

Audio and Video Recording Log

1. Name and address of collector or interviewer.

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Organization or Affiliation (if any) Chemung Co. Historical Society

2. Full name and birth date of the veteran or civilian being interviewed as it appears on the recording label and Biographical Data Form.

Name of Veteran/Civilian ROBERT SCHWERIN Birth Date FEB 6, 1927
month/day/year

3. Recording format (please check)

VIDEO type: Betacam VHS 8mm High-8 Digital Other _____ (identify)
AUDIO type: Cassette Microcassette CD Reel Digital (DAT) _____ (identify)
If audio, is the cassette or reel recorded on both sides? Yes No
Is item: Original Copy

4. Date of Recording 25 June 2004
Estimated length of recording (in minutes) _____

5. Location of recording Holiday Inn, Horseheads, NY

6. Corresponding materials (please check)

Have you included materials other than the recording? Yes No
If so, please complete the Photograph Log and/or the Manuscript Data Sheet.

7. Please summarize the topics discussed in the interview in their order of appearance on the recording.

| Meter Reading or Minute Mark | Topics presented in order of discussion on recording |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>00:01</u> | <u>ROBERT SCHWERIN was interviewed</u> |
| _____ | <u>by Dan Crandall on June 25, 2004</u> |
| _____ | <u>at the Holiday Inn in Horseheads, NY</u> |
| _____ | <u>Schwerin is 77 yrs old, having been</u> |

(Continue on back or on additional sheets as needed.)

Meter Reading
or Minute Mark

Topics presented in order of discussion on recording

Born on February 6, 1927. Schwerin was an Army Staff Sgt stationed at Los Alamos.

On December 7, 1941, he learned of the Japanese attack when a neighbor called him to ask if he would help him sell the "EVAS" about the attack. Schwerin's parents would not let him do it. Three of his grandparents came from Germany and they remembered the anti-German feelings of World War I.

00:22

When he turned 17, Schwerin tried to enlist in the Air Force, but he was rejected because he was color blind. A year and one half earlier his older brother had been drafted into the army. Schwerin was still in high school and it was a given that on graduation, he would be drafted by either the Navy or the Army. The majority of the boys were taken by the Army.

00:31

Schwerin's Army training was held at Camp Wheeler in Georgia - near a swampy area south of Macon. Training was hard service in the Pacific. There were no long hikes or heavy load packs and they were given only a quart of water a day. It would be bitter in the evening.

and one had to decide whether to
 drink it that night or to save it for
 the next day when they would be
 stopping around in the swamp in
 the Georgia head. Schwerin said
 that that job of water was the
 toughest thing he had to deal with.
 The cadre that trained Schwerin's
 group consisted of combat veterans.
 The training was designed to "keep
 you alive". They were instructed
 in camouflage and weaponry. They
 dug and slept in fox holes and ate
 regular grade rations. The training
 was to end in November. The war
 in Europe was over, and Schwerin's
 group was to replace soldiers who
 had been killed in the invasion of
 Japan which was scheduled for
 Year 66. A few days before
 basic training had been completed,
 Schwerin and another soldier
 were sent to the Army Finance
 Corps at Fort Benjamin Harrison
 in Indianapolis. He was to be
 an officer's finance clerk.
 Schwerin was unhappy with
 this so when his time came to
 re-enlist, he re-enlisted for 3
 years and chose Ordnance. He
 chose the European Theater and

0:70

00:27

was sent to Aberdeen Proving Grounds for training. After a few weeks, he and some other soldiers were called aside. They all had high scores on IQ tests and had served time as draftees. They had to have no record of subversive or criminal activity and to be willing to go to a special project in the U.S. FBI clearance was required. Each soldier was asked to provide three references. Schwerin said that the FBI also checked with his neighbors who wanted to know what kind of trouble he was in that the FBI was asking about him. Schwerin said that they had no idea where they were going. They travelled by train to New Mexico where they were met by an army bus which took them up a hill. Schwerin remembers that it was a moonlit night. The bus driver told them that they were going to Los Alamos "the home of the A bomb". This was March of 1946 and the war had been over about 6

01:02

months.

01:13

They were processed thru
the pass office. They were
instructed in the do's & don't's
of handling radio-active
material and told what their
duties would be. They had
a one week apprenticeship
with the veteran security
guards. These guards were
leaving Los Alamos thru discharge
or an assignment to Bikini
Schwerin & the others in his
group were replacements

01:30

Censorship. During the war
mail was given to an officer
who read & censored it. The
envelope was left ~~open~~ open
until it had been read. During
the war, WAACs manned the
switchboard and could terminate
any call. By the time Schwerin
got to Los Alamos, there was no
more censorship

01:41

When you called Los Alamos
your call went to a location
in Colorado. That operator then
connected you to the Los Alamos
switchboard. The name Los Alamos
was never mentioned

01:45

Schwerin said that where

They went to night clubs in Santa Fe they always felt that the FBI was around, checking to see that no one got too drunk and started talking. He had never been questioned. The Los Angeles Security Office was, in a sense, an offshoot of military intelligence. Schwerin said they were warned to never talk about what they did.

Sometimes they didn't even talk about their work in the barracks. Schwerin lived in the barracks which were shaped like an H with latrines in the middle. Each barracks had four coal burning stoves. They were filled in the evenings, so nights were pretty good. But by morning, it was cold. Soldiers going to the latrine would put on more coal and occasionally a 45 mm shell for excitement. Food was the standard army food. Schwerin said that the soldiers pulled no KP duty, however. This was handled by women from the pueblos in the Rio Grande Valley. (Each pueblo had its own bus which would bring men & women up to work at Los Alamos)

1:59

1:81

Schwerin was a "security guard"
His duties centered around the
security and transportation of Radio-
active material. This was his only
concern. The MPs processed badges
at the gates. If someone was
on the base, it was assumed that
the MPs had cleared him. Schwerin
explained his duties. In the processing
building, plutonium &
uranium were processed into a
solid form. When the rough castings
were made, they were placed in
a vault within the fenced area.
The rough castings were
taken from the vault & be milled
and put on a lathe and brought
down to exact specifications. This
material was then coated to retard oxidation.
Schwerin said that security guards
would accompany the material to
the various shops to be processed.
They stayed with the material and kept
it in sight at all times. This was
their primary duty.
As for precautions, the materials
were kept in lead lined canisters,
which were numbered. When a
canister was needed for a Security
Office would open the vault and
remove the requested canister.

8

Meter Reading
or Minute Mark

Topics presented in order of discussion on recording

Schwerin said that the security guards would take the canister and load it into the sedan. If the canister was going to an outlying area, it would be accompanied by two guards. If it was to be delivered to a nearby secure area, one guard could take it. Radio-Active material was never moved except in a sedan equipped with a radio, a siren and red lights. If the destination was off site, the sedan was accompanied by a panel truck. Schwerin said that they were in touch with the security guard office at all times.

2:22

They were given their choice of weapons, Schwerin said. They could carry either a 38 special or a 45 automatic. In the case of any "interference", shooting was the last resort. They should move out & escape using their red lights and siren.

2:30

Schwerin said that his security guards were sent to the motor pool to get licenses for jeeps, sedans or 3/4 ton trucks. Those who were especially good were trained on 6 by 2 1/2 ton trucks.

9

Meter Reading
or Minute Mark

Topics presented in order of discussion on recording

PANEL TRUCKS and "Six by's" were used off base to accompany the sedans. They would lead and follow the sedans.

2:43

Trips were made to a variety of sites. Trucks would go to HANFORD to pick up plutonium. They would go to ALBUQUERQUE to ship material on the Santa Fe RR. It was loaded on a special siding in the freight yards. If possible all transporting of radio active material was done during daylight hours. Schwerin said that they had to go to the Rock Island arsenal in Illinois to pick up bomb casings. Occasionally security guards had to go to Albuquerque to guard a car all night. They were allowed M-1 carbines or Thompson sub machine guns for that duty.

2:64

Schwerin said that during his time no one ever tried to intervene in a convoy. The only problem they ever had was when one sedan went into a ditch and smashed its wind shield. The convoy had to delay while a guard went to a junk yard for another wind shield which was taped into place. The convoy then continued on its way.

2:75

Schwerin said that there were routine check-ups and medical tests at Los Alamos. When you came out of a contaminated area, you took a Q-tip cotton swab and put it in each nostril to determine if you were inhaling any contaminated dust. When you were working in a very "hot" area, you carried a "film badge" which was like a little pen which you stuck in your pocket. If the film showed any developed areas, you knew that you were taking on gamma rays. Gamma rays were the most dangerous. Alpha rays could be stopped by clothing; a doorway or a wall would stop beta rays.

2:89

Schwerin said that the people he served with were all highly intelligent. That was one of the criteria. They also became bored easily. Someone got an old motorcycle; the guards worked on it and tinkered with it until they got it going. Schwerin said that they took turns horseback riding. They were allowed to ride the horses that belonged to the MPs when they were off duty.

Meter Reading
or Minute Mark

Topics presented in order of discussion on recording

They were allowed to use an army vehicle to go swimming in the Rio Grande - usually on weekends. They took trips to the Bandelier National Monument where there were old Indian sites. They used all passes to Santa Fe and took normal furloughs.

3:11

Sewerin described the chain of command for the security guards as very loose. There were no platoon or squad assignments. There was one group of 3 officers. There was a schedule of 3 days for the post. Supernumeraries stayed in the barracks on call. If an assignment came up the barracks were contacted by radio and a panel truck & jeep were sent up.

3:20

There was some interaction with the scientists, and the security guards were generally in the background as they had to watch the material.

3:32

There was an incident in the summer of 1946 at Piavita Canyon (phon). There were 9 men in the room (including the security guard) when an experiment went sour. The scientist

who was conducting it died
9 days later. The rest of the people
in the room got various doses
and reacted in various ways.

The security guard, a close friend
of Schwerin, was not seriously
affected. He was put on a gurney
and a doctor stuck a hypodermic
needle right into his breast bone
& withdrew some bone marrow
& test his white blood cell count.
After his friend left the special
weapons unit at Los Alamos he
was assigned to Okinawa. When
the Korean war broke out, he was
sent to Korea and was killed in
September 1950

3:61

Schwerin said that radiation
was a cumulative thing - there was
no special incident for him
in the spring of 1947 when his hair
started to fall out. Schwerin
was taken out of the production
areas and given a job as a courier.
He made the daily mail run from
Los Alamos to the Sandia Base in
Albuquerque. He also carried passengers
between the train station, civilian &
military airports and Los Alamos.
Schwerin said that the army
did not try to cover up the dangers
and results of radiation exposure.

3:78

The Army took blood samples to determine the white cell count. He knew then what had caused his hair loss.

3:85

Schwerin never claimed any compensation. When he left the production area his hair stopped falling out.

3:88

Schwerin had no long term consequences though he had one scare. Shortly after he left the army, he developed a fatty tumor. He was operated on at an army hospital.

They took so long doing the pathology on the tumor that he woke up on the operating table while they were sewing him up. The next time he woke up it was 3 AM the following day. The doctors had really put him under.

4:05

Later that morning his doctor came by and told him he had really put up a struggle.

About 2 years later he developed another fatty tumor. Although the first tumor had not alarmed him, the second one did for he was married by then. He went to the library to research the effects of radiation. The second tumor was not cancerous and

4:22

He never had any other than Schwerin was not married while he was in the service. He would have hated being married and not able to live with his wife. He didn't know how others could stand it.

4:25

When Schwerin was asked what was the scariest moment of his service he said that there was an incident which was not really related to anything. Trying to improve the technique of the implosion bomb, the Los Alamos scientists would run full scale tests of the explosive lenses that compress the metal. It took more than one day to set up and run the test, to do the X-Ray photography and to record the instrumentation that went with it.

Because the sedans had radio communication equipment, 2 guards were assigned to babysit the device at night in an isolated canyon away from Los Alamos. The guards would go down in the evening as the scientists left. Schwerin said that they would park close to the device and shine their headlights on it every half hour. They would then contact the duty officer and tell him all was well.

Once, about midnight, it got very quiet. Schwerin said that they had the cat windows open because it was warm. All of a sudden, a coyote who must have been about 75 feet away, let out a blood-curdling howl. Schwerin said that he was half asleep and it scared the hell out of him.

4:61

Schwerin was asked what was the funniest incident while he was in the service. He described a party thrown by a young guard to celebrate his divorce. The entire barracks participated.

4:67

The warehouse still had a supply of Griesedick (phon) beer in stock. As civilians from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) were gradually taking over, the commissary started selling beer at 5 cents a bottle to get rid of it. The PX closed at 10:00 that day so the guards took up a collection to buy two cases of beer. They scrubbed out a garbage can which they billed with water to cover the beer cans. They obtained some dry ice from the tech area to cool the beer. They drank beer all night and lasted one day. By the time they were finished, everyone

5:04

was so sick of war that they never did that again. There were no repercussions from this escapade as the sergeants were in on it and the officers never knew. There were no detonations at Los Alamos during Schwerin's time. The 1946-1947 Pacific Tests were the only detonations. They had not started any in the U.S. - e, Frenchman's flat in Nevada at that time.

5:14

Schwerin was due to be let out of the service in January 1949. But as the AEC replaced the military, Schwerin and ^{the} other guards were assigned to Sandia - which was also a part of the Armed Forces Special Weapons Program. There were a number of caves in which A-Bombs were stored. One day about 6 soldiers, Schwerin included, were sent to a cave to draw out an A-Bomb. The bomb was on the carrier which went to a loading pit on a taxi way which led to Curtin field. The bomb was then loaded on a B-29. Schwerin felt he was fortunate to have to have seen this. Schwerin said that the reason they had witnessed

This activity was because they were to be assigned to an installation 5 miles south of Camp Hood, Texas. They had a 10,000 foot runway and a taxiway which led to a loading pit. A system of coves had been established too. It was a brand new installation. Schwerin said that they were the first to occupy it. It was a permanent installation - a brick sided masonry building. For four or five months they loaded bombs into these coves until it was turned over to the army air force. Schwerin & the others were returned to Sandia where they served out their time until discharge.

5:68

The last of the security guards left the end of December the beginning of January 1948. They went to Sandia and then to Fort Hood & home.

5:80

Schwerin never considered re-enlisting. The difference between the war time & peace time army was too great. He had many discussions with a Captain at Los Alamos about OCS but he never gave it serious thought. He really wanted to be a forest ranger. When Schwerin was discharged, he went to Mississippi State College & majored in Animal Husbandry, but took a course in forestry.

He has made his living as a farmer
and a cattle man.

6:04

He bought a small farm close to
Memphis and had six children. They
have all done rather well, Schwerin
said. He was glad that none of
them followed his footsteps, because
they have made a lot more money
than he ever did.

6:12

Schwerin and his wife were also
college educated. All their
children except one and he
went thru a trade school and
became an aircraft mechanic.
He has a daughter who is a
veterinarian and is married
to a veterinarian. Both are
small animal practitioners so
Schwerin can tell them a thing
or two about cattle.

6:24

He has no regrets about his
service. He feels privileged
to have served at Los Alamos.
It was a humbling experience to
be with the learned people who
worked on that bomb. You are
in the National Honor Society,
you have taken chemistry and
physics in high school and you
think you know a lot, and next
to those people you know "diddly".

These people, SCHWERIN said, could make anything they needed. SCHWERIN said that the FIRST TV had he ever seen was after DR. STOCUM'S fatal accident. The next time that test was run, SCHWERIN and another guard carried the material out to PIARITA Canyon (phon). They had learned their lesson. This time the test was run by remote control. They used a TV to monitor it from behind a plate glass window.

648

What bothers SCHWERIN the most about the bomb is that people have lost sight of the realities—some people have tried to revise history. You had to live in that time. SCHWERIN said to understand how it was and ^{you had to know} the mentality of the enemy. Even after 2 bombs were dropped on Japan, the military elite in Japan wanted to continue the war to the last man. In dropping the bomb, many Japanese were killed, but had the U.S. invaded Japan many more Japanese and Americans would have been killed. We actually saved lives with the

6:81

with the Comd. Schwerin said
 that the Revisionists have lost
 sight of this
 Finally, Schwerin said that he
 had on one occasion met
 General Groves. Schwerin was
 serving as a courier during the
 1947 tests. Normally he would
 pick up material at Sandia after
 lunch. On this occasion he
 had an envelope that was to
 be delivered to General Groves
 and no one else. Schwerin
 was delayed and by the time
 they got back it was almost
 dark and General Groves was
 sitting on the steps of the HQS
 building. Schwerin said that no
 sooner had his feet hit the
 ground than General Groves
 "hollered" out "Sgt ^{HAVE} you got
 a letter for me?" General
 Groves had a commanding
 presence.