

Fort Hunt Oral History
P.O. Box 1142
Interview with Norton Taylor by David Lassman
Gouverneur, New York
November 15, 2010

DAVID LASSMAN: Dave Lassman, I'm with the National Park Service at the George Washington Parkway. I'm speaking with Norton Taylor of Gouverneur, New York. He was part of the Air Ground Aid Service [00:16] during World War II. I'm joined by Patrick Sheridan [spelled phonetically], Emily Devits [spelled phonetically], and Victoria Sofenberg [spelled phonetically]. Now as I said, if you would just sort of start off with casual, where you were born, your education, and we'll take it from there.

NORMAN TAYLOR: Okay. I was born in Gouverneur, New York [00:39], April 7th, 1922. I attended local schools in Gouverneur, graduated from the high school. And after my stint in the service I went to Albany College of Pharmacy [00:56] and graduated as a pharmacist. That was my [01:00] profession during my entire life, was a professional pharmacist.

DL: Okay. Now can you tell me just a little more about your youth? What type of studies did you have? Did you have any particular studies that would have helped you later on in terms of military, especially in Asia [01:21]?

NT: No, no. To tell you the truth, I came out of high school just as a high school graduate. I had no training at all. I was going to be drafted and I did not have any training at all, but I understood that they had a radio class at Clarkson University [01:44] in Potsdam, New York [01:45].

DL: Okay.

NT: So my friend and I took a 10-week basic radio training class at Clarkson. And we had a certificate that we graduated from that [02:00] class. And I think perhaps when it came

to -- after my basic training, they came to me one day, they were going to make assignments. And they said to me "Mr. Taylor, we can make you a truck driver or a lineman or a radio operator." And the minute they said radio, I said "Well, then radio sounds good to me." And that's how I got into the radio service [02:26], in the, you know, radio part of the service. I think it's because of my mentioning of radio, that I'd taken a short course at Clarkson [02:38].

DL: Okay. Now where did you do your basic training, and when did you enlist?

NT: Well, I went in in 1943. I went to basic - Fort Dix [02:50] and then I moved up to Fort Monmouth [02:53], New Jersey. And that's where I took my basic radio [03:00], got assigned a radio school and went to radio school there.

DL: We actually talked to a few folks who went to radio school at Fort Monmouth [03:10].

NT: Fort Monmouth, right, right.

DL: And how long was the class at Fort Monmouth?

NT: I have no idea. It couldn't have been too long, you know. I don't think it was very, very long, maybe six months.

DL: Okay. How long after this, did you get any general deployment or did you go straight into Air Ground Aid Service [03:36]?

NT: No, that's exactly what happened. And then I got assigned -- right from there I got assigned to the AGAS, right.

DL: What route did you take to get there?

NT: No, I cannot tell you. But I know after Fort Monmouth [03:56] I ended up at a camp [04:00] outside of Washington [04:01], D.C. I have no idea of the name of that camp.

DL: Then actually you were at Fort Hunt [04:08], which is our main study.

NT: And where was that, at Fort Monmouth?

DL: No. Fort Hunt is just outside of Washington, D.C.

NT: Well, okay, that might have been where -- yeah, that might have been. I never heard that name, but that probably was, right outside of Washington [04:24], D.C.

DL: Did you ever hear the phrase Post Office Box 1142 [04:30]?

NT: No, not that I'm aware of. No. No.

DL: Okay.

NT: I was there for a while and I'm kind of vague what the heck we did, although I do remember we had radio training and classes. And then for a while we went directly into the Pentagon [04:49]. I remember that. And we had short classes of some sort up there had to do with radio [04:58] transmission and also [05:00] about sending intelligence items, you know.

DL: Now were you learning codes, or what kind of radio skills were you getting?

NT: Would you say that again?

DL: Were you learning specific codes, or what skills were they training you in terms of radio?

NT: Well that's what I can't remember. I just remember it was a lot to do with the radio, basic radio [05:33]. And then we had something to do about classing -- if we ever got captured or something, to send special ways to communicate, especially if I wrote a letter. But what that was about I can't remember.

DL: That probably meant you were trained as a code user.

NT: Probably, yeah. I would say so. Unbeknownst to me, because they did not tell us [06:00] exactly what we were doing, you know.

DL: Well, the situation is that they would teach a small number of personnel codes which they

could slip into their letters or postcards?

NT: Yeah, yeah, that's what I'm trying to say. Yeah, something to that effect. Right.

DL: And the staff at Fort Hunt [06:22] actually had a long list of people that they knew -- had identified as knowing the secret codes. And when correspondence came from where these people were posted, they'd look at their names, especially if they're prisoners of war [06:40], and they would pull out their letters and check for communications, secret messages. They would normally forward that communication on to the person who it was official intended for, so it's like your wife, your girlfriend, your family.

NT: Yeah, could be. And I do remember some of that time when -- and I can't remember [07:00] if it was in Washington [07:02] or before that, but to keep us busy we typed up -- we typed up letters and resumes of people that had been captured, you know. And what had taken place in their life. I remember copying the letters on to a form, you know, typing it.

DL: Okay.

NT: And they [unintelligible] to my eyes because I remember I was just a young squirt and I remember all these things that had happened to those people that shocked me when I was typing what they were telling us, you know.

DL: Now between your time at Fort Hunt [07:48] and the Pentagon [07:49], about how long was that? A couple weeks, a couple months?

NT: It's not very long. I wouldn't say -- it wouldn't go over two months [08:00] because it was not very long.

DL: Okay.

NT: And then I was shipped overseas.

DL: Now getting back to my earlier question, do you think you went like from the East Coast to the West Coast, you took either a boat or a plane to Asia, or did you go to Europe and -
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NT: No, no. We went to the West Coast, by train. And then we went to Australia [08:27] by boat. And then from Australia we went up to India [08:33].

DL: Okay.

NT: But I can't tell you the time. I just vaguely remember that.

DL: Now at this time what rank would you have been?

NT: I was a PFC and then a corporal. And I think I became a sergeant, but I think that was after I got to -- after I got out of Indochina [08:59] there sometime [09:00]. I went in as a corporal and then I came out as a sergeant. But I can't remember when my ranks were given me.

DL: Okay. Now besides your training in codes, did you ever see or learn about secret devices being hidden in objects? Like a compass in a button or a --

NT: No, no, no, nothing like that.

DL: No secret devices? Okay. Now about when do you think you arrived in Indochina [09:40]?

NT: Oh, boy.

DL: Just guesstimate if you can.

NT: That was along in 1944, somewhere along in there.

DL: Okay.

NT: It was late 1944, I know that. Because we were there [10:00], we were in the field, you know, and I don't think we were in the field that long. And then I remember President

Roosevelt [10:10] died. But we didn't hear about that for about the day after it happened. And then it seemed to me right after that we were taken out of there.

DL: Well when you were sent out with AGAS [10:28], did you largely bring your own supplies, or when you got there were supplies there waiting for you?

NT: No, they supplied everything. You mean -- where do you mean?

DL: When you were shipped out to --

NT: Oh, yeah, no, when I shipped to the States over?

DL: Yeah.

NT: Oh, yeah. No, they give us -- we had regular issue stuff, yeah, yeah. We didn't --

DL: But you didn't have any special supplies, you just had regular issue?

NT: No, no, no, not anything at all. No.

DL: Okay. Now [11:00] I understand that you were central China. Now I know the bulk of the operation was in Kunming [11:11].

NT: Was where?

DL: Kunming, K-U-N-M-I-N-G [sic]. Which was in central China.

NT: Oh, Kunming.

DL: Yeah, Kunming.

NT: Oh, yes. I flew from India [11:21] over the hump -- you've heard about going over the hump.

DL: Yeah.

NT: From Karachi [11:26], over the hump to Kunming [11:28].

DL: Okay.

NT: Where the 14th Air Force [11:30] was. And we were billeted right along with that group.

DL: So do you remember then Gerald Chennault [11:38]?

NT: Chennault, yeah. I remember him, yeah. We were right among that group of -- I think we were billeted with them.

DL: Now do you have any particular memories of Gerald Chennault?

NT: No, not a thing. No, I never saw him. I just -- we were not there, we were not in Kunming [11:58] that long.

DL: Okay [12:00]. Do you remember General Frank Pinky Dorn [12:04]?

NT: No, no. None of those names.

DL: And what about General Joseph Stilwell [12:10]?

NT: No. No. I heard the name, but no, I don't know anything about him. No.

DL: Okay. After you were at Kunming [12:17], where did you go?

NT: We stayed there very shortly and then one day they loaded us into a plane and we flew quite a while in a small, what's that, DC transport plane. What's the number of it, do you know what I mean? Anyway, they flew us down to a place called Fu High [12:44] [spelled phonetically].

DL: Okay.

NT: And that's all. I know they took us down there, they landed us, got us off in a hurry, and the plane took off in a hurry. The plane surprised me, but they got us off [13:00]. The plane landed, got us off in a hurry, and the plane took right off, and the last we saw of that plane until we came out.

DL: Now --

NT: Of Fu High.

DL: Now when you were sent there, were you given any general instructions what you'd be

doing there?

NT: Not really. Not generally until I met -- I was with two other gentlemen. One was Captain Rogers [13:30], an American Captain. And there was a Captain Bailey [13:37], who was an Australian [13:39]. And myself, and an interpreter, whose name was Lee [13:44]. That's all I can tell you about him. We were a team of four.

DL: Do you know what Captain Rogers' [13:53] first name was?

NT: No, I do not. And I've been trying to think and I can't for the life of me remember. Or Captain Bailey [14:00], I can't remember either one.

DL: They are not listed as AGAS [14:05] personnel. Could they have like OSS [14:08] agents?

NT: Well, I'm not sure. To tell you the truth their relationship with me was very aloof, you know what I mean?

DL: Understood.

NT: They said things that I didn't even know what was going on, to tell you the truth, except I was the radio [14:27] operator that transmitted messages and received messages.

DL: So when you were out in the field, who were the main people you were communicating with on the radio?

NT: Yeah, by radio.

DL: Yeah. But who were you in communication with?

NT: I have no idea. To some main base.

DL: Okay. Now were they --

NT: I remember my call letters that stuck in my head [15:00]. DS2 was my number.

DL: Okay, sir. Now during your time there were you mostly monitoring the downed planes? Was that your main operation?

NT: Well that's what we understood. It was my understanding they might have been in an invasion in Hainan [15:26] or one of those islands. And we were set, if somebody -- if we received -- a pilot had been ejected or crashed, we were supposed to pick him up or, you know, locate where he was. But all time I was there we did not have that -- we didn't have that opportunity to pick anybody up. But I know one thing that we did do.

DL: [affirmative]

NT: This Captain Bailey [16:00] would be gone for two or three days. He would be gone with some natives. Then he would come back with evidently information of some sort. Now whether it was troop movements, I have no idea. But he was the bravest guy ever lived. He would be gone -- he would come back and then they would put -- he and Captain Rogers [16:24] would get together and make up a message. I didn't know what was in it, in letters and numbers, which I would transmit to my main location. When we would move, after we made the transmission we would pick up and we would have to move, be on the move.

DL: Now was this for your own safety so the Japanese --

NT: Yeah. As I understood it, yeah, they didn't -- must be the Japanese [16:56] were right in that area, is that what I'm understanding? As I remember that [17:00].

DL: More than likely they might be triangulating your location.

NT: Yeah, that's what they said. The minute we made a -- and normally when Captain Bailey [17:11] made a report, it would be quite a long transmission. And the minute it was finished we would be on our way.

DL: Now did Bailey or Rogers [17:24] speak Chinese or any other languages?

NT: I think Bailey [17:30] did. I don't think Captain Rogers did, no. But Bailey did. And we communicated through the interpreter Lee [17:39], who talked Chinese or Laos, or whatever they talked, you know.

DL: How common -- how often did you meet locals who spoke English?

NT: Not very often. In Fu high [17:57] we did.

DL: [affirmative]

NT: But then when we got out in the field, no [18:00], it was all just -- it was just natives, to the natives.

DL: Now would you be on the run? Did you ever actually have any encounters with the Japanese [18:14] or --

NT: Nope, nope, not at all. No.

DL: Okay. Now do you have any specific remembrances of Rogers' [18:26] or Bailey's [18:28] missions? Anything unusual that they may have said about their mission?

NT: No. I just think that Bailey got information out in the field somewhere. Whether it was troop movements or what to do, I really -- I was not privy to what he did. Except he would be gone, then he would come back and be filled with information. And he and Rogers [18:57] would talk about, and then we [19:00] would send messages.

DL: Now this team of four, you said you'd be constantly rotating. How long would you normally be in a certain location, you would say?

NT: Well, we would stay there two or three days -- once in a while -- we would listen for the transmission. Now we would get information back from the home base and I would give it to Bailey [19:28]. He would decode it, but I never knew what it was. If they sent up

messages we could receive it, but the minute we transmitted a heavy message, we had to move. See what I mean?

DL: Yeah.

NT: We would be in contact, I think it was once or twice a day, they would send us, contact us, you know, little quick messages to let us know that they were aware that we were still around. But we didn't transmit every day [20:00].

DL: Now actually I do -- I do see Mr. Rogers, Vernon L. Rogers [20:08]. Would that be his name?

NT: Maybe, it might be. Vernon L.?

DL: Yeah. And I also see you, of course, being at Hainan [20:20].

NT: Yeah. Vernon Rogers. Now that might -- boy, I hate -- don't hold me to that, but it sounds like it might be his.

DL: Okay.

NT: Is he a captain?

DL: Here he was listed as a first lieutenant. But that may have been at the start of the --

NT: Oh, could be, could be. Could be. Was he in that same region that I'm talking about?

DL: Yes. He was also at Fu high [20:47].

NT: Then I'll bet you, probably it was. You don't see Bailey [20:51] at all?

DL: No, I do not.

NT: Okay. Okay [21:00].

DL: Well you said you never had any direct contact. Did you ever observe like Japanese [21:08] planes were in the distance?

NT: No, no, no, no. No, we didn't do that much.

DL: Okay. Now are you aware of a thing called blood chits [21:24]?

NT: Say that again?

DL: Blood chit. They'd be cloths written in multiple languages.

NT: Oh, yeah. No, no, no, I'm not. No, not aware of that.

DL: Okay. Now while Rogers [21:42] and Bailey [21:42] would be out on their excursions, what would you be doing in --

NT: No. Bailey would be -- Rogers would be more or less right on -- and now that I think about it, I can't remember what actually we did during that time.

DL: Okay.

NT: I don't think [22:00] we did -- there was nothing -- we did not do much that I remember.

DL: Okay. Okay. I'm just -- I'll ask you, did you ever, to your knowledge, encounter anyone with the OSS [22:17]?

NT: Not to my knowledge, no, no.

DL: What about with the Office of Naval Intelligence [22:26], the ONI?

NT: No. If they were, I was not aware of that.

DL: Did you encounter any British personnel?

NT: No. No, just that -- no, not British, no.

DL: Okay. Did you -- well I'm sure you didn't encounter him directly, but do you remember any story about Chiang Kai-shek [22:52]?

NT: No. No.

DL: Okay [23:00]. Now were you still in China [23:04] -- when you said you were still in China when President Roosevelt [23:08] died.

NT: Yeah, yeah. And I remember that. He had died like a day before. We did not get the

message on it until -- I know we were surprised. We didn't get the message until almost the next day I guess. We were late in getting the message.

DL: Okay.

NT: And then it seemed to me right after that, they came and picked us up at some air field and -- picked us up and moved us out.

DL: Where did you go to after that?

NT: And I think we went to Shanghai [23:40]. I can't remember how we got to Shanghai. And then they brought us back on an aircraft carrier, a small aircraft carrier.

DL: Real quick. When you were out to the field, what was your housing like, what were the villages like [24:00]? What conditions were you living in?

NT: Well they were just native villages, you know, we're sleeping in the shack, you know, on stilts, you know. Just native -- I can't explain. Just native buildings, you know.

DL: Now were they -- how willing were they to give up their structures for you to move in?

NT: They were -- they all seemed to be done ahead. Captain Bailey [24:40] and my interpreter, Lee [24:45], they would go and we'd come to a village and they'd jibber jabber, jibber. Next thing you know we would have a -- we would put down sleeping bags and we would have a place to stay.

DL: Well, you were a radio [25:00] operator when you were in Kunming [25:02] or out in the field, did you ever observe any Chinese radio operators working with the Americans?

NT: No. No, no, no.

DL: We do have one account from another person who related with AGAS [25:15] who said that regular bases, the Chinese operated the radios.

NT: Yeah. No, we didn't. As I say, we were more or less all by ourselves all the time we

were there.

DL: Okay. Now when you said you were pulled out of China [25:34]. Was this before or after the bombing of Hiroshima [25:38]?

NT: Boy, I don't -- it must have been after.

DL: Okay.

NT: Yeah, I got out -- I don't know when that bombing -- I got out in '45. December of '45.

DL: Okay. Now --

NT: Yeah, it must have been after that [26:00].

DL: What happened to you after? You said you went into pharmacy [26:05]?

NT: Yeah. And then I came back, I came back home, you know, and I just had worked in the drug store. And I had \$800 in the bank and a car. And one day they kept calling me at the drug store to come back to work. And one of the young pharmacists says "You may only be a clerk but pharmacists earn more. Did you ever think of going to pharmacy school?" I didn't know the first thing about it. So I drove down to Albany [26:35] to the pharmacy school, applied, and the next thing I know I'm into it. And I remember going up to the first day at pharmacy school, walking in and I said to myself "I'm going to be with a bunch of fresh, you know, high school students."

DL: [affirmative]

NT: "And what am I doing here?" I walked [27:00] inside and I looked around and the whole class was made up of veterans from -- you know, World War II veterans from over in Europe and the Pacific and all. So we all got along and therefore I stayed in pharmacy college [27:20]. We were the first class to graduate as veterans. So that was why I stayed into it. And it was good to me all the time I was in it.

DL: Congratulations. Now I'm curious. When you were in Asia [27:35], did you ever get a glimmer of the language while you were there?

NT: No, because we learned some Chinese, you know, Chinese [27:46] words and such. No, I wish I'd been older, because I remember going through some of the big temples, the Buddhist Temples, and all that. And we didn't pay any attention to them, you know [28:00]. But I wish I had my wits a bit more, I would have probably loved it, to have studied some more about that. But I was young and foolish and wanted to get home, you know.

DL: Let's actually just real quickly go back to your time when you were doing your training at Fort Hunt [28:21].

NT: Yeah.

DL: Now I know that was six decades or you're only there for a number of weeks, but do you -- when you went there, do you remember, was there a gate around the location, around the site? Was there a gate and fence around the site?

NT: As I remember that, it was a very secret place. And as I think they warned not to say much what we were doing, you know, we didn't get contact with anybody when we were in that camp, as I remember that [29:00]. And whether it was alarmed or not, I cannot tell you. But I know it was buried somewhere where we were at, and when we went in, I remember I was very impressed when we went into the Pentagon [29:16], they took us in in buses or something, small buses. We stayed there, you know, went back and forth for I don't know how long it was, but it was kind of a blur. But I was quite impressed though, the transportation to get us there and then to bring us back, you know.

DL: Now were you actually staying at the Fort [29:45], or were you staying someplace else

during the nighttime?

NT: No, we came back and forth.

DL: Okay.

NT: We stayed, you know, just early in the morning and then we'd come back at night. So we didn't stay in Washington [29:58], no.

DL: Okay [30:00], on the off chance, do you remember if George Washington's [30:04] home of Mt. Vernon was nearby?

NT: Yeah, yep. [affirmative] We used to take Washington Overlook [30:14]. Does that mean -- ring any bells to you? Overlook?

DL: Yeah, there were a couple overlooks right there on the --

NT: Well that's -- I remember that, Washington Overlook. Would we be anywhere near that?

DL: More than likely you were at Fort Hunt [30:30], because there are some --

NT: Okay. Okay. Well I remember Washington Overlook [30:34].

DL: Do you recognize -- I asked you a couple of names of people who were involved in AGAS [30:43].

NT: Yeah. I don't know if I remember them, but --

DL: Well, give it a try.

NT: I'll try.

DL: Okay. Do you remember Captain B.P. Shoyer [30:52] [spelled phonetically]?

NT: No.

DL: Okay. Do you recognize the name Oliver Amar [31:00]?

NT: No.

DL: Do you recognize the name Ed or Ned Carpenter [31:06]?

NT: No.

DL: And do you recognize Colonial Wickish [31:11] [spelled phonetically]?

NT: No.

DL: Witrich.

NT: No.

DL: And a name similar to yours, Ross M. Taylor [31:19]?

NT: No. No.

DL: Okay. Those were the main people who were involved supervising of AGAS [31:30] or actually are a couple people we've had encounters with, or interviews.

NT: Okay. I'm sorry I can't remember any of those names.

DL: Oh, sure. Now we'll be winding up momentarily, but I'm going to ask my colleagues if they have any questions.

NT: Yeah.

DL: No? No questions?

NT: No, no, no. My report to you is that we -- now that I look back, I did very little, you know, to [32:00] [laughs] help the war effort. Sometimes I wondered what the heck we were doing there, you know. It was kind of a -- I didn't know what we were doing and what we were supposed to be doing, you know what I'm saying?

DL: Well it was a very experimental -- the escape and evasion at --

(End of Tape 1A)

(Beginning of Tape 1B)

DL: Now, I was curious. Do you have, off chance, any documents, or pictures of yourself from --

NT: Nope, nope, not a one. Not one.

DL: Okay. Then what we'll do is, I'll be making you a CD of this interview.

NT: Oh, okay.

DL: I'll send you a couple copies. Do you have any children?

NT: Yeah, I've got three children, yeah.

DL: Okay.

NT: But they're up and married, you know.

DL: Okay. Then --

NT: I wish I could give you more information but I cannot -- as I say, I was, you know, young, and right out of high school, only been out a year. And the more I think of it, it's just funny; I haven't thought about what you're asking me in years. So it's kind of a just out of my own memory, you know.

DL: I do understand very much.

NT: Yeah. Yeah [01:00].

DL: What I'll do is I'll send you four copies of the CD, one for yourself and one for each of your children,

NT: I appreciate that.

DL: And I'm also going to include in there just a little bit of information that we learned about AGAS [01:14]. And if you can review it at your leisure, and if you have any comments I would love to hear them.

NT: Yeah. Well after I got out of the service, you know, and see all the reports and I'd never heard -- you're the first one that's ever mentioned to me AGAS. I've never heard it mentioned again or ever seen it printed anywhere. And that's why I thought it was

probably a top secret organization or something.

DL: It was a very secretive, also very small -- there were only about --

NT: They were very small, yeah. Very small, very secretive. And now that I looked back on it, I don't know how they ever chose me to be the radio [01:55] operator. I was a small speed and now I got into what they call high speed, you know, used the typewriter [02:00].

DL: [affirmative]

NT: And, you know, then I learned it. But when you're out in the field we didn't have a typewriter so we just transmitted and wrote it by hand, you know.

DL: Okay. Well, we'll get this package off for you. And one thing I should mention to you is that I'm going to include in there, besides just a few documents about the AGAS [02:25], I'm also going to include a form. It's a release form, which basically it's going to be a preaddressed envelope. I'm going to ask you to read it, sign it, and send it back to us.

NT: Okay.

DL: It is giving us authorization to use this interview.

NT: Sure. Okay.

DL: All right. Well I thank you very much for your time.

NT: That's very nice of you to call me, and [laughs] you bring back memories. I wish I had a little bit better memory to tell you more, but I really -- that's about all I know, can tell you. Okay [03:00]?

DL: Well we don't know much, so what you gave us is more than we knew before.

NT: Okay [laughs]. Nice to talk to you. You bet. You have a good day now.

DL: Always. You too.

NT: Okay. Bye, bye.

DL: Bye.

[end of transcript]

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