

2001 Oral History Project  
Parents of the Baby Boomers, 1941-2001  
Interviewee: John Norman Timmer  
Interviewer: Geoffrey Reynolds  
July 13, 2001

GR: Norm, tell me what you were doing when we were attacked at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941.

JT: I was working for the Pennsylvania Central Airlines in Milwaukee. Sunday morning, of course; I heard it over our station radio. I tried to get in the Air Force or the Army before because at that time I was classified 4-f, which was, you don't go in the service then, you stay home. But I wasn't too happy in that job with the airlines, so I left the job two weeks after that and went back to my hometown, Grand Rapids. Whenever I tried to enlist again...well, the services were really trying to get people enlisted at that time. It became easier for me to go into service. I finally connected with an office, just by chance, in downtown Grand Rapids. They were looking for communications people, people who had had physics in college or knew something about radios. So I applied there. I was rejected about two years before that because I had an umbilical hernia. I was classified 4-F then. But I took an examination that time, in June of '42, for a communications cadet, and the doctor passed me, no problem. But I do have a heart problem and my heart was not normal. I was born with a heart defect; it's not a steady heart, but it's okay. But the doctor passed me there, and I went to Scott Air Force Force base as a communications cadet, which is very, very lucky. I went through a course in communications in three months, before the war the course was a year and a half. I went in on June of '42, became commissioned in October of '42 and was second lieutenant. I really didn't know much about the service at all. I didn't know really the difference

between an officer and an enlisted man. But I learned very quickly that an officer had a lot of privileges, which I hadn't known before. Well, anyway, I was assigned to a communications group in Maine. A number of us from my class at Scott Air Force Base went to northeast. When we got there in October, I met a colonel who was in charge of the group at that time. He assigned four or five of us to different places in the northeast. Some went to Labrador; some of us went to Newfoundland. I was assigned to a Navy base in Newfoundland called Argentia, which was a naval base at that time. These places in Argentia, Newfoundland, and Labrador were part of the...Roosevelt had this lend-lease program. We leased destroyers to the British, and in return the British built bases for us in Newfoundland. They were big, beautiful quarters—nice apartments, not barracks by any means. So I was just very fortunate again with the assignment. I was the officer in charge of a detachment of eighteen enlisted men. They're all communications-type; they could send a Morse code very fast. They were intelligent, older enlisted men who had been in the Army for already ten or fifteen years. I was just a new second lieutenant. Before I got there, the detachment was in charge of a master sergeant, his name was William O. D. Heap—he had no middle name, just initials. He was a master sergeant, a very fine communications type. He could type fifty words a minute. Receive code fifty words a minute. I was the detachment commander; I was still in charge. In those days we always had...during the wartime, of course, and we had to censor all the mail that the enlisted men sent home. I had to read the letters unsealed; they came to me open and I would read them. I was sort of lucky and wise when Sergeant Heap, this master sergeant, wrote a letter. I took it before his eyes, and I sealed it without looking at it, showing him that I trusted what he was going to write. And he appreciated it. Write to

his wife, in private. About a few months after I got there, he was reassigned and given direct commission to first lieutenant. I never saw him after that. So I stayed there until, I think, '43, and then I was assigned back to the states and given a little leave. In the meantime, the war was going on, but I thought well, gee, a heck of a place to be in the northeast. No action here, no fighting. And I couldn't leave that command, they wanted their people there. Then I was reassigned to Goose Bay Labrador, same command—communications. I spent a number of months there, then brought back to the states again and sent to Bangor, Dow Air Force Base in Maine, where I was the captain in charge. I had made first lieutenant in Goose Bay, and then I made captain in Bangor, Maine. That was a much bigger organization; we had a control tower and navigational aids and big communication center. It was a much bigger job but then I was a captain, had more experience. People had time between going on leave back to Michigan. I was stopping near Boston at Fort Devens to see my girlfriend, who became my wife. We wrote a lot, although we didn't see each other a lot. In early '44, I flew her to New York—just for the day, of course, not overnight, of course—and I asked her to be my wife. She accepted and we were married in June of '44 at Fort Devens, Massachusetts. We went back to Bangor, Maine, and we had a couple days honeymoon in Bar Harbor. Then from Bangor I was sent to Harmon Field, Newfoundland. That was a big communications place, four or five hundred people in my squadron. Receiver site, transmitter site, communications center, cryptographic office, navigational aids were a compass locator and trail marker...a lot of communications, navigational aids. I had four officers under me. I was there in '44, '45, and at that time I heard that my first cousin from Muskegon was killed in the Marines. I thought, boy, here I'm in the northeast and never saw any

action at all. I was just very, very fortunate, I guess. I was discharged from service in '46. I had a reserve commission which I got at Scott Air Force Base, and I kept the reserve commission and left the service in '46, and went back to Hope College to get my teaching certificate, even though I had graduated back in '38. I thought I'd try teaching. Got a job in Muskegon, teaching junior high, really not a great job; it was a difficult job. I'd taken the job after four or five young men ahead of me just stayed one semester at this junior high. It was a rough part of Muskegon, and the boys were about as big as I was, in junior high. But I lasted there a couple years, so I think it was a success. And then I went to Michigan State and got a graduate degree in education, and then I got a job in Muskegon, Hile School district. Just there six months and the war in Korea came up—not a war really, a police action—and I was recalled, active duty. When I left the service in '46, I was captain, but when you retire you automatically became major there. So I was a retired major on reserve duty \_\_\_\_\_, and I was recalled as a major. I was sent to Mitchel Field, New York, my first assignment, in '51, and was there a couple months, and then they sent me to Germany. I could take my family with, family came about four months later, and we spent about almost four years in Germany.

GR: What part of Germany was that, Norm?

JT: Bavaria, southern Germany. The air base was called Furstenfeldbruck. In the States there are air force bases, but overseas, just air base. A little German fighter base. They had one building that was one kilometer long that we worked in. Well, before I went to Furstenfeldbruck, I was assigned to Munich Reim, an air station just outside of Munich. Then I went to Furstenfeldbruck. At Furstenfeldbruck, my mother became sick and I was sent home on emergency leave for thirty days, and after thirty days, about the twenty-

ninth day she died. And so I went back to Furstenfeldbruck. My third son was born there in Germany. I should go back. Our daughter was born here in Holland. My second child, my son was born in Muskegon. So Paul, our third son was born in Germany. Then I was sent back to Washington D.C. I worked for the FAA for a while and then the Pentagon, and I was sent back to Scott Air Force Base for a while and from there I was sent to Paris, France. It was the European Command; EUCOM it was called. It was part of SHAPE—Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers of Europe. It was a great job; I was in charge of the communications equipment programs for all the NATO countries. At that time I was a lieutenant colonel. I made lieutenant colonel back in my Washington days. So we had four years in Paris. My wife was a French major, and she loved Paris. And I loved Paris too. Our children went to a dependent school. My daughter graduated from high school there. We had no TV in those days in France, so it was a pretty good learning experience for the children, to study and travel a lot. We camped a lot. Europe was a great place for camping. We camped in France and Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, Italy—at different times, when I had leave in Europe and Paris. After Paris, I was sent back to states, the Pentagon. I worked in the Pentagon about a year or so, and then I retired from the Pentagon. My reserve rank at that time was full colonel, even though I was serving active duty as a lieutenant colonel. So when I retired, I retired as a full colonel. It makes a difference in pension. So we lived in Washington awhile. I came home from the Pentagon late Friday afternoon, I think it was. It was raining, and I was tired. My wife was on the phone when I got home—a call from Hope College. They were asking about me and taking a job in the Alumni Office. So I talked to Dr. Wm. De Meester who was in charge of the office at the time. We talked and I said, “I’ll probably

come out next weekend, if that's okay." And he said that would be fine. So we came out and saw him, \_\_\_\_\_, so I got the job at the college. I was with the college for about six and a half years, and I retired from the college. I lived in a big house on College and 13<sup>th</sup> St, and got a chance to move in here. Next week I'll be 85.

GR: When you married Barbara during the war, did it occur to either one of you that you might get called up into combat duty?

JT: No, because I was so entrenched in the command on the northeast that they wouldn't let me go. I hate to say this, but only the guys that really fouled up are let go. So I never heard of a shot fired in anger.

GR: You talked a little bit about how you wished there was some ability for you to be in the action.

JT: Yeah, I felt that way when I first got in. You don't really realize how bad the action can be, but still...the war was such a big thing in those days. It was such a mass effort of the whole country. I had some acquaintances that were evasive and got jobs in industry, or they took other jobs, so that they wouldn't have to go.

GR: Had Barbara been working before you were married?

JT: She worked as a Red Cross person in Fort Devens, Massachusetts.

GR: Did she continue to do that after you were married?

JT: No, she taught. When I went to Muskegon she taught music; with my first job, she taught music. Then when I went to Germany, she taught kindergarten; and in France she taught in a French school.

GR: So she had a bachelors from a college?

JT: Yeah, she went to Hope.

GR: Did she continue working when the kids started being born?

JT: Not generally, maybe part-time in places.

GR: Was that a decision that you made as a couple because you needed the money, or was it more for her?

JT: Well, we always needed the money, but she wanted to teach French, it was her major. She wanted to teach music too. She liked it. The money was part of it, but not awfully important.

GR: Had both of your sets of parents gone to college?

JT: No, Barbara's father went to Rutgers, and her mother went to, I think, maybe a two-year school. She was a teacher, her mother. And my folks did not finish high school.

GR: What did your parents do, John?

JT: My father was a bricklayer and then became a general contractor, and worked for the Pet Milk Company building plants all over the country, so he traveled a great deal.

GR: And what did your mother do?

JT: She was a housewife. A very good mother.

GR: How many siblings did you have?

JT: I have a brother and a sister.

GR: And what birth order are you?

JT: I am the oldest, and then my sister, and then my brother.

GR: Now you had attended Hope College before the war...

JT: Yes, I graduated.

GR: Why did you choose Hope College?

JT: I went to junior college first in Grand Rapids, the first two years. And Hope was just a family decision. My mother knew President Wichers in Zeeland, so when I enrolled at Hope College as a junior, she came with me and we talked to Dr. Wichers who was the president of the college. She reminisced with him about their days in Zeeland. So it was the natural place to go.

GR: What was your degree from Hope College?

JT: Business Administration. Also, I was a member of a Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, of course, Hope College being Reformed.

GR: What was life like on the base for you as a single man versus as a married man?

JT: I recall mostly my time in Harmon Field, Newfoundland. It was a 7 day, 24 hour a day job. Every day I was working. I don't recall any...well, I did go fishing one time in Newfoundland on a Saturday afternoon. But it was a big job, it was a very important job for me. One time we had 500 people in my squadron, and I would give a commander's call on Saturday—twice, once at 8:00 and once at 12:00—because our people worked 24 hours a day. We had a control tower 24 hours a day. All our stations were working 24 hours a day.

GR: What was your base doing in the war effort? What was it supposed to be...?

JT: The B-17s would leave the North East, Manchester, New Hampshire, or Maine, and make the first flight to Goose Bay. From Goose Bay they would go to Scotland. We were just a way station for aircraft going overseas, but in Argentia it was just a weather station, just a very small place. In Harmon Field too, airplanes would go from our place overseas.

GR: They were brand new airplanes?

JT: Oh yeah.

GR: Were they being delivered by women or men or?

JT: The crews that would fly them overseas. Second lieutenants, pilot and co-pilot, and the crew was enlisted.

GR: So the crew that would fly the plane was on it at that point?

JT: Yeah, they'd start up the airplane and fly out of Goose Bay into combat really.

GR: So these planes weren't arriving from the factory directly?

JT: No.

GR: So Barbara worked part-time as the children were being born and different opportunities for you as a family happened. Obviously your family was a little bit different in the way it was designed because of your military occupations. Did you ever think that a civilian life would be better?

JT: That's a good question. I liked the military life, as an officer. And the compensation, pay, was medium as an officer, but you get along. Really, I taught for a short time in Muskegon, as I said. It was not a very pleasant experience, but it was alright. I was successful, really, because the previous teachers lasted just one semester each, and they were driven out of the school by the kids. And I lasted about 2 years.

GR: What was the school name?

JT: Glenside, a school just outside of Muskegon....

GR: Is it still there?

[End of side one]

JT: [Continuing] Because even though I had only been the principal for about six months, I was kind of pleased to go back into the military, and this time as a major on active duty. Much better job, and the pay as a major was better than I was getting as a superintendent.

GR: Did you have a yearning to go to Korea?

JT: No, except I thought maybe I would be sent there, because that was the reason that I was recalled. But at the time, the military policy in the country was to build up European Air stations because of the Cold War. We built a lot of new bases in France and Germany, and it was all because of the Cold War and the threat from Russia.

GR: Tell me about raising a family during the Cold War. What types of precautions and feelings did you have to deal with most likely every day?

JT: Well, in our stations in Europe, we were told to have certain supplies on hand, and given evacuation routes information for the families. If our wives could drive, they would drive the car and children, and we would stay back. It was just sort of second nature, kind of a common sense precaution, although we really didn't think it was going to be necessary. But, you know, the armed forces take nothing for granted, and are very conservative, so we had supplies on hand and evacuation routes planned for us, especially to Germany.

GR: Were you in America during the Cold War where civil defense was handled differently, from more of a personal standpoint in a family versus a military branch with bomb shelters and that type of...?

JT: We knew people that had bomb shelters, but as I recall, in the Pentagon and the other places I worked, they had places where you were supposed to go in case of emergency.

GR: These personal bomb shelters...from a family standpoint...how would you go about getting one? How would you install it? Where would you buy it?

JT: There were just a very few that I knew of. Dig a hole in the back yard, you have the concrete over it, and stock it with water and flashlights and canned food. There were very, very few of them, really. I guess I never knew of any of my friends having personal shelters.

GR: Was there a general feeling that if the bomb was dropped that most likely...?

JT: You just didn't think about it.

GR: Did you ever receive advice on raising your children from anyone other than your parents or siblings?

JT: I don't think so.

GR: Did you and Barbara have to ask periodically for advice?

JT: Well, we read a lot. We never practiced corporal punishment; our children were well behaved.

GR: Did that come from your military background?

JT: It could be. I know that in Paris, when my third son would answer the phone and say, "Colonel Timmer's quarters, may I help you?" He studied hard. In Paris, my two sons both played Little League baseball, and we used to watch them. My older son applied for the Air Force Academy and got in. He's very proud of that. My daughter, our first one, moved to Hope when we got back to the states in '55. She went to Hope directly from Europe. She wasn't sure where she wanted to go, except we said, "Let's go to Hope and try it for a year. If you like it, stay." So she came to Hope and made a name for herself. My son, a couple years later, went to the Air Force Academy. And then my third son went to Hope College and later went to the State Department. He was killed in a pedestrian accident about 5 years ago. The State Department really was improving him

too. When he joined the State Department he went to language school for a year and sent to China—first assignment. Then he came back and he went to language school again, studied Russian, and they sent him to St. Petersburg for a year. He came back and he went to Paris. So he had some great assignments for a young, State Department officer.

GR: Your children have all seemed to follow your footsteps a little bit, with not only college, but the military.

JT: Well, they love to travel. We had a great time traveling in Europe. Camping in Europe is just the way to do it, for family. We had a camper; it had the top that would raise—you could sleep up there—just a small...it was an English made car. Commer Camper, 55 horsepower, but big enough for five of us. In France, we would camp in the summertime, of course, in school areas. The boys could run around the track, and we used common latrines. But camping in Europe is just so...in those days, just great. I think we camped in every NATO country in Europe.

GR: Do you think that that traveling and camping that you did with the kids made them more independent, more worldly?

JT: I think so. My son now is the captain of the American Airlines, and he used to fly overseas to London and Paris, and he'd walk all over the big cities—really be the leader of his crew, telling about the sites and so forth. He knew London like we knew Holland. And he knew Paris...it was just a big city to him.

GR: What did your daughter end up doing?

JT: She married out of college, and then went to law school. She went with her husband for awhile, he was in the Army, a sergeant, and they finally got divorced. She went to law

school and got a job in Muskegon. And then went to Washington and got a job there. So she's in Washington now looking for a job.

GR: Being in the military Norm, you probably didn't have a work schedule that could be called typical. Were you ever away from the family more than forty hours a week?

JT: I went on temporary duty in Europe a whole lot because I traveled to all the NATO countries, in addition to Spain, Portugal was NATO, but Spain was not. I traveled all the...we call it MAAG headquarters, which is military assistance. I traveled maybe four or five days at a time, and so I was gone quite a bit.

GR: Did that bother you, as a father, being away that much?

JT: Well, I was always glad to get home, although I certainly enjoyed the traveling too. I traveled on foreign airlines, a lot of times on Air France. It was kind of heady stuff, you know, at that time, lieutenant colonel. There would be majors and captains and different military assistants and groups.

GR: When you returned, did Barbara ever need to take a day and go out and do some things on her own after that period?

JT: The children were in school at that time, so she played bridge with French ladies. She loved to go into Paris.

GR: So she adapted to military wife position very well?

JT: She was perfect for a military wife.

GR: There are obviously situations where that didn't work out, maybe like your daughter for instance. Are there women that are made to be military spouses and some that aren't?

JT: That's right, because we knew people in Paris at that time, they wanted an apartment that faced the west so the wife could see where the United States was. She just hated it, you know. But our family really enjoyed overseas.

GR: As a couple, what did you and Barbara do when you had time away from the children? Did you go out to dinner, or visit movies?

JT: Well, in Paris, we had a group that went to a new restaurant every week. Somebody would be in charge of finding a restaurant. And we had French friends, just outside of Paris. He was a great guy, he fought with the...he was with the free French and was taken prisoner a couple times; he was under Mark Clark's staff in Italy for a while. He became our friend in Paris and he lived in sort of a big country estate outside of Paris. His wife was quite wealthy. They lived in a chateau, so we used to visit there.

GR: Did you find yourself associating with military or just regular people in the neighborhood for the most part?

JT: Well, in Germany and France, mostly with military. We played bridge a lot as a couple, like we play bridge now, two or three times a week. It was a good life for us in the military.

GR: Did you have hobbies through any of this time in your life that you did as an individual?

JT: I used to kind of fix things; I was handy around the house. In the military, I don't think so. In the military it's a 24-hour a day thing. The hours are not eight to five. You'd stay after work sometimes or somebody would check in with a project five o'clock in the afternoon. In the Pentagon, they always came up at five o'clock in the afternoon, and that's when you're ready to go home. But hobbies? I don't think so.

GR: Do you have hobbies now as a retiree?

JT: Not really, I play bridge a couple times a week. I read a lot, the New York Times every morning.

GR: As a retired veteran, you probably appreciate the national holidays that have military meaning. How do you view the way the rest of America is dealing with national military holidays?

JT: The holidays, like Memorial Day, I march in the parade here, and they give this ribbon. But that's kind of a funny thing. They look and pray and have the people, \_\_\_\_\_, watching it. They're applauding, and it makes you feel kind of funny, you know. I think Holland is quite unique that way. So many of my friends marched with me. I can only walk maybe a couple of blocks, but I look forward to that parade. I've marched in it the last six or seven years. [Showing Geoffrey something] That shows my progression in military life and my decorations. Top three of the important ones. The top list is my commendation. Here I got in Europe, in European command, supervising the communications in the NATO countries. The next two are Air Force commendations. The rest of them are just for being there, but the top three are very important.

GR: Were you somewhat pleased that two of your children went into military service in one way or another—the Air Force and the State Department? Did that secretly please you when that happened?

JT: Yeah, it did, especially the State Department...well, and the Air Force Academy too, that's hard to get in.

GR: Now that was when the academy was relatively young, right?

JT: Yeah, well, he's been out eleven years, twelve years. It's tough duty; the first couple years were tough.

GR: Once the children were all gone, did you and Barbara start spending more time together as a couple?

JT: We traveled a great deal; we traveled to Europe a lot. We are very close as a couple; we've been married fifty-seven years.

GR: What do you attribute that too, Norm? That strength as a couple?

JT: That's a good question. You have to like each other and have common interests.

GR: As parents, you must have had some great communication through those three children's lives?

JT: Yeah, our children were very close to us.

GR: What do you attribute that to, Norm?

JT: In Europe, we camped together as a family. They were very formative years for them. You do a campsite and the two boys would put up a tent. My daughter would help my wife set the table, together. As a family, we're very close. Still today, our daughter calls about every day.

GR: Where does she live now?

JT: In Washington D.C. And our son flies a lot, and he calls us from different places. So, we're staying in touch. Our younger son, being killed—never get over that.

GR: Have grandchildren been born?

JT: Yeah, my older son has two daughters, and his wife died last October of cancer. My younger son's wife lives alone in Sacramento, California, and they have two children—fifteen and seventeen—bright kids. Her folks live out there, so... He was killed in the Washington area, and then she moved to California.

GR: Do you find yourself being asked questions from them about how to raise children?

JT: Not really, no.

GR: Have your parenting attitudes that you had with your children changed since grandchildren have become part of your life? Do they ask you questions periodically?

JT: Not really, no.

GR: Do you find yourself offering advice to your children?

JT: Well, we're separated now, so... Some people around here have their grandchildren down the street. So, we see our grandchildren a couple times a year. But they're brought up well.

GR: Did your kids periodically ask you, as their children grew, questions about parenting?

JT: I don't think so. My son, in Paris, had some desire for getting a motorbike. So he asked...he was I think fourteen or fifteen, and I said, "No motorbike, not in Paris." He was very persistent, and I kept saying no. Finally that was the end of it. Tragically, a couple of his friends got hurt on motorbikes. He said, "Thanks, Dad, for saying no."

GR: As a retiree and a military man, what sort of community involvement do seek and enjoy now?

JT: Well, you say military man, I don't consider myself a military man. I didn't know anything about the military when I went in. I did my job, it was not a military job, really. It was a 24-hour a day job, keeping navigational aids, and control tower and all that communications on the air base. Not like practicing with the rifle or machine gun or anything like that. It was a job.

GR: So have you joined local veteran's organizations?

JT: No, I have not. As I said, I don't really consider myself a military man.

GR: Even though you rose to quite a high rank in the military?

JT: That was because of my specialty, really. A lot of my friends in the military were pilots and had no specialty, and when they couldn't fly anymore, they couldn't do anything, and they left. I always had a good job. Well, I say good job—it was very interesting and technical. Communications in those days were just terrible. We could get radio signals very poorly. Communications were terrible, but we had to live with it.

GR: As your time in the military grew, and Korea past and Vietnam sprung up, how did you view that war?

JT: I was completely opposed to Vietnam. So was my daughter. When I drove for the Pentagon, I dropped her off to go to a protest thing. I'd be in uniform, drop her off, and go to the Pentagon. I got out in '68, partially because of the Vietnam War.

GR: Was your daughter the only vocal opponent in the family?

JT: At her age, yeah, the boys were too young. Well, I'm not sure, my youngest son might not have registered for the draft. He was very independent. He was the editor of the Anchor at the college here, very controversial.

GR: What was his name again, Norm?

JT: Paul. He and President Van Wylen, at the time, were at loggerheads, when I was part of the administration. But that's fine. We had one common thing. We have a cottage up in a place called Bitely. Ever hear of it?

GR: No.

JT: It's a small village south of the Pere Marquette, just off M-37. Small lake. I've been going there since I can remember. My father bought it in the 20s. I spent...and my sister and brother...spent our summers there—after school until school started. So now our family goes there; our children go there too. My daughter likes to canoe down the Pere

Marquette. She is planning a trip in August. So that's someplace that my family went when we could, every summer—except when we were overseas, of course. I take my monthly dive off the dock, every year. Celebrating my eighty-fifth birthday the other day.

GR: Just the summer months right?

JT: Yeah. Our family each has a month; my sister has it a month, and my brother has it a month. This year our month was June. It was cold \_\_\_\_\_. But that's one thing that kind of tied our children together. That's one place they know. They didn't have a home, like in Holland here.

GR: Did your dad do that so when he was out on the road...?

JT: No, my Dad loved to fish. That's when we lived in Grand Rapids. There are some places up in that area that very few people knew about.

GR: That's a fly fishing river, right?

JT: Yeah, well, Pere Marquette, and South Branch, and branches of the Pere Marquette are all vibrant. And east of Bitely. He also found a place with a small creek in the woods. An old Indian place. Very quiet, with large brook trout. Nice to get our limit. He was a great fisherman. He'd come up weekends and work in Grand Rapids.

GR: Did some of that activity with your own parents on the Pere Marquette lead you into a pretty vigorous camping life in Europe?

JT: Yeah, I think so.

[End of interview]