you – sorry.

Wheeler That's okay.

Johnson So you grew up on a military post?

Wheeler My dad was in the military, and we grew up – I grew up in, uh, location to location, across the United States and Europe, until he retired in 1971.

Johnson So what did your father do for the military?

Wheeler He was a logistics officer. He was a ward officer [*clears throat*], and, uh, he – he spent, uh, time in WWII [World War II], Korea[n War], and three tours in Vietnam [War].

Johnson So what did your mother do for a living?

Wheeler She was a housewife, Uh, up until about the time my dad retired, and then she came back into the workforce.

Johnson Do you have any siblings?

Wheeler No, I don't.

Johnson So what did you do before you entered the service?

Wheeler I was in college. I was a ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] cadet at Gonzaga University, and so I was a college student.

Johnson What did you study?

Wheeler I was a business major.

Johnson Um, so do you have any other family members that served in the military?

Wheeler Um, uncles. My – my dad's oldest brother was killed during World War II. Uh, his old – his younger brother served in the Navy. His other younger brother served in the Air Force, and then I have cousins who have served in the military also.

0:01:52 **Enlistment**

Johnson So what prompted you to enter the military?

Wheeler It's a – it's a very easy decision to make, if you grew up in a military family. Uh, it was just a logical progression of what I would like to do to serve, and so I made that decision – when I was in high school – that I was gonna serve.

Johnson Um...

Wheeler [*clears throat*].

Johnson So how did your family members feel about you entering the service?

Wheeler Uh, they were very supportive. They were not, uh, overly pushing me towards that decision. It was my own decision to make. Uh, my mother was not as happy with that decision as she would've been if I had stayed in the civilian side, uh, but that's the way it turned out.

0:02:25 **Training and duties as an Armor Officer**

Johnson Um, so what were your first days in the service like?

Wheeler I came in at the end of December 1981, and came on active duty, and went to my basic qualification course at Fort Knox. I was an Armor Officer, and so, for the next four and a half months, I spent time at Fort Knox learning how to be a

platoon leader—a second Lieutenant, and then I was assigned to Germany after that.

Johnson So what did you do as an Armor Officer?

Wheeler Well, sp—the position that I was in was, uh, a cavalry position. That is a sub-branch of the armor—a subsection of the armor. Uh, Cavalry is a screen unit—a—a scout unit, if you will, that works in a divisional or regimental level. Basically, the cav's mission is to, uh, screen and be the leading edge of a, uh—of the unit, uh, in the advance, to screen the flanks to make sure there are no surprises. So it's very, very light, very, very fast reconnaissance.

Johnson Um, so what was your initial training like?

Wheeler Four and a half months of learning everything, from personnel actions to vehicle repair to how to employ the weapons systems on all the vehicles that we are going to be assigned, Radio communications. I mean, the entire gamut that you would expect to serve in that posi—in a ge—in that position as a leader. Uh, second lieutenant platoon leader is an entry-level position for combat arms. Um, Basically, uh, you're in charge of about 38 soldiers and about—at that—at that point in time [*sighs*—let me count vehicles real quick—about 13 vehicles.

Johnson Um, okay.

Wheeler [*clears throat*].

Johnson So what do you remember most about your time in training?

Wheeler Time in training?

Johnson Mmhmm.

Wheeler Fort Knox, in the wintertime, is very cold. As Germany is very cold. Um, it was a lot of fun. We learned a lot in a very short amount of time, and, uh, long days, long nights, and it was a really good building experience. Uh, the people that you meet, in that same course, are people that[sic] you serve with in the military throughout your career, and it is a boomerang-type effect, because you come back together. They're sent to units, you're sent to units, you run into them for training exercises or operational deployments. You come back together for training over time, and so you're building a cohort of—of people that you serve with throughout the rest of your career.

Johnson Um...

Wheeler [*clears throat*].

Johnson What type of advanced training did you receive, if any?

Wheeler Um, really, advanced is not key to this, at that point. Um, basically, you know, eh, for the armor side, you come in, you're given, uh, the tra – the base training, and you go out and be a platoon leader, and you spend a couple years doing that. If you're selected for the advanced course, then you come back as a ju – a senior lieutenant or a junior-grade captain, and go through another six-month type course, where they lear – they – you need to learn how to be an effective commander of a small unit – a Company Commander. At the end of that, then you go out and serve a utilization tour, being a leader at that level. So it's, you know, two grades up, and then, at that point, then you – you split off in your career, and pull the secondary career, and so you split off into another area, and so, at that point then – rom that point forward in your career you, flip flop between your primary and your secondary specialty. So I really didn't have advanced training, other than the fact that I went through the career course as a Captain, and then commanded a unit.

0:05:41

Germany

Johnson Okay, um...

Wheeler [clears throat] Excuse me.

Johnson So when did you find out that you were going to Germany?

Wheeler Um, April 1982. Right at the end – I received orders for that, right as I was finishing up my qualification course.

Johnson And how did you react to that news?

Wheeler I was very happy. I had spent two years in Germany as a child. I already spoke fluent German, and so it was not a huge, life-changing experience to go over there. Um, usually what you walk as a – as an American, when you walk into Germany – not having served there, not having any background to it – you go through a couple weeks of qualif – uh, of familiarization, where you learn rudimentary language, and I was not – I was able to just bypass that and mainstream right in.

Johnson Um, so what was, uh – what was a routine day like during your assignment in Germany?

Wheeler Well, [clears throat] I can give you a routine – a, uh, better description than that. For the first year that I was there as a platoon leader, we were in the field 280 days out of 365 days that year. We would deploy out for a, uh – a 30-day session on a border camp, where we would patrol the East German¹ interzonal border. From that, we would get on the train and go to a gunnery – three or four weeks of tank gunnery, and from that, we would deploy to a field exercise, go home for two weeks, and then go back to the border for 30 days. So we spent most of our

¹ German Democratic Republic (GDR).

time out actually doing our real world mission, at that point. Um, up at six in the morning, uh, some pu – some, uh – in effect, through midnight – one in the morning. I mean, it was a very, very, very dynamic, high stress, long day environment.

0:07:16

Inner German border and gunnery

Johnson So what did you do in each of those three sort of positions?

Wheeler At the border camp, we were responsible to patrol a section of border of – of the East German interzonal border. This was still when the [Berlin] Wall was up. between 2nd ACR [Armored Calvary Regiment] and 11th ACR, we had this – this – this piece of the border that had to be actually manned, and stood ready to – to announce that any – any incursion had come across the border. We were fully combat-loaded. We were deployed there 30 days at a time. We spent 10 days, eh, in a steady reaction state of walking around, with full gear loaded on, helmets in our hands, ready to walk out the gate with five minutes notice to go to our general positions and fight a war. Okay? We spent 10 days in training. We spent 10 days doing actual patrols in jeeps up and down the interzonal border. Uh, it is the – It was the – other than Korea – at that point, it was – we were one of the most forward-deployed units in the Army, at that time. All the vehicles were fully uploaded with the ammunition and ready to go.

Johnson So what did you do at the gunnery?

Wheeler Gunnery was – there's a – there's a – a full qualification session that you have to – to do in tanks to maintain proficiency, and you do that more than two to three – four times a year, and so you would go, and there were actually exercises that you run, shooting live guns, live ammunition at the range, and you qualify as a tank crew, as a section of two, platoon of four, and a company of 12, and so it is, basically, you know, move and shoot, and communicate, and prov – proving proficiency that you can do that.

0:08:47

Interaction with Germans and most memorable day

Johnson What did you think of the Germans?

Wheeler Well, uh, where we were stationed in Germany, it was in – it was in the very northern end of Bavaria. Germans were very, very polite people. Uh, very welcoming. Um, I'm not so sure that the Germans really enjoyed being occupied still after 40 years of – after the end of the [World] War [II], but, uh, they were very nice. Uh, they – if you spoke German, or at least tried to fit in and blend in, you get a lot further than being an ugly American, and, uh, it was a very pleasant place, and we saw a lot of it riding in the back of a military vehicle.

Johnson What was your most memorable day during that assignment?

Wheeler Give me a second. Um, [*clears throat*] we had a soldier that died in a training accident, and the aftermath of that was really hard to deal with. Uh, It was not his—it was not a—a—a, uh—a safety issue that was the direct cause. It truly was an accident. Uh, The tank that he was riding in, uh, went over, uh—now, in Germany—back in the Germany, uh, the train—a lot of the trains and some of the streetcars would run with electricity, and they had these high tension wires overhead, and he was riding in a tank, and the—the antenna on his tank, uh, snapped loose and the antenna went up and hit the top of the—of the high voltage wire, and it arced electricity through the vehicle, and the vehicle basically exploded, and three of the—of the four crew were able to get out, and he was unable to get out, and he passed away. So that was very difficult to deal with. Uh, seeing the aftermath of that [*clears throat*], having to pull the tank apart, trying to take his remains out, you know, that kind of thing. So that—that was a very memorable day.

0:10:39

Free time, contacting family, and fellow service members

Johnson Um, what did you do with your free time, while you were in Germany?

Wheeler Traveled.

Johnson Uh, can you tell me about that?

Wheeler A—again, we were deployed most of the time. So when there was a free couple of day—a week—a weekend, or a free three- or four-day event, we would get in the car and disappear. Drove all over Bavaria, uh, spent time in France [*clears throat*], spent some time, uh, in Northern Germany. Um, basically just enjoying the, uh—the countryside and the people.

Johnson Um, so how did you stay in touch with your family while you were overseas?

Wheeler We didn't have email, at that time. Computers were still brand new [*clears throat*]. So it was by post. Uh, Telephone calls were very expensive, so telephones didn't really get figured into that, so letters.

Johnson And what do you remember about the people that you served with, while you were there?

Wheeler I still have friends that I've stayed in contact with, after all these years. That was, uh, 1982-1983-1984 timeframe. I still stay in touch with a few of 'em. Uh, Very dedicated group of people, um, very like-minded. Uh, you find in the military that not just the clothes you wear make you the same. Very, very similar backgrounds, characteristics, views on the world, and, uh, it was a very, very good time to be a young officer, at that point.

0:12:00

Fort Benning, Georgia

Johnson Um, and what was it like when you came back to the U.S.?

Wheeler They call the flight from Germany to the United States the “freedom bird” for a reason. Uh, everyone’s happy to come home. Uh, it is a great feeling of – of, uh, assimilation back into society [*clears throat*], into the culture that you – you are in. It – and, you know, it is – it is – it wasn’t different, at that point in time. It was Europe, and different language, different money, different feel. It was – it was coming home. So it was very nice to come back to the States.

Johnson Um, and what do you remember about Fort Benning?

Wheeler [*clears throat*] Benning is the home of the Infantry [Branch]. Uh, It is – it is a[sic], uh, Infantry training center. Ranger School’s there, Airborne School, Pathfinder [School]. Um, I was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 69th Armor [Regiment], at that – at that point, and we went and we were part of a round – we were part of a – a, uh, brigade that was a round-out element for the, uh, rapid deployment force – XVIII Airborne Corps. So we were, again, fairly – fairly well getting ready to be on, you know – on a couple hours’ notice, ready to deploy into the world, but, uh, it was – it was a great training opportunity. We were the only armor unit on post. So we would get tagged for a lot of fire demonstrations and combined arms demonstrations, when the – when the – when the, uh, senior, uh, officers would come – come into town [*clears throat*], and so we spent a lot of time working with the Infantry. We really refined the – the union – the union of the true mechanized team, at that point. So it was not armor pure. It was that combined arms element that we really struggled to, uh, put in place, and it was really, really great training opportunity.

0:13:46 Tank Company Commander and combat simulations

Johnson Did you receive any advanced training for your job as a Tank Company Commander?

Wheeler Yeah, I went through the advanced course. That was, ah – so coming back from Germany, I spent six months again at Fort Knox, going through the next phase of that course and came out, eh, eh, basically ready to be a Company Commander. So when I was – I was deployed to Benning, I spent the next, uh, 16 months as a Maintenance Officer for a battalion, and then was assigned as a Company Commander, and spent, uh, [*sighs*] another probably 18 to 20 months, I guess, as a Tank Company Commander.

Johnson Um...

Wheeler [*clears throat*].

Johnson So what can you tell me about your job with combat simulations – the combat simulations branch?

Wheeler At the end of my command time, uh, I picked my secondary specialty as Operations Research and Systems Analysis, and there was a group that was doing that type of work attached to the Infantry center, and so I went in, and I

was a – an Executive Officer for this small group that used computers – which were very, very, uh, elementary, as compared to what we have now – to do war gaming, to look at how new equipment inserted into a battlefield would make a differential change.

So basically, you would take the characteristics of – of a new weapon system, and you would deploy that with – so you'd run simulations without that weapon system and you would run simulations with that weapons system, and look for the differentials that you could achieve and how much more advantage it gave you. It was part of the co – cost and operational effectiveness analysis for getting those systems to be brought online.

Johnson Um, so – I lost my place. Um, what was a routine day like while you were in Georgia?

Wheeler Um, at – at the – at the, uh – at the armor group job? Or in the, uh – the simulations job?

Johnson Um, either one.

Wheeler Armor job – realistically, almost every line unit almost has the exact same type of training as – same type of day. Uh, up in the morning, depending on, you know – three days a week you run PT [physical training] from six o'clock to seven o'clock, have a shower, be back at – at work at – at eight for formation. Going through the day, whether training, or maintenance, or what have you, and are usually done by six o'clock at night, Uh, Back home to families.

Um, the – the Executive Officer's job is – at the branch, we would spend the day doing the same thing. We would do PT a couple days a week, and then, um, go into what was more of an office-style environment to do those simulations. Um, we had a staff of about eight members – both soldiers and civilians – that worked that group, and we would do these simulation exercises on the computers.

0:16:22 Resignation and graduate school

Johnson So what was it like when your service ended?

Wheeler Um, [clears throat] I made the decision to – to, uh, resign my commission and come out of active duty, uh, in early spring of 1990. Um, my secondary priority[?] – I had already worked at my secondary specialty for two years, and was unable to get the Army to agree to send me to grad[uate] school for a funded grad program, and I had watched officers who had gone through the Army non-funded program and the funded grad program, come out and see how effective they were in that job, and the ones that[sic] were coming out, not having gone to grad school, were not being retained, and I was not selected to go through the grad program, so that basically was the de – deciding point [clears throat] that, if I couldn't do that and retain my time – because I figured, at that point, I would not be able to continue. I elected to resign and get out, and then I, uh, applied for

grad school and went to grad school. Um, My ETS [Expiration Term of Service] was June 30th, 1990, and the Army froze all separation actions July 15th, for the [Persian] Gulf War. So that was immediately – I mean, it was – it days before the Gulf War jumped from there, almost.

Johnson Um, so what did you study when you went to grad school?

Wheeler I studied information systems, and, uh, spend 18 months in grad school.

0:17:57 Awards and most memorable aspect of service

Johnson Um, What can you tell us about the awards that you received from the Army?

Wheeler Very, very common, uh, awards that people, you know – you spend eight years doing that. Um, nothing – nothing major. Um, you know, Army Achievement Medals for stuff, and, uh, that's pretty much it. Nothing major.

Johnson Um, and what was the most memorable thing overall about your time in the service?

Wheeler You know, as I alluded to earlier, uh, it is a – it is a great pleasure to spend time with people of a like mind. Okay? I found a lot of the people, that[sic] I spent time with, had the same values, same views on the world, politics, that I did, and so it was a brotherhood, and just the – the people that[sic] I – and the friendships, I guess, that I had – had gained, and the relationships from work that I had from that group of people is what I retained from that.

0:18:41 Post-Army career

Johnson Um, and what was your job after you left the service.

Wheeler When I came out I went to grad school and finished grad school at Syracuse [University], and, uh, [clears throat] I went to work for IBM [International Business Machines Corporation] as an intern, did that for about nine months, and then came into the private sector.

Johnson Um, and what are you doing now?

Wheeler I am currently the director of IT [information technology] services for the Student Development and Enrollment Services division here² on campus.

Johnson So what can you tell me about that?

Wheeler Basically, SDES is the largest division on campus. We have about 2,400 staff that we maintain computer action for servers for, so desktop, laptop, database, uh,

² At the University of Central Florida.

web design, and that's what we encompass. So basically, I run the services side of that group.

0:19:27

Effect of service on civilian life

Johnson Um, and how has your time in the military affected your life since then?

Wheeler There hasn't really been an effect since then. It was a — any time you transition from the military to the ci — the civilian sector, it can create a period of — of, uh, change, I guess you would say. Uh, going from the major activities, and the mindset, and the — the guidelines that we do into what the civilian world does not encompass. Um, it took about a year — a year and a half — to go through that and actually transition the mindset away.

Johnson And do you belong to any veterans groups?

Wheeler No, I do not.

Johnson What do you do with your free time since you left the service?

Wheeler Uh, I have — I have children. So pretty much now it's just work and — and, you know, time with family and Boy Scouts [of America].

0:20:21

Closing remarks

Johnson Um, and what would you say to someone who is contemplating enlisting or becoming a commissioned officer today?

Wheeler Military service is an honor, and, uh, it's a calling that, if you're called to do, you really want to without any real reason to explain why, and it's a very, very honorable thing to do, and if that is — if that is a design that is something that interests someone to do, I encourage them fully to accept that and enjoy.

Johnson Um, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to talk about?

Wheeler No, ma'am.

Johnson Alright. Well, thank you for your time, and for coming to talk with me today, and thank you for your service. I appreciate your participation, and we will be in touch with you once we have a copy of your interview.

Wheeler Thank you.

Johnson Thank you.

End of Interview