

Dennis Schiess

Interviewed by Judy Hansen
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I was born December 11, 1940 in Provo, Utah to Daniel and LaRita Schiess. We lived there and I attended school until the sixth grade. My mother and father divorced after he came out of the US Navy serving in WWII. Mother remarried Joe Colledge so we moved to Lehi down by the Jordan River on his farm. It was straight west down 1500 North by the Oxborrow Farm that was run by three brothers: Tom, Jack, and Joe. I have two sisters that live here in Lehi, Deann who married Arnie Cardon, and Nancy Bond who lives over on fifth west. I have one half-brother living in Clearfield, Gaylon Joe Colledge.

I attended Jr. High in Lehi and to the 11th grade at Lehi High. I wanted to quit high school at seventeen. I went down and tried to join the Navy. I filled out the paperwork and all I needed was my mother's permission but it never got that far. The recruiter said,

“Whoa, this is not going to happen. I've got you all set up but you're going to go back and finish high school first.” I was so adamant to quit school that I told him I would go and join the Army instead. This recruiter talked me out of it. Later on, the recruiters came over to the old Lehi High School and this same man was there. He asked me how I was doing in High School and I told him I think I might make it. I was having some problems so I went to live with my Uncle in Blanding Utah and graduated from San Juan High School. That was quite a shock. I thought Lehi was a pretty quiet town until I got to Blanding. Blanding is pretty darn quiet.

I finish High School in Blanding and came back to Lehi. I thought about going back and joining the Navy but I changed my mind and decided jumping out of airplanes in the Army would be better. I went down to join the Army. I had to walk right by the old post office building in Provo. That was where the line was for the Navy recruiter. As I walked by, three guys from Lehi were standing in line ready to join the Navy: Jesse Cardon, Dick Watkins, and Loil Dubois. I changed my mind again and decided I would join with them. When I got in, there was a different recruiter than the one I had worked with so I told him I had been in before. He pulled my file and said, “We don't have to do anything, you're ready!” The four of us joined and a day or two later they took us to Fort Douglas, swore us in, put us on a bus to the airport, and then flew us to San Diego, California by Western Airlines¹. I went in July 6, 1959.



¹ In 1987 Western Airlines merged with Delta Airlines.

They discovered Jesse Cardon had some medical problems so they sent him home. Dick Watkins was on the same ship I was on for the entire four years, and Loil Dubois went back east to Norfolk, Virginia.

My new life began at the San Diego Naval Training Station. We spent three or four months in basic training. They whipped us into shape. I couldn't believe how many of these men didn't know how to swim. They would take us up on a high dive to teach us how to jump off a ship deck. If someone didn't jump they got pushed. Everyone knew how to swim within a week. They made healthy people out of us but they also taught us how to do for ourselves. We had to learn to wash our own clothes as well as everything else we would need to do in life. They taught us in a way we wouldn't forget (he laughs). A lot of people thought it was harsh, but it wasn't harsh it was just basic training. They tried to make men out of a bunch of boys. They shaved all our hair off and we started new. From that day on we were theirs. You do as your told, when your told, and there are no two ways about it. If you don't like it you can run, but if you run you're going to get caught, then you're in big trouble. When you go AWOL things happen and that is not a good thing to do. It was miserable for the first little while but you get used to it because it really was just a routine. We went to the exercise field, paraded, marched, and done all kinds of dumb things. Then we went to classrooms and learned anything and everything that has to do with the Navy, military, justice; the whole thing. When we got out we had a pretty good understanding of what was going on. Then they assigned us to our next duty station.

Right after boot camp I had a two week leave so I came home to Lehi. On the way back I had developed an ear infection and I ended up going to the USS Haven; which was a hospital ship that was ported in Long Beach. I'd never had anything hurt that bad in my entire life. They had to do surgery and ended up lancing my ear. It took a long time for it to heal and it was always draining.

I had been assigned to the U.S.S. Bremerton. It was named after Bremerton, Washington and was a heavy cruiser. When I showed up to catch it in Long Beach California it was being decommissioned; put out of service. So we sit in Long Beach for a long time. They would assign us different things; go out on destroyers and different cruises but we always came back to Long Beach until they found a home for us. I remember this whole time my ear continued to give me problems.

They finally put us on a train in Los Angeles to Seattle. I think I could have walked faster than that train went. It took forever to get there. I had a really hard time during that ride because of my ear. The ship we were supposed to go to fell through so they put us on a carrier that was sitting in dry dock. They ended up taking us off that ship and moved us over onto the U.S.S. Point Defiance. That is where I stayed for most of my sea-going life; and there I went, sailing, sailing, over the bounding main!

I had been waiting to get into several schools but they never did open up. After I got onto the USS Point Defiance this guy came down and told me that I should just get out of this waiting mess and go to Q Division; which is Quartermaster Division or navigation in the Navy. He told

me there were a lot of openings there and I would be able to make rank so I transferred into N-Division. They sent me to striker school that was only a week or two long. They taught me the very basics about navigation, fathoms, and how to navigate by the stars. I was a quartermaster. Once I actually got into the job I found it was a lot more complicated than what they had taught me.

My focus from then on out was navigation. We were part of the 7th fleet. I worked with the Navigation Department and I'd help them plot courses and shoot stars. Every night we would go up and use their sextants to measure the stars. Then we would go down and put little X's together on all the charts to figure out where we were sitting in that big ol' Pacific Ocean. There was one Navigator on ship but several Quartermasters. At every port we went into we would have to pull out the chart for that port and make sure it was correct. The US Geographic Survey in Clearfield, Utah would send us information, charts, and everything we needed. We had to go in and find buoys', reefs, or whatever and mark them into the chart. We also ran the Helm. They would train some of the Quartermasters as Helmsmen who would sit and steer the ship; but everybody had to take their turn because there wasn't enough Helmsmen to cover 24 hours a day. We also cleaned the bridge areas and the chart rooms. There were charts; hundreds of thousands of charts that we had for places all over the world. There were charts for every sea, port, and ocean that we would have to use. A lot of it required a special clearance. This is basically what I done for four years.

Even though most of the time our home port was Long Beach, I don't think there is any place in or around the South Pacific and Indian Ocean that I haven't been close to. When we went on deployment we were gone for at least nine months at a time. We toured Japan, Korea, and Okinawa. US Navy WESTPAC; as they called it had a naval base in Yokosuko, Japan which is what they called home port when you were over there. We would go out and do exercises & patrols with other fleet ships. We would take LSD's; landing cruises and land Marines and their equipment on the beaches of small islands. We also did experimental stuff. We done things the US government never told the American people we were doing. When the Vietnam War started they were flying sorties² over there that nobody knew about.

We got orders one day to leave California and we went somewhere out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. There were a lot of ships with us. We spent two or three days just steaming around in a big circle. One day when we were out in the middle of the ocean going around in circles; here came an airplane. We watched that airplane and pretty soon all these guys started jumping out of it. We sent out landing craft and picked them up. These guys had our orders; nobody knew where we were going until they arrived on our ship. That was when we ended up in Bangkok, Thailand. We went up there and unloaded all this stuff we had for a landing force. It was shortly afterwards the Vietnam War started. Our Government never told anybody that we were there. They wouldn't allow us to take pictures going up into the Chao Phraya River. It rained so hard going up that river. We had to stop and drop the anchor because it rained so hard the radar wouldn't navigate. I've seen monsoons but I'm telling you they really had monsoons there. We went in and unloaded everything we had on ship then we were out of there. They didn't allow us to even go on shore. They wouldn't tell us anything about what we were doing.

² A deployment or dispatch of one military unit, be it an aircraft, ship, or troops, from a strongpoint. The sortie, whether by one or more aircraft or vessels, usually has a specific mission.

To this day, I still don't know much about that mission. I do know that the American public was kept in the dark at that time. They didn't want people knowing what was really going on. In fact they sent me a letter after I got out and told me I could apply for a Vietnam Campaign Ribbon. I never did.

I remember I got a good conduct medal but I had to wait for it because I had gone AWOL once (Dennis laughs). I'll tell you what happened. It was in the beginning of my military service. We were temporarily assigned to this carrier and we went into what they called X-Division. That is where they brought all the new people. These ships are massive; I mean they are BIG! People can't find their way around on them so you go into an X-Division and they would teach you where to eat and all the different places on ship. It was all exciting. They had this Officer; a Lieutenant JG (Junior Grade) and he said, "We're going to teach you guys about this ship but you haven't got a full sea bag until you have a haircut like mine and you've gone AWOL." Well, he was as bald as a cucumber. Me and some other guys figured we wasn't going to get a haircut like him but we could sure go AWOL. We did! We wasn't gone very long, we were just late getting back one night. It wasn't like we took off on a trip. We were punished by being restricted to the ship with extra duties and it prevented us from getting a good conduct medal for a while.

Anyway, once we hauled this missile over the ocean to fire at the sun³. It cost over a million dollars. (Dennis laughs) We took that missile out and spent days getting it ready to go and at the precise moment they hit the switch, nothing happened. So we spent more time and done it all again, nothing happened. They decided it wasn't going to work so they took it out and punched it full of holes and sunk it (He laughs). Some of the things our government does just blows your mind. When they were doing all the nuclear tests on the Atolls in the Pacific we were part of the guinea pigs that would go out to sit and wait. We'd go out there where there was nothing but bird dung and they'd see if it was adequate to have a bomb blast.

They had put a new attack submarine in service on the east coast; the USS Thresher, for its deep dive test but it never came back up. They had a bathysphere; a deep diving vehicle down in San Diego and we loaded it and took it over to the east coast to look for the USS Thresher. This bathysphere was a one or two man devise and they would get in it and ballast it with BB's. We had so many 55 gallon drums of BB's on board ship you couldn't believe it. They would fill this bathysphere up with BB's and it would submerge a long way; really deep in the water. It had big plastic windows and lights but they never did find any traces of the USS Thresher. They lost the entire 129 member crew. They figured there must have been some kind of flaw in the frame that collapsed under the pressure. They eventually sent us back to the west coast.

Toward the end of my military career ol' Fidel Castro decided he wanted to conquer the world. They had a big announcement that our enlistments would be extended for one year and maybe longer. We went down the west coast of California through the Panama Canal as part of the Cuban crisis. I remember I ended up making four passes through the Panama Canal during my military service.

³ *Point Defiance* became one of the first rocket-launching surface ships to support the 1958 International Geophysical Year Solar Eclipse Expedition to the South Pacific. Launchers on deck fired eight Nike-Asp sounding rockets to collect scientific data during the eclipse. (wikipedia)

Every vessel is different. When I was getting close to getting out I had an Executive Officer that had been stationed in New Zealand. For a long time they had ice breakers go down to the Antarctica and break ice. He told me that was an assignment I should go on. I tried to go but could never get transferred down there. They won't even let the Navy in there anymore because of the nuclear vessels; if you're a nuclear vessel you're not getting into New Zealand.

When I was getting ready for discharge, the Navy wanted to send me to New London, Connecticut to submarine school. They had a lot of promises but I thought, "No – I want out of here." I couldn't get in to any school when I first got into the Navy because everything was full and now they were begging to put me in. They offer so many good schools that I tell these young guys that it's crazy not to get into the military. I tell them to go for their six months and go to a meeting every weekend, and training every year and if they can put up with that for twenty-five or thirty years and get it all over and done their life is pretty easy after that. They never have to pay another medical bill; heck they don't have to do anything. My brother-in-law Gary Evans tried to get me to go into the active reserves but I never did. I would have been a lot better off now if I had. I wouldn't have had to pay medical bills and I would have had a little more retirement money. Oh well, you live and you learn!

I've done all kinds of wonderful things out there where they call the big ol' Pacific Ocean. I would have never known any of those places I went to even existed except in a book. After having a chance of seeing how the other part of this world lives I'm dang glad to be home here in the United States; I'll tell you that. I'm glad I live where I live because I know what those people have to go through to live. I know the freedoms we have that they don't have. They can't just jump in their car and run to the store – heck, a lot of those places they don't even have cars. It is an eye-opening experience.

I'd been dating Marilyn Fox from Lehi since the seventh grade. Her parents didn't know we were meeting at the show house up on State Street holding hands. Her dad got transferred to Colorado the year I went to Blanding but she was back living with her Aunt going to beauty school when I was home on leave. The second time I went home on leave I asked her to marry me and she said, "Yes." Marilyn came to San Diego to an open house with a couple of her girlfriends while I was stationed there.

A Navy base can sponsor free open houses where the public can come in and tour the ships. If people are in the area and pass up an opportunity to attend one of these they are blowing the ball game; because it is worth doing. San Diego has a lot of them. They take the public on an open house in an aircraft carrier. You get on one of those aircraft carriers and they are so huge it still blows my mind how they can float. I know they are airtight and I understand the mechanics; but ships shouldn't float on the water when they weigh 800,000 tons, but they do. When you're on one of these open houses they give you a tour of the whole ship and it is worth the time. They take you through flight scenarios and do all kinds of things with you. The ships are just massive; a peace time crew on a carrier is probably around 5,000 men and during war time when they get a squadron on it can carry up to 8,000 people. They've opened the USS Midway Museum in San Diego which is an aircraft carrier but you have to pay for that one. There are several other

ships they have turned into Museums; the USS Iowa in San Pedro, the USS Utah and USS Arizona in Hawaii, and the USS Intrepid in New York to name a few.

I was discharged after four years of active duty on July 1, 1963. In August of 1963 I married Marilyn. I had to stay in reserves for another two years but was never called. I was officially terminated on the 8th of July 1965 for a total of six years' service.

I bounced around from job to job. I've lived in Lake Tahoe working in the casinos, Las Vegas where our children were born. I've worked labor, construction, and painting when I was younger but I ended up being a truck driver. I did that for a long-long time. I drove over the road for quite a while but I decided there had to be a better way to make ends meet so I transferred into the office and became the dispatcher/manager for Swift Transportation. We moved back to Lehi in 1968 and have been here ever since. I have three children; my sons Trent who lives in Lehi and Tracy who lives in Heber, and one daughter Teralin who lives in Grantsville,

It was all a new experience for a little farm kid from Lehi, Utah. I learned a lot in the military. I think every male alive should do some service in the military for their country. It is an experience they will never forget. There is also a pride that goes along with it. Veterans just have a different outlook on everything. If someone has served in the military they have a real tender spot in their heart for their country. I get emotional just talking about it (as he says with a tear in his eye). If I hear the National Anthem I become very emotional. That is something I acquired through my military experience. I would recommend the military for everybody. I think the draft was a good thing and I don't think they should have ever stopped the draft. I think every male should have the responsibility to serve at least two years for their country. I really enjoyed my time in the military and was glad for the experience.