

William Schaper Oral History Interview

MARK BURKEN: Call to Bill Schaper on July 19th, 1997.

WILLIAM SCHAPER: Yeah, Bill.

MB: Ah, Mr. Schaper?

WS: Yes.

MB: This is Mark Burken in San Antonio.

WS: Oh, I had -- I sent you -- message a couple times.

MB: Yeah, I had hoped you had. I'd left the message there --

WS: Yeah.

MB: -- a couple of time.

WS: I kept -- I got the phone number. I had no idea when to call.

MB: Well, I guess I didn't leave that part, did I?

WS: Yeah, you left the phone number. I got it.

MB: Oh, I --

WS: (inaudible) what's your mission? (laughs)

MB: Well, what I'm trying to accomplish, here -- I have been working with Dick Rossi and Lydia Rossi, and we're putting up a historical AVG homepage on the internet, where people wanting accurate information about the AVG who use the computers and the internet can get on and get that information straight from the AVG. So, this will be an AVG historical site by AVG. So, we're not using outside people

or -- we're not using anything written by anybody else, but strictly AVG folks. And I have been calling around. The reason I called Robert Smith is I wanted to use a couple of excerpts from his book. I'm compiling one of the parts of this from crew chiefs.

WS: Yeah.

MB: And I'm getting some information that various crew chiefs want to put in about, oh, maintaining the P-40 or interesting stories that they had and so forth. And I've gotten something from [Losansky?] and George Bailey and Robert Smith, and he suggested -- that is, Robert Smith suggested that I get ahold of you, that you kept a diary during the AVG.

WS: I know, I've got that. I started (inaudible) when -- it was a late start with -- down in -- might have been (inaudible) but I saw so much history. (laughs) The kind that takes the breath away.

MB: Oh, yeah, well, it'd be easier to -- you know, if you've got the diary than just recollection.

WS: (inaudible) you know Charlie [Bond?], don't you?

MB: Oh, sure.

WS: (inaudible) I sent him the diary for a while, and I don't know, it was copied at the (inaudible) I have scrapbooks that I put together, and my sister put it together when I

was over there. And she was in Chicago at the time. She got all the clippings from the local newspapers and stuff. But that diary, it was copied down in San Diego, I guess, and couple other guys used some -- couple of phrases that I had. I'm just rambling now. (laughs)

MB: Well, is there a copy of the diary still available?

WS: I've got it here with me right now. Here somewhere.

MB: Oh!

WS: Here's what happened. A year and a half ago, in October, my wife passed away.

MB: I heard that.

WS: (inaudible) after 54 years, yeah. And I have a son and daughter down in Orange County here, which is in Anaheim, between Knott's Berry Farm and Disneyland. Anyway, I (inaudible) there until I (inaudible) I think I'm settled there 'til their dad (inaudible) the way it sounds. But anyway (inaudible) settling. I don't know that I could help or not. I got all the junk that I had.

MB: Well, we are looking --

WS: Got any questions or anything you want that I could answer?

MB: Well, there --

WS: (inaudible) I passed my 85th birthday, so I'm no chicken anymore.

MB: So you're not what?

WS: I said I passed my 85th birthday, so I'm no chicken here.

MB: Oh, you're a real chicken there.

WS: No, I'm not a chick-- I'm not as young as I used to be.

MB: Oh, I see, I -- yeah, you're not the spring chicken.

WS: That's right.

MB: I got you. Well, the -- you know, there's a -- there's three ways to look at this, and one is if you have some interesting excerpts from your diary that you want to share, I'll take that. The second is, if you have some questions that you have been asked from time to time and you have an answer to those and you want to give that, that's a second thing. The third that I have offered a lot of the Flying Tigers, a lot of the AVG, is if there's something that you want folks to know about the AVG, you can pose your own question and just answer it yourself. I'll write it down and -- or you can write it down and send it to me, and -- just something that you want folks around the world to know about the AVG from your perspective, and --

WS: Jeez, I thought (inaudible) you know, it's been so long ago, I think it's all history. (laughs) (inaudible)

MB: Well, you're right, it is all history.

WS: Very --

MB: There's some --

WS: -- not even my grandchildren -- don't know who the AVG is anymore, except for me. (laughs)

MB: Well, I can tell you this: there has been a tremendous interest in folks wanting to know more about it, and that's what's prompted us to have a historical site where people can get information on it. People are calling around now, trying to get more information on the AVG. And as you know, there's a lot of crap out there. But there's --

WS: I know there's a lot of bullshit with the -- it started with John Wayne, if you remember.

MB: Yeah. (laughs) Yeah.

WS: And they were here (inaudible) all these guys (inaudible) but I moved down to Orange County and he used to be close by here, I guess. Anyway, go ahead. (laughs)

MB: Well, you say that Charlie Bond has a copy of your diary?

WS: I don't know if he has a copy, but I mailed him -- I gave him the diary. He mailed it back to me with a copy of the book you -- he wrote.

MB: Oh, I see.

WS: And I got all that shit picked away here somewhere. I don't know where the hell it's -- all is. I could find that diary, I think.

MB: Well, if you find that diary -- and I'll be more than happy to pay the copy prices on it, you know, to have it copied.

And we'll collect it. Right now, I have 11 diaries of various people of the Flying Tigers. So, I have quite a few of 'em, and --

WS: Yeah, okay.

MB: -- I --

WS: The facilities I had for writing it, it's also scratchy. I don't write too well. You'd have to decipher it some way.  
(laughter)

MB: Well, you wouldn't be the first. (laughter) I got some that are pretty bad here. Like, I just read Bob [Neil's?] and my gosh, that was a chore. And --

WS: Which Bob Neil is that? The pilot?

MB: The pilot, and --

WS: (inaudible) know Bob Neil. Yeah, he and I were buddies over there. I mean, in the Armor -- he was in the Armor. He passed away quite a few years back.

MB: Did he have a diary, too, do you know?

WS: I think he did, but I don't even know where the widow is anymore.

MB: Yeah. Yeah, that's another thing I'm trying to work on is trying to find some people that have kind of scattered out and away.

WS: I think lots of (inaudible) she's living down in Texas there, somewhere.

MB: Is that right?

WS: Yeah (inaudible) [Joe?], I think, Joe Neil (inaudible).

MB: Well, let's see, he just sent me the most recent roster. This is the one that just came out. Let me see what I got here.

WS: I've got that here somewhere, too.

MB: You know, when I was talking with Bailey, he had an interesting story that he was telling about and about how they were -- and of course tires were a major problem, yeah. And he and Ben Timmerman -- Ben [Timmeron?] developed some little veins or scoops that they put on the wheel wells, put on the -- actually the wheel covers.

WS: (inaudible) I went over as a crew chief, but I had about -- a couple years' experience with the P-40, and I was probably (inaudible) know more about the P-40 than any man over there at the time. So, after a short time (inaudible) I was (inaudible) to what you call hangar chief. In other words, I did all the heavy maintenance. The line work on the flag line was all done by crew chiefs. And when they couldn't handle a problem, it came up to me and then my crew that I have, follow me?

MB: Yeah.

WS: I was more like the -- what you call hangar chief. And in fact (inaudible) (laughs) and I went on many locations,

scrounging downed airplanes (inaudible) for parts and stuff. In fact, I had a -- I have a -- the access to an airplane, I think it was a DC-2. They used to find me around and pick up (inaudible) scrounging parts, you know?

MB: Going out to crash sites?

WS: Yeah. (laughter) (inaudible) part of my job. And the other part was (inaudible) and junk parts and -- I did most of the heavy maintenance. I did -- I got off the line long time ago (inaudible) before then (inaudible) the crew chief all stayed on the flag line.

MB: Okay, so I see, this -- so, you were really in the shop.

WS: Yeah, I was in the shop, mm-hmm.

MB: I got you. Were there many parts that were really that salvageable from those crash sites?

WS: You know, generators, carburetors and -- oh, I couldn't tell you what else.

MB: Yeah, solenoids and different things like that.

WS: Yeah.

MB: I --

WS: (inaudible) so long ago.

MB: Yeah.

WS: How do you spell your last name? F-U-H?

MB: It's with a B, B as in bravo --

WS: Oh, yeah.



MB: -- U-R-K-E-N.

WS: It's Burkland, huh?

MB: Burken. B-U-R-K-E-N.

WS: Oh (inaudible).

MB: Yeah. That -- well --

WS: (inaudible) possibility of you ever getting out here, are you?

MB: Actually, yeah. You know, I was in Anaheim not too terribly long ago, and I know exactly where you're talking about, the area around Knott's Berry Farm.

WS: Oh, just a few -- just about a half mile away.

MB: I've been out there before and I have intentions -- how far is Costa Mesa from there?

WS: You know, when I moved down here from San Fernando Valley, and I was in my 80s -- 'cause I've only been there now seven or eight months. I'm so disoriented, you can't believe. I got a son that lives in La Palma, which is west of here, and my daughter's in Yorba Linda, which is east of here, about 30 minutes from me one way, and the other one's 15. And in between the both of them -- anyway, Knott's Berry Farm -- oh, is just about a half mile.

MB: Well, I can find that area again.

WS: Well, I can (inaudible).

MB: Yeah, I've got it down as [Fairwood Manor?], 200  
[Northdale?]?

WS: That's what (inaudible).

MB: Yeah, well number 132.

WS: (inaudible) (laughter) and they're so different, you can't believe. When I'm 80 years old and make a move like that (inaudible).

MB: What are you, 85 now, you said?

WS: Yeah, I had my 85th birthday in June.

MB: Oh, well, happy birthday.

WS: (inaudible)

MB: And [Tex?] just had his at 83.

WS: I think I'm the oldest guy in the group that's still alive. In fact, I was one of the oldest (inaudible) I went over as a crew chief, I was 26 -- oh, no 28, I think, 29, something like that. And most of the kids were just coming over -- the crew chiefs, they were in their early 20s.

MB: That's exactly right. I know a lot of them were just barely 20. You know, that --

WS: And, see, part of my job, like I told Charlie's mom -- you'd think I was running a training school more than anything else. There was three or four other guys, now deceased, that (inaudible) Johnny Carter, and he and I, we had so much (inaudible) with the 22nd Fighter Group, that

we -- I think we were on a training school for six months over there.

MB: (laughs) Yeah, you'd have been the only ones with experience on the P-40.

WS: Well, it -- that was -- lot of the guys were Navy, you know (inaudible).

MB: Yeah, that's right, most of them were Navy, and a few Marines.

WS: Yeah, a couple Marines (inaudible) I don't think (inaudible).

MB: Now, how far is Costa Mesa from where you're at?

WS: I'd say about a half an hour, 30 minutes.

MB: Well, I'm going to be in Costa Mesa here in a couple of months.

WS: Well, if I'm still alive, give me a call and I'll give you what I've got is all I can say.

MB: All right. Well, I'll tell you what, we can -- you know, we can talk about it then and make -- just make copies right there.

WS: Okay.

MB: And --

WS: And, oh, when I moved in there, my son and my -- I had three boys -- and a couple other friends, they stuffed this stuff up in a closet, and I have -- I've been here now six

months, and I haven't looked at a damn thing. I'm just so upset, you know, I just can't understand -- I mean --

MB: Upset?

WS: Well, it just upset me so bad that I haven't done a damn thing with any of that stuff. (inaudible) I went back (inaudible) put that reunion together in Dallas in December. I was back there then, and I looked at some stuff and I (inaudible).

MB: Well, you know, I was there in December, too. I was up at Dallas, so I'm sure we saw each other up there. I -- you know, I --

WS: Were you at the reunion?

MB: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I sure was. I was out at --

WS: I was one of the guys walking around with a cane. (laughs) (inaudible)

MB: Well, there've been two or three of you, I think.

WS: I don't even have (inaudible) but it helps keep my balance a little bit.

MB: Kind of helps steady there a little bit?

WS: Yeah.

MB: (laughs) Well, I can appreciate that. And that's -- well, there was -- so many people up there, got kind of out of hand, or --

WS: You know, I (inaudible) so many strangers up there that weekend or, you know, the time. I don't recall half them, except (inaudible).

MB: Sure.

WS: And I think (inaudible) they were the native Texans, or they had (inaudible) and I couldn't (inaudible) any of them.

MB: Well, there was a heck of an entourage there from Tex, I know that.

WS: (inaudible)

MB: Man, he --

WS: Oh, they all live there, you know?

MB: Yeah, oh, yeah.

WS: (inaudible) we used to have our reunions up that [Ojai Valley?] Country Club, you've probably heard, yeah.

MB: Yeah, those are the best ones, I --

WS: (inaudible) about 20 minutes from where I live, used to live (inaudible) and hell, I made all of them, you know?

MB: Well, I told Dick Rossi with all the money that the association has, they ought to go back to Ojai and just -- make it just Tigers. Just --

WS: What happened there, you've got -- it's -- 'cause most of us are working folks, and then we couldn't afford to stay there. Maybe we could -- well, I don't know what the deal

with it (inaudible) but once in a while, we got a  
(inaudible).

MB: Well, those days are over when -- I think the -- didn't the  
Japanese buy that or something?

WS: It got to be a resort hotel. International resort hotel  
(inaudible) and the damn room rates went from 40, 35, 40,  
50, 70 up to 150, \$200 a night. And when the golfers had  
to pay 150, \$200 a round, I think -- I guess there  
(inaudible).

MB: (laughs) Well, it would me. You know, I wouldn't have -- I  
got a -- one of the Tigers lives up the road here from me,  
and --

WS: Who's that?

MB: P.J. Green.

WS: Oh, yeah. I know P.J. pretty well.

MB: Oh, do you?

WS: Yeah. I know 'em all (inaudible) that I don't know. Oh, I  
knew 'em all (inaudible).

MB: Well, he lives on a beautiful golf course. Got a small  
house that'll -- that's on a really gorgeous golf course.  
But he won't pay the green fees there and he won't pay the  
membership, 'cause it's too high, so he leaves his house  
there on the golf course and drives across town, pays a  
city course.

WS: I don't blame him.

MB: I don't blame him either.

WS: I never was much of a golfer (inaudible).

MB: Well, you and me both. I tried it, and I got a -- I got some sticks here, but I don't mess with --

WS: (inaudible) (laughs)

MB: Well, that's right. That's exactly right. I can't afford it, unless the company's paying or somebody else is paying. I --

WS: (inaudible) go to work, too. (laughs)

MB: You know, if somebody wants to go golfing and I can expense it off of the company, I'll just do that. I work in the --

WS: (inaudible) since I left AVG, I was self-employed, and I (inaudible) you know?

MB: Where?

WS: I was self-employed. I -- my rent (inaudible) I leased a service station from them. Mobil Oil Company, at the time. And I stayed there 15 years, and I got (inaudible) and then -- moved down -- well, it's a long story. And I was Union Oil about 14 years. I'm an ex-gas jockey, you know what I mean?

MB: Ex what jockey?

WS: Gasoline.

MB: Oh, gas jockey? Well, you and my dad both. He had a Standard Oil gas station for years.

WS: You know, I was 29 years with -- between Mobil and Union.

MB: So, you came --

WS: (inaudible)

MB: -- right back to the States?

WS: Pardon me?

MB: You came right back to the States?

WS: Oh, no, I went to work for (inaudible) that was (inaudible) company, about three or four years, like [Losovski?].

MB: Oh.

WS: (inaudible) I think Lozovski was fired from there. I met him (inaudible) I think just a couple years back, in Scottsdale, I think it was.

MB: Losovski?

WS: Yeah. Didn't he retire from General Motors?

MB: I think he might have, and then he went into the restaurant business.

WS: I didn't (inaudible)

MB: Yeah, he's a -- he owns three restaurants right now there in Georgia.

WS: I know he's down there somewhere.

MB: Yeah, I just --



WS: (inaudible) maybe we're not thinking of the same guy, but I think it's the same. There's only one Losovski.

MB: Right. Yeah, I don't think he's always been in the restaurant business. That --

WS: I thought he told me that he retired from General Motors (inaudible).

MB: He may have.

WS: (inaudible)

MB: Yeah, I --

WS: I thought he'd -- I always thought (inaudible) I only saw him one time since we broke up (inaudible) and I thought he went to [Allison Division?]. There was about -- there was another guy just like myself -- we went to the same (inaudible) anyway, we went to (inaudible) Indianapolis, and I did service (inaudible) it was service (inaudible) technical (inaudible) service with -- on the West Coast, there. Then I got shipped to North Africa and Italy (inaudible).

MB: Oh, were you? I bet they partied out there.

WS: I don't know, and -- what do you mean? In Italy?

MB: Yeah, of --

WS: Oh, see, I couldn't (inaudible).

MB: No, I mean for the end of the war. Didn't they celebrate that?

WS: Yeah, I don't recall, I can't remember.

MB: Ah.

WS: (inaudible) talking about -- asshole of Italy, was called [San Genarro?].

MB: (laughs) The asshole of Italy, huh?

WS: Just north of (inaudible) (laughter) (inaudible) boy, you're bringing back memories now.

MB: Well, I've never had -- never been to Italy, but my wife wants to go and I don't give one hoot in hell to go.

WS: Oh, my wife and I, we toured quite a bit. We got (inaudible) Italy (inaudible) seven (inaudible) south of Rome, and we -- back over (inaudible) and went back (inaudible) deep south of Italy. We were right in the middle, you know, with the (inaudible) I was with a bunch of [P-38s?] (inaudible) then after I came back here (inaudible) still floating around (inaudible) and I pulled out (inaudible) .

MB: Oh, yeah.

WS: (inaudible) we worked on the first of the [P-80s?] (inaudible) if you remember them.

MB: Sure.

WS: (inaudible) see, [Allison?] built the first turbine (inaudible) and the P-80, I mean, they reduced the personnel there from eight to four (inaudible) when they

went down to one, I got laid off. Either that or go back to Indianapolis and I said I'll stay here. (laughs)

MB: Yeah, rather than go back to Indianapolis -- I don't blame you.

WS: (inaudible)

MB: Were you married in -- when you were with the AVG?

WS: No, I was single.

MB: I figured as much.

WS: I didn't get married until just before my 30 -- around my 30th -- I think the (inaudible) my 29th or 30th birthday, I guess, and married a girlfriend of my sister's.

MB: Married a girlfriend of your sister's?

WS: Yeah. Well, I knew who she was (inaudible) last year, so -  
-

MB: This is Eleanor?

WS: Yeah.

MB: Yeah. Yeah, I had heard that. I think it was Robert Smith that told me that.

WS: I don't know, because the -- when I was living in North Hollywood and San Fernando Valley, Bob and I used to go to lunch occasionally.

MB: That's what he told me.

WS: Yeah, and -- have you ever met Bob?

MB: Oh, yeah. I met him at the reunion, at --

WS: (inaudible) you would, because we (inaudible) yeah.

MB: And, well, he and I have talked a couple of times. He -- I guess he has most of the AVG memorabilia, I guess, if you say that, from [Pistoli?].

WS: Has he got (inaudible) I thought Dick had it.

MB: Well, Dick tells me that Robert has it. And the reason --

WS: (inaudible)

MB: -- that he --

WS: I didn't know Bob has -- Bob Smith had that much. I (inaudible) we just left it alone, that's all. (inaudible) we used to meet over on (inaudible).

MB: How far is he from you now?

WS: I'd say about an hour.

MB: About an hour? Do you still drive?

WS: Yeah, I do locally. I don't go any -- too far away. I've got a 1980 car, it's a -- I'm still driving (inaudible) only got 160 on it, (laughs) 160,000.

MB: Well, that's -- you know, I got a car that's got that and more.

WS: This is my third one (inaudible) but I've -- that's just an old (inaudible) I got my driver's license a year ago and it's good till the year 2000, but I don't think I'm going to make it. (laughs)

MB: Well, you know, that's only two and a half years away, too.

WS: I know.

MB: You know, I tell you, somebody reminded me that it's just not that far away, the year 2000. I just can't hardly believe it.

WS: Two thousand, when you think of me, 85 -- (laughs)

MB: Yeah. Well, when -- let me give you a call ahead of time when I'm coming out there. I'll be out there, like I say, in October.

WS: Okay.

MB: And I'd like to give you a call and look you up. There's two or three --

WS: Okay.

MB: -- people out that way I want to look up. Robert Smith and Chuck [Older?] --

WS: All right.

MB: -- and I don't know who else is all out there, but there should be a bunch.

WS: Yeah. One time, we had -- we used to have -- before we started that reunion (inaudible) AVG reunion, we would (inaudible) what you call a mini-reunion (inaudible) we'd get, like, 12, 14 of us (inaudible) around there and have dinner and get drunk together. (laughter) Them days are gone.

MB: Well, there's still some drinking going on, though.

WS: (inaudible)

MB: Those days aren't gone.

WS: Yeah.

MB: I was down here -- I know that P.J., Tex, and Dick Rossi  
and --

WS: Well, I guess Tex is still drinking pretty good, but I  
quit. (laughs)

MB: Well, all those guys are drinking pretty good. Now, Dick  
doesn't drink.

WS: (inaudible) he never did.

MB: But I could tell you that old -- you know, the -- (laughs)  
I've had a lot of drinks with P.J.

WS: Oh, yeah, he -- he's seen some shit.

MB: And I travel a lot, and --

WS: (inaudible)

MB: What was that?

WS: Who do you work for?

MB: I work in the pharmaceutical industry.

WS: Oh, okay.

MB: I work for one of the drug companies, and I do a lot of  
traveling for them.

WS: Okay. Why don't you just give me a call when you're out  
this way, and I'll -- if I can help you any way, I'll see  
what I can dig up.

MB: Yeah, and I will bring --

WS: (inaudible) my junk here, and you're welcome to either copy it, take it with you, whatever you want. I don't know what to do with it.

MB: Well, I would definitely like to take a look at it and have a copy of it. I'm not looking to take anybody's anything. But I tell you what I am doing is -- this is going to be a very historical site for --

WS: (inaudible) on computer (inaudible).

MB: Oh, that's exactly right, and then it --

WS: (inaudible) I don't -- I couldn't type (inaudible) since I left high school (inaudible).

MB: Well, I will show you exactly what's going on on the computer --

WS: (inaudible) haven't the interest in -- I don't know.

MB: And the idea is anybody in the entire world with a computer and a telephone will be able to tap into our computer, the AVG computer, and pull out accurate information --

WS: Oh, right.

MB: -- about the Tigers.

WS: My son-in-law, who married my daughter -- in fact, their youngest son is 21 years old today. He's (inaudible) a hell of a big party up there. But he's computer (inaudible) you know?

MB: Well, the younger guys are.

WS: Yeah.

MB: I wish I were computer literate like them, (laughter) but I struggle through it.

WS: (inaudible) haven't put (inaudible).

MB: (laughs) All right.

WS: Okay.

MB: All right, I'll give you a call a little bit later.

WS: Okay, and you want anything -- is -- I can have you -- just give me a call.

MB: I'll drop you a little --

WS: I tell you, I (inaudible) from seven to about 8:30, somewhere in that area. And I'm here from nine o'clock to noon most days, between -- that's nine -- I'm talking about my time.

MB: Right.

WS: Between nine and 11:30 or 12. At 11:30, I go to lunch here.

MB: All right, well, I'm --

WS: Sometimes, it's like (inaudible) couple days -- be gone a couple days with my kids or something like that. I got a son up in Northern California now.

MB: Oh, do you?



WS: Yeah. He's coming down here next couple weeks. He wants me to go back with him. I'm not so sure I want to go.  
(laughs) Anyway (inaudible) if I can help you, I'd be happy to help you.

MB: Well, that'd be great. I really appreciate it. In the meanwhile, I'll drop you a little note with my business card.

WS: (inaudible)

MB: All right.

WS: Thanks again.

MB: Thank you.

WS: Yeah.

MB: Bye-bye.

END OF AUDIO FILE