

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN R. THOMSON
Pilot, Air Force, World War II.

1999

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Thomson, John R., (1918-2004). Oral History Interview, 1999.

User Copy: 2 sound cassette (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Video Recording: 1 videorecording (ca. 80 min.); ½ inch, color.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

John R. Thomson, a Pontiac, Michigan native, discusses his experience in the Army Air Corps as a B-24 pilot in the European Theater of World War II. Thomson talks about working at Pontiac Motors after high school, the production of military hardware at his plant after the war started, and giving up his deferment to enlist in the Army Air Corps. He touches on basic training at Miami Beach, taking college-level crash courses at Kent State (Ohio), preflight training in San Antonio, and pilot training in Cuero and Waco (Texas). Thomson comments on the airplanes he trained on, overcoming air sickness, once almost falling out of his plane, and passing flight tests. Assigned to a B-24 crew, he shares his impressions of B-24 bombers and states he was most nervous during take-off. Thomson describes running “ditch procedure” drills to practice evacuating the plane and teaching himself techniques that later saved the plane. In January of 1945, he talks about flying to his assigned airfield in Italy via the Azores, handling the airplane when all four engines quit, and developing a reputation for diagnosing mechanical problems. Thomson addresses other difficult situations he surpassed as a pilot. He tells of bombing missions in Germany, being attacked by a Messerschmitt Me 262 jet, using chaff to deflect anti-aircraft fire, and flying in close formation. Thomson portrays food on the airbase, living conditions, giving liquor to the officer’s club, and overcoming his fear of flying missions. After the war ended, he talks about staying in Europe for two months to transport supplies before flying back to the States. He talks about his career at Rheem Manufacturing in Pasadena (California), buying a house with a GI Bill loan, and eventually moving to Madison (Wisconsin) to work at Bock Corporation. Thomson details a mission over Brenner Pass (Italy and Austria) when his copilot lost control of himself.

Biographical Sketch:

Thomson (1918-2004) served in the Air Force from 1943 to 1946 and flew twenty-five combat missions with the 744th Bombardment Squadron of the 456th Bomb Group. He worked at Rheem Manufacturing Company until 1960, when he left as manager of research and development for a position with Bock Corporation in Madison (Wisconsin). After twenty-one years as chief engineer and, later, as vice-president, Thomson retired in 1982 and became an alternate director for SCORE, a nonprofit association of business counselors.

Interviewed by James McIntosh, 1999
Transcribed by Liliana Gundy, 2011
Edited by Joan Bruggink, 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

Interview Transcript:

James: All right, talking to John Thomson; the date is 15 October 1989 [1999]. To begin, when was this—when did you get into the tool and dye business?

John: I started about 1937 as a mail boy at Pontiac Motors and then—

James: Where were you born?

John: Pontiac, Michigan. In 1918.

James: What background did you have to get this job?

John: High school. But of course you have to remember in high school, at that time, they taught you more in high school than they do in two years of college, five years of college, you see. But I did have a real good background and I was in the top of my class, I think, but I took a—jobs were very scarce at that time—

James: Yes, you mentioned that.

John: —so I even had a job before that, in the department store as a—what did they call them? You replace all of the materials that they sell and this kind of stuff.

James: Stock boy?

John: Stock boy, yeah. But then I got this job at Pontiac Motor as a mail boy, so being a mail boy I got to go to all the areas, including the plant. So the guy that ran the tool design department, he spotted me one day and he asked me if I wanted to become a tool design clerk. Well, I didn't even know what that was but I said, "Sure," so I got—see, I think I got then seventy-five cents an hour at that job. Well, that job led me into handling blueprints and that type of thing and I made it a point that when I took a blueprint that I was going to pass off to the rest of the parts of the plant that needed those blueprints, that I would study it, I'd look at it. And many times I would take the print and go out in the plant, find the machine that it was going to go on and look it over and see if it would fit. [laughs] And I found some mistakes, see. Well, I did that often enough that the tool design manager finally said, "Would you like to go on the board and do some copy work for awhile?" I said, "Sure." Well from there it went to I was handling the outside guys; you know they'd, when they were changing the models of the cars, well you had to have all these changes made. Sometimes that was too much for our own tool design department so we'd pass it out to engineering firms. He put me in charge of placing it

and checking it when it came back in. So anyway, I was goin' great guns there. The war started then and I was beginning to work on, uh—

James: Using draftsmen tools?

John: Yeah.

James: Is that something you used then?

John: Yeah.

James: In the factory?

John: Yeah, yes. I had another one, this was one of two that I had, but that was the kind of stuff we used then and we were beginning to work on the Bofors—

James: Forty millimeter?

John: Eighty, uh—

James: Eighty millimeter anti-aircraft?

John: Yeah. We were beginning to work on that at Pontiac Motor and I was starting to get the drawings together, changing 'em over from metric to our feet and inches, and it was a big job but I finally got that done; I did that on my spare time. But then came tanks, the big war tanks, they started to work on that, too. But all of my friends had gone to the war.

James: When it came time for you to become an officer or, I mean, a soldier, what happened? You were deferred by the company?

John: Yes, I had a deferment for the whole war, if I wanted it, and Pontiac Motor—but I went down anyway to Detroit, you know where that is, and went there and took the tests.

James: For what?

John: For Aviation Cadet. And I passed 'em all and, uh, had in the 160s on their intelligence test, but in order for the Army Air Force to get me, they had to go through my draft board, see. Okay. Now Pontiac Motor had never lost a person before. [laughs] When it came through the draft board, the head of the draft board was my minister. He was the Reverend H.G. Burt of Pontiac Episcopal, and he was the head. So one day I get a call at work, it was in December sometime, and he said, he asked me if I wanted, what did I want to do?

James: You had a choice?

John: Yeah. Did I want to stay or did I want to go to the war? And I said, "I want to go to the war." So that was that; Pontiac Motor couldn't stop it, you see.

James: Tell me, when was that?

John: Well, let's see now. I went to Detroit sometime in December of 1942.

James: 1942?

John: Yeah, and I was called into active duty in February of 1943.

James: You entered in '43?

John: Mm-hmm. February of 1943.

James: As an Air Cadet?

John: Aviation Cadet, that's right. And then to go through that quickly, I took the train out of Detroit, straight to Miami Beach, and in Miami Beach we stayed in a hotel there and we learned our marching and standing at attention and all that stuff, and where you learned that you were no longer your own boss. [laughs]

James: That everything would be decided for you?

John: That was the first big, big thing you run into, is you're not your boss anymore. And then the guy comes through your room, see, with his white gloves on, wipes your Venetian blinds with that.

James: [unintelligible]

John: Yeah, you know all that stuff.

James: Yes, I do.

John: From there we went to a college in Ohio—well it doesn't come to me, but it was a college in Ohio.

James: For preflight?

John: Ah, no, this was the crash course in college, you see. We were all guys from, some had college degrees, some had a few college, some had high

school and we had this crash course on mathematics, English, writing, a lot of things of that nature that relate to becoming a pilot.

James: So you had no college experience prior to this?

John: None, hardly. I'd been to college to look 'em over, but I could never afford it.

James: You didn't matriculate, right?

John: No, my family was destitute and my father was out of work and—

James: Bad times.

John: —so I had to get something, so that's when I went to the stock boy and went into that. But that was the reason that I couldn't go to college at that time. But, um—

James: Now you got a heavy dose, huh?

John: Yes, then I got a—I did well there. In fact, the professor wanted permission to put up my description of some activity and I described putting an automobile together. He was so impressed he put it up on the bulletin board for his students, said, "This is what a cadet can do." [laughs] Well anyway, that was, that got me to Ohio, then we went directly from there to San Antonio. In San Antonio is a school—you probably know about that—it was a school where we learned about airplanes. We learned the Morse code, uh, they tested us, it seemed like every other day, on various items. To describe one: you have a little channel here, it goes up like this and around and up like this, and then you take a stylus and you go in that channel and try not to touch the sides. To test your nerves, I guess. [laughs] That kind of stuff we went through, okay? But that was no big deal. But then it came, that was where we went before a board made up of majors and colonels.

James: You still hadn't seen an airplane yet?

John: Yes. I had, when we went to Kent State, that's where I went, we flew those little Piper Cubs.

James: Okay.

John: We didn't fly 'em, but we went up with the trainer, the instructor. We never soloed through, at that time. But then they asked me what I wanted to be and I had no idea in the world, see. So it was a choice of a pilot, navigator or bombardier. I just left it up to them. I said, "You can send me

where you want; I'll go." And so they said, "You're going to be a pilot." And they said, "You're qualified for everything, but we're going to make you a pilot." So that's when I started and, ah, see from there I went to Cuero, Texas, where I got the primary deal and soloed in about, oh, a few days; it didn't take long.

James: What were you flying there?

John: Single engine, canvas-covered airplane called a PT—

James: 13?

John: —13, yeah. Low, a low-winged job. And that was a nice airplane to fly, that kind of thing.

James: Did you enjoy flying?

John: I was a little tentative yet about flying, mainly because I became sick early in the training of flying that PT. I kind of wondered if I was gonna be able to stand it. I'd get green around gills, you know. The guy that was training me saw that and he said, "Just stick with it." He said, "You'll come through, you'll be alright." And he was right. About another week and it was all gone, all that was gone. And I had, I guess it was a combination of nerves and fear. Anyway, I got through that fine and then we went up to, um, Waco, Texas, and flew the metal job, single engine, metal job, that was a BT—no, yeah, BT. BT-17, I believe, whatever.

James: [unintelligible]

John: Yeah, it had a lot of torque on it. You had to hold in the rudder when you took these off. And so I got trained in that, and that was okay, too. No big deal.

James: Two seat, open cockpit, right?

John: No, just had a hood on it, fortunately. It had the hood on it, because when I went to out to fly, to practice, to practice acrobatics in that airplane, I decided to turn it over. I turned it over and I ended up on the top of the airplane. Fortunately the canopy was closed. [laughs] Now how do I get it back around, you see. That was the next problem. What do you do? Well, my feet, I could put them down there, so I put my feet, well I'd say up there, and I got the stick and I pushed it to one side and that turned me back over, so.

James: What happened to your seat? Your belt wasn't tight?

- John: I just didn't put it on. That was one of the big, big things I learned, boy.
- James: If it had been an open cockpit, you'd have just kept right on going.
- John: I learned that there wasn't, you never did enough checking.
- James: That was just carelessness?
- John: Carelessness, sure, sure.
- James: Wow.
- John: At that age—let's see I was what? Twenty-four, something like that—at that age, you know it all. I was getting to the point where I knew it all. I was promptly brought up with a crash, see. [laughs] But as I say, I got though with that, but when we went on a test flight, you know you get a test every once in awhile, and this was the final test after going through all of the training in basic, and so I went up with this trainer, this guy that was doing the testing. So we take off and you have to hold the rudder to keep it from torquing off to the side, and so I was pushing and pushing and trying to get that damn thing to move and it wouldn't move. So I finally kicked it the other way, and I guess the instructor took his feet off the pedals about that time, and we went off like that, you see. [laughs] "Boy," I said, "well, I'm done now." I thought "boy, they wouldn't put up with a guy like me" after that. But I went through it and I did a beautiful job, if I say it myself. On everything that we had to do on that test, including a spin, and I moved it out without even a jerk, I just moved it, just like that. That's hard to do, but I did it, see. Then to top it all off, I came in and I made an exact three-point landing. You didn't even know that we even touched the ground. We came out and we got out of the airplane, he turned to me and he said, "What happened on that takeoff?" And he saw that the tears in my eyes, you know, and I said, "Well," I said, "I couldn't move, I couldn't move the pedals, so I kicked them the other way." And his faced dropped like that and he says, "Oh." So he had made the mistake of holding them and not letting me fly the airplane, you see. Well, I guess they do that on occasion because they have been stung a couple of times by these nuts that they were trying to train. Anyway, I got top billing in that, that area too, and then they decide whether you're going two engine or four engine planes, and I guess mine showed that the way I flew and everything I'd be able to handle the big jobs. And also I guess they test you on your ability to, uh, keep your head under dire conditions, like they were always pulling the damn throttle off.
- James: To see how you would react to that?

- John: [laughs] Yes. I bet you there was ten times in that training that they'd pull it off at the worst times and you were supposed to, you would do a simulated landing, you would find a field or something and you'd go down to about ten feet and then go back up again, you know. They'd do that all the time. But out of all those tests they would get you to the point where they could decide, with the stuff that you had been doing, whether you wouldn't at those big, big things that take forever to turn, or the little things that'll jerk you all around like that. But I went on B-24s, up to, um, Fort Worth.
- James: That's where you were first introduced to the B-24?
- John: Yes, that was the first.
- James: So now this is what, a year after you entered service? Or was it less time than that?
- John: Those dates get me at times. I was in the class of '44 E.
- James: So it was about a year then?
- John: About a year, yeah. And, um, from there—
- James: How did you enjoy the 24 now?
- John: I got to like everything. I found out I could handle that B-24 and I was good at it; I could feel the airplane, even as big as it was. And later on when we got overseas, they used to send other pilots up with me to show 'em how to handle an airplane. [laughs]
- James: A couple of B-24 pilots that I've interviewed, all of them said the thing was a bear to deal with on the ground, but once you got it in the air it was really good, but on the ground it was hard to deal with. I don't know exactly what they meant by that.
- John: Um, [long pause] I didn't find it that way. The landing and all that, that was ordinarily a very easy thing for me to do. Takeoff I always had this fear—it's good to have fear—I had this fear that something would happen to the engines when you just get off the ground, see. That's the worst time.
- James: That's when you're really at risk.
- John: That's the worst time. Coming in, that's not bad, you've still got room to maneuver, but taking off you have none.
- James: You're kind of at the mercy of—

John: Of what the airplane does, sure. There's nothing you can do with it. But that reminds me of a—we went, you know you go through a checklist, okay. And my copilot and I, well we'd been doing it for quite some time—whoa, I'd better go back and put this together here. From Fort Worth, we went to, through a series of going home and coming back and that kind of stuff. We went to Charleston, South Carolina, which they called the RTU.

James: Replacement Training Units?

John: Yeah. And we spent I don't know how long there, but, um, that's where we put guns on the airplane and then we taught—that's where you got your crew together.

James: I was going to say, "That's where we got—

John: Yeah, you got a crew together. And I came back with the same crew as I went over with, so that was good, too.

James: That was good.

John: But we learned a lot of stuff and there again I practiced the team, the crew, on ditching. Theoretically the airplane would stay up about not quite a minute until it hits the water and it's going to sink, so I kept them going and going and going until we got out in thirty seconds, see. [laughs]

James: How did you practice?

John: There was an airplane hulk there, you know, with no wings on it and all that, but it had all the insides just like it is in the airplane, and so you put everybody in place, because you're gonna say, "ditch procedure," or whatever, you see. And then you, uh, you just yell, "now," or something like that; then they've got to get out of the airplane and they've got to do the things that they have to do before they get out of the airplane. Like there's that little thing that pops out of the side, that kind of stuff. And you—for instance, the pilot like me, I would have to—I carried my shoes—tie your shoes together by the shoelaces and then you hung your regular, those shoes that you, you've got my shoes, and then you tie those, you hang them over your neck here. There's a hook here that you hook 'em on while you're flying, see, and when you go out you take that and put that around your neck and then you go out. There are some other little things I had to do, but that was one of the main ones because you'd lose your shoes when the parachute opened. Opens with a crack like that and your shoes go flyin' off. So you had these shoes that would stay with you, in case you had to walk after you got down. That part of the stuff you could do a lot of things that you would yourself think about, and we used

to play “what ifs.” “What if this happened? What if that happened?” My copilot and I used to do that quite often, and then when we went up to practice we’d do these “what ifs.”

James: One engine out, two engines out, three engines out, that kind of thing?

John: All of that, uh, and some of the tests before you got your wings they would take you up and do that and shut off two engines and have you bring it in, that kind of stuff. But there were some other things that bothered me that they never tested us on, never told us about. One of ‘em was how far can you tip the airplane to turn?

James: Without flipping?

John: Without flipping, that’s right. And how does that fit in with the air speed? Well, they do fit together.

James: You increase that air speed then.

John: You sure do and—

James: Fall off.

John: —and then go. I practiced all that, how far I could do that, and it came in handy once when we were over in Italy and we went up to, went to see where the, where that abbey was where—

James: Monte Cassino?

John: Yeah. And it’s got a little kind of a bay there, but it’s hills, pretty high hills around it. So we’re down here and we’re going up this bay, rubbernecking and everything, and all of a sudden I figured out I had to get out of here. [laughs]

James: That must have been something. What a view.

John: Yes. So we headed straight like that and put the throttles right up against the wall there, and it wasn’t gonna make it.

James: Oh, my.

John: It wasn’t gonna make it there, there was no doubt about that. So I thought, “Well, I got to turn it around.” So I went off as far as I could to one side and then just gave her the gun and put her up and just turned her, pulled her right around, you see. And I made it. It was alright. Well, if I hadn’t practiced that I don’t know what would have happened. And then there

was another one that they didn't teach me, was when, um, the, when the wing goes down you get caught in the previous airplane's draft and you get caught and this damn thing won't come up, no matter what you're doing, it won't come up. I found out if I just run up the engines like that, on that side that's down, it just pops right up. [laughs] So we came in one day and we were in one bad one; boy, I just couldn't get it up and I had a kid in the copilot seat that was just finishing up his twenty-fifth mission and he knew he was gone, you could almost see him—he was like this, but I had practiced this so I just ran up the two engines on that side. “Bang,” we came on the ground and level.

James: Just at the last second?

John: Yup, it worked beautifully, see. And this guy cried.

James: He'd already given up?

John: Yeah, he'd given up; he thought that we were gone. Anyway, it was all those little “what ifs”, see—

James: It paid off, though.

John: Paid off, it pays off. We were flying—**[End of Tape One, Side One]**—after that we went up to a number of little places, but we ended up in Bangor, Maine to get supplies and all the equipment we needed in that, that uh, parka that I gave you, things like that, that we would take overseas and—

James: Had you formed a squadron by this time?

John: No.

James: Still doing this on an individual basis?

John: You don't get any of that until you land somewhere overseas at an airbase. But we flew; we got a new airplane assigned to us in, um—

James: [unintelligible]

John: Yeah, a brand new one and went out to Bangor, Maine and I think somewhere in there we flew in support of the West Point graduation, [laughs] all of the airplanes going over, but this new airplane we flew out of Bangor and we went to Bermuda. And then we—fog came in and we had to stay there a couple of days and then the third day we finally took off.

- James: As an individual flight? You're not in a group then?
- John: No. We didn't even see another airplane. There were a lot of them going, but we didn't go over in groups.
- James: This was in June or July of '44?
- John: No, this is later than that, it's uh, this would be January of 1945. And from Bermuda we were gonna go to the Azores, okay? And so we, we were in the fog quite a way. We could take off but we still had plenty of fog, and we finally broke out about, it would be about halfway to the Azores, and so I started to, took a nap, put my feet up on the board, instrument panel. My copilot took over and he was changing fuel, you know, while, while he was flying, he was changing the fuel—
- James: To keep the plane balanced?
- John: Yeah. To run it into the various tanks, and all of a sudden all four engines went off, completely off, and of course I came awake, "bingo", and I turned to George and I said, "What are you doing, George?" He says, "I'm just changing the gas." Whatever the term was at that time and I said, "Well,—"
- James: I think it's switch.
- John: I remembered one of my classroom teachings and I said, "Turn it to 'all'." A-I-I. Turn it to all and the engines came back on. So we just left it at all, we didn't bother with changing the fuel anymore. It ended up when we finally, we got that airplane to another airfield and then a truck took us over to the airfield that I finally ended up in.
- James: This is at, on the Azores?
- John: After the Azores we went to Marrakech, then to Tunis and then up to Italy and landed at a particular airfield and then they trucked us over to the airfield that I was going to be at and would be assigned to. Well, this particular airplane ended up in our squadron anyway, our group, and I, uh, heard about this airplane that nobody could get to the targets, they all had to turn around and come back. [laughs]
- James: A myriad of small problems?
- John: Yeah, the engines go off and they didn't know what the hell was happening. So they'd get scared and turn around and come back. Well, they assigned that to me, that airplane, to me. Well, I was getting a reputation for being able to figure these, figure these things out, yeah. And

George and I looked at each other when we got in it and he said, “We know this airplane.” [laughs] Somebody had put their initials on the inside of the airplane and we recognized that, same airplane that we’d flown over in. So we flew the airplane just on “all” the whole mission; it was about a, oh, six hour mission and we just went with “all”. And when I came back we landed the airplane and I just said to the mechanic who takes care of the airplane, I said, “If you’d check out the fuel lines you’ll find out that they’re all going to the wrong places.” And sure enough, that was it, you see.

James: The problem?

John: That was it, yeah. And of course my reputation went up again. Just takes it out, flies it, comes back and he tells me what’s wrong with it, see. [laughs]

James: He didn’t know about your other experience?

John: No, he didn’t. I didn’t tell him either.

James: No, of course not.

John: But, um, because I should have told him before, but you know, things had happened so fast and I didn’t get a chance to talk to anybody about that airplane. But it had to be sabotage, you see. That’s the only way you could—

James: Oh, really?

John: Oh, yeah.

James: Back at the factory?

John: Yes. Had to be; there’s no other way you could get that so fouled up.

James: You mean it’s too illogical to be an accident?

John: Yes.

James: I’ll be darned. So you said it worked back in Detroit?

John: I don’t know. Things happened that probably triggered something, but I don’t know anything about it. We, um, that’s how I got overseas was in that general—and when we headed for Bermuda from Bangor, the navigator gave an ETA and we got to that ETA and nothing in sight. [laughs] But we cheated then and turned on the radio from Bermuda and it was still pointing ahead. Exactly one hour after that ETA was when we got

to Bermuda. And I never got on his back about that because he felt bad enough as it was. But then when we went from Bermuda to the Azores we had only taken a few shots because of the fog to check his, his, where he was, and when we finally were getting close to it I said, "How long do we have to go?" He says, "Oh, maybe half an hour." And he says, "Which side of the island do you want to land on?" [laughs] And he gave me a heading. I said, "I want to go on the left-hand side," because you landed in that direction. Right on the nose.

James: Very good.

John: And he didn't cheat this time.

James: Good navigator.

John: Yeah he was, he was a good—he turned out to be the best, really a good guy. There's a lot of, um—I think, once in a while, though, about how many times I came so close to being killed with the, with the crew. Of course I told you about turning the airplane upside-down and that kind of thing. But, um, the checklist is an important thing, really important, and the problem with checklists is that you get, you do it so often that you just voice the check, but you don't really check it, you see. So we, in this one case, we had a, we had a full bomb load and we're going, we'd gone through the checklist, and I was waiting for the airplane to take off, which you do, you don't pull it off or anything, you just get it in an attitude and measure heat increases and it just lifts off by itself. It wasn't lifting.

James: The runway was shorter then.

John: Oh, big pile of rocks at the end, that was the dumbest thing I ever knew, but they had piled, when they made the airplane, the air—

James: This was in Italy?

John: Yeah. All the rocks that they picked up were put at the end of the runway. Well, we lived with that and, uh—but we were coming and it wasn't lifting and I finally had to just—we were up to maybe a hundred and thirty miles an hour on the ground and it wasn't coming up and—so I finally just pulled back the wheel and it popped up. Now the question was, was it going to stay there? [laughs]

James: You couldn't get any more power into it?

John: No, I had it right up to the wall. That was another thing they told us: "Never put it to the end of the wall."

- James: You had to.
- John: I had nothing else to do by that time. I had everything forward and it wasn't making it, so I just jerked it up and popped it up in the air. We cleared the rocks okay and then, um, when we got, finally—well I don't know, have you flown airplanes?
- James: I've not. I've flown in them.
- John: In 'em, okay. But anyway, you come up to this, popped it up and then we're sitting there, now it feels as if you did like that [demonstrates motion to interviewer] the thing would fall, see. [laughs] So you just sit there and just wait for the speed to catch up and it finally did and we took off okay. Then I called for—you take off with forty degree flaps, and so we had gone through the checklist and all that. "Flaps," George says, "forty degrees." But forty degrees had never been put in it, see.
- James: Passed over it thinking without flipping?
- John: Yeah. There we go again. You keep learning, but fortunately—
- James: Whose job is that?
- John: Copilot.
- James: Was that George's?
- John: Copilot, yeah. I read it; he does the checking. In some cases I have to check, too, I read and check at the same time, but basically that was his deal. So we, um, when I called for twenty degree flaps this is what you do: you go off with forty, then you cut it to twenty and then, uh, when you get so far, your speed gets all settled, you take all the flaps out, you see. Well, that was the problem and that would be, you could crash the airplane pretty easily right there. And there was—I didn't say anything to my copilot, I never have. Never did speak to him.
- James: You never discussed that?
- John: He was bad enough now, I saw that he was just crushed that that had happened, you see. So we never talked about that. But then, uh, airplanes fly in bad weather during wartime and you fly airplanes that if it weren't for the war you wouldn't fly 'em, they're so dilapidated, nothing works other than just the engines. But you fly those, even though you know they're bad, until the war ends and then you won't fly half of 'em. But at this, um, [long pause] well, I've forgotten that one now. I had it and I've forgotten. Oh, yeah. We fly in sevens: lead ship, two on the wing, number

four here, two on the wing and then the tail-end guy, seven airplanes. And what you're taught is that when you get into a situation where you can't see the other airplanes, which happens, the lead airplane goes straight ahead and, uh, increases speed if he can. The two wingmen go out at thirty degrees, the number four guy here is right behind the lead airship, he cuts his power just a little bit and goes down. And the ones on his wing go out here at ninety degrees, see.

James: Ninety?

John: Yeah, they get out. And then the tail-end Charlie guy, he's supposed to just, uh, pull back and, uh, just stay there, just pull back. Well, here we run into this one day and so I was flying number four and there's the lead ship, and I did what I was supposed to do, I drew back a little and went down. And when, um, when we broke out into the open, then you count ten, one-two-three, and if you see nothing in that time you just get the hell out of there in all directions as far as you can get. I counted—after we were situated, we ran into this area where we couldn't see each other and I just dropped back and went down a little and then we broke out of that cloud again and here I was sitting right on top of the lead airplane. Right there, there it was. I could almost step out of the airplane and step on their wings. And I got on the phone right away, the radio, and told them to just "stay where you are, don't do anything." [laughs] "Stay there, don't move." [Tape has long period of silence] So it, um, all those things they're, they're there all the time, see.

James: All those potentials are there.

John: Potentials are there in every direction.

James: Where would you usually look for your targets?

John: Most of them were in Germany and most of them were rail yards.

James: Did you carry five hundred pounders?

John: Oh, yeah.

James: That's the usual bomb that you carried?

John: Well, we carried those; we carried, uh, fragment bombs—

James: [unintelligible]

John: Yeah, and we carried some fire bombs at times, yeah. And, uh, we did have one mission where we bombed the Germans in northern Italy and

that was done, that wasn't done by squadrons. That was—we flew there in squadrons, then we formed a big long line like that, maybe about twenty-one airplanes just straight, strung out like that. And then we flew over the area and they had colored markings down there to show us where they were, where the British were, and we should bomb beyond that, see, okay? The third time we came—we did it three times—the third time we came over you could see the road leading away from that area, filled with German soldiers in trucks and, uh, all kinds of things like that getting out of there. I found out later that when the British advanced there was nothing there, they had left, they had left and headed for the Brenner Pass to get back up into Germany.

James: How many missions did you have over there?

John: Uh, twenty-five. Most of 'em were bombing Germany.

James: Were you attacked by airplanes?

John: Once.

James: Just once?

John: One time. Made one pass.

James: Messerschmitt?

John: No, it was one of those—

James: One of the [unintelligible]?

John: It was one of those new jets.

James: Oh, 262.

John: Yeah, and it was there and gone, just like that, scared the hell out of us, I'll tell ya. We'd never seen anything—

James: I suppose you didn't see it coming, you only heard it as it went past?

John: Yeah, we saw it go but we'd never seen anything go that fast before, see.

James: It was all alone?

John: Yeah, it was all alone. I understood later that they, they could only stay up in the air for about—

- James: Twenty minutes?
- John: Something like that.
- James: That was a problem.
- John: So they were taught, I assume, to just make one shot and get out, so that's what this guy did. But he did scare us.
- James: What about the triple A? [Anti-Aircraft Artillery] [unintelligible]
- John: Yes. The flak was heavy over such areas as Vienna. We bombed Vienna about three times, and it just gets black, the sky gets black with that stuff. And of course we were throwing out the flak—not the flak, chaff, chaff, that aluminum chaff.
- James: Aluminum.
- John: And we were dumping that out to mess them up, and apparently it did, so we continued to do it, uh, and that kind of stuff.
- James: So then you never really were struck by any of that anti-aircraft fire?
- John: No, no, we didn't have that problem, thank goodness. The flak was the biggest problem we had.
- James: Did your squadron lose many?
- John: Um, we only lost one, one crew, and a few guys that were hit by flak. But basically no, we didn't lose very many people, and that was fortunate too, but of course by that we had learned a lot, too. We flew closer than we were trained to do. We, ah, we found out just among, say seven of us pilots, that we would go up on a practice deal, see, and we'd take the wing—like me, I'd take my airplane, I'd move it over and I'd tap his wing, see. Just to show him that that can be done and it's not a big dangerous thing. They worry that the airplanes go like this, but they don't, they all go like this, you see. So you can do that kind of thing and you all stay together. Well, what we had been doing was practicing this and we could get within ten feet of each other at the end of the wings here, and it's so much easier to fly in a—what am I trying to say? To fly as a group, as a squadron. If you're close together you can see the movement; if you're out here you can't see it. You get 'em close and we all knew then, and if the airplane starting dropping back we could see that and we could immediately correct. You see, a B-24 doesn't just jump ahead, you just change the throttle, then you have to wait for it to move up. [laughs] And

so you can get pretty far away and not know it if you're out like this, you see.

James: How fast would the aircraft fly?

John: We flew in formation at about a hundred and fifty-five miles an hour. If we were alone we would get her up around a hundred and sixty five, a hundred and seventy. But we didn't try to go in those high speeds because we used too much fuel. But they kinda settled on about a hundred and fifty-five.

James: Your airbase was well supplied? You had no trouble with gasoline?

John: No.

James: How was the food?

John: Terrible. [laughs] That was bad because we'd get those imitation eggs with all of the sulfur smell and everything. And many times I had to go back to my, my little hut that we had, adobe hut, and pick up one of those c-span things, or what do you call them things? K-rations, K-rations.

James: Oh, yeah.

John: I'd pick up one of those and take it instead of taking breakfast because I'd get sick if I went into that, uh, that mess hall, see. And put that in the airplane and then as we were going toward the target we'd eat that.

James: Did you get any USO entertainment at your base there?

John: Only once.

James: Did the Red Cross or Salvation Army ever show up at your base?

John: No.

James: Your quarters were huts?

John: Red Cross was about twenty miles away from us, in a small town. We could get ice cream there and that kind of stuff.

James: What about beer? Did you have a PX on base?

John: No, a PX was nowhere near us. Yeah, we could drive to a PX. That again was in that other small town, about twenty miles; we had to get a Jeep to go.

James: But you could get beer there?

John: I can't tell you, that doesn't come, I don't know. But I know you couldn't get hard liquor. But I had bought a case of hard liquor, but I didn't even drink, but somebody told me that I should take that because it would be—

James: Worth a lot of money?

John: Yeah, well that, and the fact that they run out so often. So I had twelve bottles when I arrived in—

James: Bourbon?

John: Nobody ever stole it either.

James: The bourbon?

John: Yeah.

James: Okay. What did you do with it?

John: Put it under my cot and left it there and when the so-called Officer's Quarters, Officer's Club, ran out of booze, which they did occasionally, I'd find out about it and I'd go back and get a bottle and give it to them. So it kept going that way.

James: What did they do for you in return?

John: Nothing.

James: Nothing?

John: No. No, no.

James: I thought everybody traded everyone. When I was in Korea, everybody was trading this and that. If you had something you got something in return.

John: Well, they probably could but, uh, actually the Air Force was kind of a different operation. They had people that, uh, were honest. I don't know how they'd get that way, but they were, and you could leave your wallet out on your bunk and all that and nobody would touch it, not in our area. And I know they had trouble with that in the regular Army. We didn't have that trouble. So it's, uh, it was a good experience for me, but I'm unusual in that area because I was scared when I took my first mission and

they were shooting at us. Your first mission is behind, is between the pilot and the copilot, you're standing there, see. That's to get you acquainted. And so you fly that whole mission inbetween the seats and they were shooting at us, and man there was a few, that flak was coming right through the airplane, you see. And I had my helmet on and a flak jacket—do you know what a flak jacket is?

James: Yes.

John: Yup. Well, most of us would sit on one of those.

James: Of course.

John: [laughs]

James: Naturally.

John: Coming up this way, we didn't like that.

James: No.

John: But the—oh, then your second mission you were, uh, you were put in a copilot seat with a crew, already experienced, and the third—**[End of Tape One, Side Two]**—one, you flew the airplane with all of your crew and an experienced copilot, and then the next one you're on your own. That how they did that, and it worked, works out fine. But I was so scared on those first two missions that I didn't sleep; twice, two nights I didn't sleep. So when I came back the third night, third mission, I started thinking to myself, "I think I'm different from most in the way I approach this." That I was gonna get killed, I mean I had to accept that, I was gonna get killed. So if you're gonna get killed, then you might as well quit worrying about it. And I slept. Basically I slept, and then it was it was over, there was no fear anymore. So I was gonna get killed, so okay. But the fear was gone.

James: So after the twenty-fifth mission it was near the end of the war, right?

John: Yes. In fact it ended, we took our twenty-fifth mission, we bombed Vienna, and the twenty-fifth mission was on April the 25th, April the 25th of 1945, okay? And the war ended on May the 5th. It had really ended, but it officially ended on May the 5th. And then we stayed overseas for another two months, another two months, and some of the stuff that we did, I did in particular, was fly missions from our base to, up at the head of the Adriatic where the—let's see, where—Trieste, I know where Trieste was. We'd fly supplies up there, land in an open field. [laughs] And that was another experience.

- James: A non-airfield?
- John: A non-airfield, that's right.
- James: So bumps and rocks and stuff to look out for?
- John: Um-hmm. And things got a little sloppy then. I almost wrecked one of the airplanes on a landing. I couldn't get the wheel back and I didn't have enough time to check on why that was, but I suspect it was because one of the pieces of cargo got jammed up against the side of the airplane where the wires run through and I couldn't get back far, you see. So I put, I put both feet on the instrument panel and was pulling and I couldn't get it up, you see, couldn't get the nose up. So we hit, we'll say all three wheels at once and it was a hard landing, [laughs] a real hard one. Oh, I thought we'd lost it there, too. When you can't get that back, get the airplane up like this instead of—well anyway, it was that kind of thing and we were getting a little sloppy and I knew it.
- James: Did you fly home?
- John: Yes, we—
- James: You took your plane home then?
- John: Yeah, we went, we flew an airplane out of our field down to an embarking area and then they checked your airplane over and made sure it was okay. Then you could look it over and see if everything was okay and you were agreeable to fly it. And we happened to get a pretty good airplane, it was also very easy on gasoline, but we flew directly from there to Newfoundland.
- James: Oh.
- John: And landed there just for refueling and then we flew from there to Boston, the Boston area, and Boston, from there we took a train and I was gonna be relieved from active duty in California.
- James: Army logic, right?
- John: Yeah, I didn't want to go back to Pontiac so—
- James: Oh, you didn't?

- John: No. And Pontiac Motor kept after me for about five years to come back, you see. And the service kept telling me that I had to join a National Guard.
- James: Had to?
- John: That's what they kept telling me, you know, otherwise I'd lose my commission. And I said, "Thanks," and I threw the thing in the wastebasket. [laughs]
- James: Easy decision.
- John: That's right.
- James: You were a captain by then?
- John: It was in, my captaincy was in, but when the war ended everything stopped, just like that.
- James: Did you use your G.I. Bill?
- John: Yes, I bought a house in California; I was married. Bought a house in California that, uh, cost twelve thousand dollars and the G.I. Bill gave me the money to put down.
- James: Sure, so you could process that loan, couldn't you?
- John: Yeah, that's what happened, and of course my payments per month were only fifty, fifty-six dollars a month.
- James: What did you do to earn a living now?
- John: I took a job as a draftsman. I knew I could do that after all of the experience I had at Pontiac Motor. Just out of the paper, I didn't know what I was applying for really, but it was a draftsman and I could do that. So I took, asked for, interviewed with Rheem Manufacturing. Do you know Rheem? R-h-e-e-m.
- James: Yeah, they make the water heaters and stuff.
- John: That's right. So I just answered the ad and they hired me. In fact I went, I was still in the service at that time. They hired me and I became a draftsman. I did well there; pretty soon I became a layout man, which means that you design the whole unit and then you work in conjunction with the research and development.

James: What city was this?

John: This was in Pasadena. And I was living in Altadena, that's up the mountain a little bit, county area, and quickly advanced from running the drafting room. That was the next move, I ran the drafting room. Then the next move was to become the assistant to the manager of research and development, and then I became manager of research and development. Then I ran the whole damn thing.

James: Oh, my goodness.

John: And in 1955—I'd taken that job in 1950—in 1955 we became the world's largest manufacturer of water heaters. And I take a lot of credit for that; I brought a lot of good things in that. And of course when you have an item that's about a third less than your competition and it's also very good in servicing and all that—

James: Can't beat it.

John: There's no way to beat it, that's right. So that's, that was a big move there, and then I left them in 1960 and went up to Madison and—left them for a lot of reasons; I won't go into all those.

James: Those aren't important for us.

John: But, um—

James: What was the attraction in Madison, Wisconsin?

John: A job. So I took a job with this small company whose—it was a water heater manufacturing company, but their total billing was only six hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year, that was their billing, not their profit. [laughs] But I tackled it. It was interesting because I thought that there was a lot of things I could do for them.

James: What was that company's name?

John: Bock, B-o-c-k, Bock Corporation. And I did a lot. After the first year they were up to a million-two and then the next year they were up over two million. It went on up to about six or seven, and then you can't go much more than that unless you diversify. And diversification for this operation was not there, it would have just been a disaster if that had happened. And I encouraged them not to sell the company, although we had many offers. After we got up into the five or six million bracket, then other companies like Rheem wanted to buy, buy them out, and some other big water heater

companies, but I encouraged them not to sell. “Stay independent, you’ll be happier that way.” And they were, still an independent company.

James: Still?

John: Yes. They go into some big, big stuff—

James: I’m not familiar with that name.

John: Bock?

James: And I’ve been in Madison all my life.

John: No. If you want to check the oil-fired business, you’ll find them.

James: Oh, I see.

John: I’d never had any experience with oil-fired when I went, but I learned soon enough what to do. Brought the price down on their thirty gallon oil-fired water heater to the point that they could compete and pretty soon took about half the business of the country. So there are ways to do these things that I found. But anyway, I retired, retired from Bock in 1982.

James: Tell me about keeping track of your crew. You say you all returned home together; have you stayed together?

John: No, no we didn’t do that, but—

James: No reunions?

John: No, they—there was two guys that I kept in touch with for a little while in California. The rest of ‘em were scattered around the country. And we were all making our own way, really, and the guys who graduated from college and wore the fur coats[?], you know, I took a lesson from them, and I never did that. When I left the service, I left the service. When I left Rheem Manufacturing, I left Rheem, period. And when I left the Bock Corporation—

James: Same thing.

John: Same thing.

James: I’m surprised you didn’t keep track of George, your copilot.

John: I did; when I went back to New York on business, twice we got together.

James: Oh.

John: Twice. He was in—his father was in the engraving business, so he went into that, that business. But there was nothing that would keep us together then, you see. His name was George Shahinian, and you know what that is, he's of Armenian decent. Nice fella, very nice fella, yeah. That brings up another little story, that we were bombing a bridge in the Brenner Pass, you know where that is?

James: Yes.

John: Okay. Bombs like this. And they had these guns—

James: Right, on the walls, right?

John: Right up here and you're flying here and they're just knocking the, knocking the hell out of ya up there. And the fighter bombers had gone there, the single engine jobs, and they couldn't get that bridge, they were shot up. Then they sent in the B-25s and they couldn't do it.

James: Tell 'em to get the big guys.

John: So the job came down to the B-24s to go after them, see. We went in at about, uh, about twenty-four thousand feet and, um, we were, we were really getting plastered when we went, went in there across that target, but we got the bridge. And the airplane was a mess. But during the approach to the, to drop the bombs, all of a sudden George started becoming incoherent and kinda screaming, and he was yelling at the crew through this thing that you talk to the crew with. And under those conditions, see, he's on the, he's, he is talking to the crew and I'm, I'm talking to the other airplanes, you see. Well anyway, I looked around, I could hear this and I looked around while he was in this kind of spell, I banged him on the cheek like that, see. He goes like this and looks around I said, all I said was, "Get with it George." That was it, he settled down, did his job, it was all over. But, um, we never talked about that either.

James: That's two subjects I would assume you had discussed at length.

John: The wrong thing to do.

James: Oh, okay.

John: In my mind.

James: Yeah, I understand, I understand.

- John: It was the wrong thing to do. George knew it.
- James: What do you suppose is the diagnosis here? Did his oxygen mask come off?
- John: We had been, we had been told, uh, somewhere in the training that you're apt to have somebody go off their heads.
- James: Because they lose their oxygen mask?
- John: No, just up here. And you get scared, they lose control and they had told, told us that the thing to do is to slap 'em and they'll come back out. It did; I banged him like that and looked at him and he looked at me and that was the end of it, see. But the, what you do under fire is, nobody knows what—
- James: Can't predict that behavior?
- John: No way.
- James: Were you surprised at yourself?
- John: Yes.
- James: You handled it better than you thought?
- John: Yes.
- James: You said you worried and you didn't sleep. Did you ever get a feeling that you came out better than you thought you would?
- John: Oh, yeah. I should say. I'd played a lot of athletics and things like that, and that probably helps. For people to think under fire—well, there's just no way you could tell. For instance, in the same Brenner Pass thing they had shot, or they shot away before we got to the target, they shot away the plastic bulb that's out in the front of the airplane. And we have a gunner in there, you see. This was the winter, this would be in March, February maybe; anyway, it was cold. And when they knocked that plastic away it would be maybe thirty to forty below zero. And you're doing a hundred, a hundred and fifty—
- James: The wind chill factor must have brought it down a lot more.
- John: —a hundred and fifty miles an hour or something like that. So the navigator—not the navigator—yeah, the navigator called me on the phone and he said that, quickly explained that the plastic was blown away and

George, I've forgotten his name now, but he was out there in the cold and he can't move.

James: I'm sure. He's cold.

John: "What do we do? See. What do we do?" Here I am flying the airplane and flak's going through there and all that, okay. So I said, "Why don't you—" I didn't say, "why." I said, "Each of you take him by the shoulders and drag him in." "Oh," he says, that was it. They did that and pulled him in, see. Well, just say that is an example of "what do you do under fire." Now they could have done that without calling, you see. But—

James: They were not used to making those decisions.

John: See, it's just—

James: Were his hands and feet frostbitten?

John: No, no. They got him fast enough that there never was a real problem for him. Just brought him in and he warmed up after awhile, put blankets on him and warmed him up and it was okay. So it, it's just another, another thing that happens in that kind of situation, but you can't predict that stuff.

James: So the decorations that you received then is the Air Medal and—

John: The Air Medal and the—an Air Medal means five missions, and then I had four Oak Leaf Clusters, which means twenty-five missions. And I had two, um, I had two Flying Crosses, Distinguished Flying Crosses. And I had a Presidential Citation.

James: Unit citation?

John: Unit citation, yes.

[End of interview]