

Transcription: John Tschirhart

Today is Friday, September 19th, 2008. My name is James Crabtree, and today I'll be interviewing Mr. John Tschirhart. This interview is being done in person at the General Land Office at 1700 North Congress Avenue in Austin, Texas, and this interview is being conducted in support of the Texas Veterans Land Board Voices of Veterans Oral History Program. Sir, thanks for taking the time to come and talk to us today.

John Tschirhart: The pleasure's all mine.

This is something that is an honor for us because your interview, like other interviews we've done, is something we'll save for posterity and we have records and archives going back to the 1830s, Davy Crockett and Stephen F. Austin -

John Tschirhart: Wow.

So your interview is going to be part of that, so that future generations and historians can listen to it. I guess the first thing to do is we want to make sure we don't run out of time -

John Tschirhart: Yeah, we got one hour and 15 minutes.

I guess the first thing is maybe we'll start at the beginning. Tell us when you were born and where and maybe a little bit about your parents.

John Tschirhart: You want me to go beyond that, I mean from the beginning? Grandfather? No, just from the day I was born?

Yeah, just a little bit about your background and then we'll focus in particular on your service.

John Tschirhart: But starting when I was born.

Sure, tell us a little bit about that.

John Tschirhart: Because there's some history of Central Texas, you know, involved there, the development of Central Texas. OK, my grand grandfather, Nicholas Tschirhart the 1st came on the boat which was sponsored by Prince DeCastro who got a bunch of land from Sam Houston. Sam Houston granted him 1,000's of acres provided that he would go to France and bring some farmers to tend to the land. That's what he did. So he got about 5 or 6 ships loaded of starving farmers in the Alsace-Lorraine region, and my grand grandfather, Nicholas Tschirhart the 1st came alone on one of the ships and landed eventually in what is now called Castroville.

OK, I've heard of Castroville, sure.

John Tschirhart: West of San Antonio, Castroville which is named after Castro who brought in all these pioneers in the year 1844 period. In that period of course Texas was still fighting Mexico and eventually they won independence, and then they were launched off a little while before they joined the Union. Well, my grand grandfather, Nicholas Tschirhart married another immigrant from Alsace-Lorraine, and together they had 12 children. And of those 12 children was my grandfather, Nicholas Tschirhart the second. He was nicknamed Nick, they called him

Nick, not to confuse him with his father. Now Nick had married Louisa Roseberg and had several children, among whom was my father, Arnold. In 1918, my father joined the Army and went to France in World War I. That is interesting because actually we went through the same route in a way, he in World War I and I in World War II.

Your father was born in Castroville?

John Tschirhart: He was born in Hondo, Texas. My father was born in Hondo. He went to France and his unit camped very near a small town where we eventually lived for 25 years, a small town called El Villo Chantelle, southeast of Paris about 150 miles, in the Champagne region. He married a girl there, my mother, Lucy Kiso. And before he returned, they had a daughter, but he came back before my mother did because his father, Nick, died, but he arrived much too late with the time it took in those days to get to Texas from France. So then later on my mother rejoined him and she ran out of money in New York so he had to use some of his mules to get a loan.

Was your mother born in France?

John Tschirhart: My mother, yes.

Your father met your mother while he was there during World War I.

John Tschirhart: Yeah.

And then where were you born?

John Tschirhart: Then, a few months later I was born in San Antonio. I probably was born, well I was born in a hospital in San Antonio. My father and mother were living at the time with their mother, Louisa Roseberg who was widowed from Nick.

And what was your date of birth, sir?

John Tschirhart: 30th of December, 1920. Then five months later, they returned to France.

What caused your parents to decide that?

John Tschirhart: Well, she got lonely from France. In other words, that's when my mother rejoined my father. They took a picture when she arrived. That's his mother, Louisa Roseberg, who had married Nick Tschirhart.

Are you in this picture?

John Tschirhart: No, not yet. I'm probably in there, in the womb. This was taken probably around April or May 1920. Then I was born and I don't have the earliest picture is when I was 5 months old just before they went back to France.

Yeah. So your earliest memories are of being in France.

John Tschirhart: Yeah. So then my parents stayed there until 1946. I stayed there until 1941. I'll tell you the reason later. So these are some of my – this is a reunion in Castroville of the Tschirharts in 1996. We did another one twice as big as this in 2006.

So Tschirhart is a French name then?

John Tschirhart: No.

It sounds kind of German to me.

John Tschirhart: It sounds German, but it's not German. The best that I've been able to do was to find out that they came way back in the 15th Century from Yugoslavia. And they landed in Alsace-Lorraine, and they began farming. So in Alsace-Lorraine there are Tschirhart's all over the place. I couldn't find anything definite from Yugoslavia. This is just some small pictures. I used to go with my grandmother to the market and sell her ducks and chickens and things in France. I grew up in France. This is my oldest sister that you saw a while ago, me, and then another sister.

What did your parents do? Was your father a farmer?

John Tschirhart: Well, he started the small fruit and vegetable store, and in a small town of El Villo Chantelle, a very small town, about 700 people, which remained our home town throughout our life in France. So quite a few years, I believe from 1921 to 1933, they were managing that fruit and vegetable store. When my grandfather died, my maternal grandfather died, then they took over the farm. They were leasing it, and they took over the lease on the farm. That's where my parents remained until 1946 in that farm. Now when I was 13 years old, I quit school. Then I left the town and went on my own. From the time I was 13, I went to work on my own and -

What caused you to do that?

John Tschirhart: My parents could not afford to send me to a high school. See, high school in France in those days was not free. So they had 7 kids, and they couldn't afford to send me. So my best option was to go on my own and start working, so I took several jobs. I was a pastry assistant one time, I was an assistant bookkeeper, some odd jobs. I would spend most of my free time in the movies. That's what induced me to -

Did you see a lot of American movies then?

John Tschirhart: Yeah, oh James Cagney, John Wayne, Jimmy Stewart. He became a commander by the way during my training.

Jimmy Stewart?

John Tschirhart: Yeah, he was my squadron commander.

We'll have to get to that at some point. I like Jimmy Stewart. So as a child in France, did you know that you were born in the United States?

John Tschirhart: No, the strangest thing, my father never spoke English. He spoke broken French with my mother. And it never dawned on us that we were American, although people called us, oh the Americans, but it never dawned on me as a young guy that there was anything else but a French kid, and that my life was destined to be in France forever.

And when you would go to those movies, were those subtitled in French?

John Tschirhart: When I went to see those American movies, of course, but I thought of me wanting to be an actor, but not in America.

Were the movies in English?

John Tschirhart: Well, they were with subtitles, with French subtitles. Some of them were dubbed. That's where I became accustomed to the American movie production. So then in 1939, I took a job in another town, the last time that I was in France, San Disyet, and I worked in a refinery, oil refinery, as the assistant bookkeeper. During the two years that I was there in 1939-1940, I fell in love with this girl, with Malou. Now she and I during the German infiltration of Europe and all that, we just didn't bother. We were happy, we were having a good time, except one Sunday when we were dancing they announced that the Germans were coming. They were about a few miles from the town. So we evacuated.

The town that you lived in, was that in northern France?

John Tschirhart: No, this was southeast of Paris. It's about halfway from Paris to Lyon, right in the middle, in the Cote d'or area, but this was the old mound, so her mother had a car so we took her car and we followed the refugee crowd. We were hit seven times by the Stuckedat bomber because that's what they were doing, the Stuckedat bombers in the air. They were diving on the refugees.

Did you have any warning or thoughts that this was going to happen at some point? I mean surely you had been following maybe what had been going on in the rest of Europe?

John Tschirhart: Well, we knew vaguely but we weren't interested. We were so raptured, you know, within ourselves, we didn't pay attention to the war, we didn't know what the meaning was, you know, except when they came in. Then I was in a café with her and the bookkeeper, head bookkeeper, three of us were kind of friends together, and here come the French gendarmes with the German policeman, and he asked for our ID's. Now I had a driver's license which shows USA on the corner. And then they were – said yes sir, I was born, so what? But all of a sudden it became a very important note. So she didn't have any ID on her, and the gendarmes said oh, I know her family, don't worry about it. Then he goes to my friend and he had an ID, he was a Jew. But it doesn't show on his ID. Then I gave my ID to the French gendarmes, and he looked excited, and he sees USA. He told the German soldiers, oh, it's OK, it's OK. He didn't give the ID to them. He told them it was OK because he was pro-France.

Do you remember what day or month that might have been or what year?

John Tschirhart: Oh, they invaded in June 1940. This was around June 1940, around the end, maybe July, about the 13th of June that they invaded our town where I was working in San Disyet, dalla Otmound. Now my friend the bookkeeper says we're in trouble, we got to get out of here, because he was a Jew.

Wow. So he already knew then.

John Tschirhart: Well he was a little bit older than me, he was a little more into politics, and all that.

He knew that it was bad for the Jewish people.

John Tschirhart: He said you better go, too, because he went to Paris. He had an apartment in Paris. In Paris it's easier to hide, with such a multitude, three-four million people. But in a town of maybe 5,000 or so, they know you. So he tells me you better go, too. Said why? What do you mean? You are an American. I'm not an American. I'm a Frenchman. You were born in Texas, weren't you? Yeah, that don't mean anything to me. That's how I responded. So she and I went to Paris and lived there very precariously, you know, because we had rations, maybe 100 grand of meat a month, but I got some food from the black market and then I would go to my farm and get some food and sell some of that food to get money to pay the rent.

How were you able to earn money and how long did this go on for?

John Tschirhart: I earned money this way, in the black market. I would go and get half a pig from my farm, from my parent's farm, and then take it to Paris and sell it, and sometimes they change it for vegetables, but I would go to get some vegetables from the farms there. We were lucky that I could rely on my parent's farm.

Were you living with the bookkeeper in his apartment at that time? Where were you living in Paris?

John Tschirhart: I was living in a hotel. Down in the Clechy section of Paris and a very small, one room, I mean it was very bad. But then a friend of hers writes to her and says they are arresting foreigners. So she tells me, you've got to go to the United States. I said no, I am not going to go. I'll go if you go with me. I'm a French girl, I can't go with you. Well, we'll see. So a couple of days later, we go to the U.S. Embassy. Oh, in the meantime, the U.S. Embassy sent me a letter – all Americans who are wanting to go back to the States as soon as you can -

So the Embassy was aware of you being an American.

John Tschirhart: Oh, of course, they knew all the Americans and then they knew that I had moved – but so they wrote me a letter like they did to all Americans to repatriate as soon as possible. So I said no, I am not going. So for two or three months, it was an argument between her and me because I was a little younger mentally than she was, and she was very wise. She said you'll be safe over there. If you get arrested and go to a labor camp in Germany, you will never come back.

So was she the same age as you?

John Tschirhart: About one year older.

So you were about 20 and she was 21?

John Tschirhart: I was 20, she was 21, maybe 9 months older. But besides her age, she was much more mature, very poetic, very sentimental, fantastic, a rare human being. So eventually then when they chased us down the street one time, we were after curfew. We went gambling along the Seine River -

The French police?

John Tschirhart: Oh, the German Gestapo. So we were under the bridge and we heard the boots right over the bridge, and we hid and we held our breath. We ran and they saw us running, so they followed us. But it was dark kind of so we finally escaped. So that was the final warning to me. So when she was asleep, I got up early in the morning and I said darling, I'm gonna go and say goodbye to my family and I decided to go back to the United States.

Do you remember what date that might have been?

John Tschirhart: Oh yeah, I left Paris about mid-March 1941.

So from about June of 1940 to March of 1941 you were living with your girlfriend in Paris.

John Tschirhart: Yes, exactly.

And the entire time supporting yourself on the black market.

John Tschirhart: Yeah, and during that time, we were still very happy up to the time of course, and then I had to make a decision.

What were her thoughts and your thoughts while this was going on for all those months? Did you have faith that the war was going to end, or did you think that things were going to get better?

John Tschirhart: Oh no, the focus was on the fact that they were taking foreigners to labor camp. That was it.

So you lived day to day then.

John Tschirhart: You don't want to out-guess anything else. That was it. As an American, I was doomed, and so I understood that eventually. So I left about mid-March. Then they kept us about one month in Portugal before we could get passage.

So the American officials had you in Portugal?

John Tschirhart: The Red Cross was paying by the way. When I went to the Embassy, oh, when I went to the Embassy, they said we got everything ready for you Mr. Tschirhart. We pay for your trip. I said about my girlfriend? They says no, she can't go. There's a big scene in there, you know, where it says she can't go. So very dramatic goodbye at the Algaldo Stelitz before I left. And then so we arrived in Portugal, and during that month were many, many refugees wanting to go to America. You saw Casablanca? You know, Humphrey Bogart has something similar to that where refugees are landing in Morocco and Casablanca, waiting to get passage. And because we were 20s, and Roosevelt was beginning to talk about going to war about needing people in the Army, beefing up the forces and so on, so we got ahead of many

other refugees, a bunch of us kids, about four or five of us who were about 20 years old and we became very good friends. I arrived in New York about the 10th of April, 1941, and the Red Cross picked me up at the dock. All the other kids had families, you know, and I didn't have anybody, and the Red Cross picked me up and put me at the YMCA for about a week. In the meantime, they contacted my father's sister, Aunt Della, and she sent me a ticket. That's Aunt Della.

So she had not seen you since you were a baby?

John Tschirhart: That's it, she knew me when I was 5 months old. And of course immediately she sent the money for a bus ticket. So I took the Greyhound for the United States and landed in Texas and went to live with her for about until the end of the year. I worked across the street as a soda jerk. I couldn't speak a word of English.

What were your thoughts during all of this? What was going through your mind?

John Tschirhart: Bewildered, you know, strange. You just left your family, your girlfriend, although I was well treated there, so the future was uncertain to me. I didn't know what was going to happen, except when Pearl Harbor came, her son, Delbert, said hey, this is your chance to go back to France.

That was your cousin.

John Tschirhart: My cousin, Delbert. Yeah, Delbert and Robert, both of them died. She had two sons.

Do you remember where you were when Pearl Harbor was bombed?

John Tschirhart: Well, he told me that we declared war because Roosevelt declared the war.

So your cousin told you and that's the first you had heard.

John Tschirhart: And then a few days later they were calling for Army Air Corps, or navigator, bombardier, and pilots.

So you were working as a soda jerk.

John Tschirhart: Yeah, and I knew about 500 words of English.

So do you remember that exact moment? Were you working in the soda shop? Do you remember where you were when your cousin told you America has just gone to war?

John Tschirhart: No, I just went home, you know, there, and they were reading the newspaper. Oh no, they heard on the radio. We were listening to the radio to Roosevelt. My younger brother was too young, and he was playing with an airplane. My Uncle Sam, his name was Uncle Sam – and throughout my life I remembered him. He was a gentle soul, he was very good to me. He was my step uncle.

You said you had a younger brother. Did he leave France with you?

John Tschirhart: No, they all were French, all my brothers and sisters couldn't leave.

Oh, I thought you said you had a younger brother there, or was that a younger cousin?

John Tschirhart: That's her son. There were two sons, they were my cousins.

Because you left by yourself when you left from France.

John Tschirhart: Yes, oh yeah. A big scene when I go see my family and say goodbye, and they said oh, we all go to America, seven kids, you know, let's all go to America with John. But we can't go. Only I and father can go. He was American, I was American. The Germans would not let French people leave. Well, besides the Embassy would not. And my mother says, you know, she looks at him and says don't worry, Lucy, I'm not going. She said maybe you're gonna leave, too. So I left with very dramatic, my mother passed out, you know, when I left, and said goodbye on the train. She was very, very sensitive.

How much contact did you have with your girlfriend and your family?

John Tschirhart: Zero. That's what the movie is all about, zero, because OK, then I joined, but you see I had because then I joined the Army Air Corps, went to Cali Air Force Base. Then they classify me as a pilot. I don't know why, because my ___ was so damn bad, you know. But they classify me as a pilot, so I went to pilot school for a few months, but my English was so limited that when I was flying my P-19, I understood about one-third of what the instructor was telling me. He told me to take a 45 to the left, and I would take a 45 to the right, and wham, that was it. So they transferred me to Arlington Field near Houston to bombardier. So I graduated as a bombardier, commissioned a lieutenant. Then had several months of pre-combat training. During that time, that's how I met Jimmy Stewart at Boise, Idaho. I reported to him, to the squadron commander. He had his long seat on top of the desk. Then he called the sergeant and say, get him a bunk.

Wow, and that was at the air field at Boise, Idaho.

John Tschirhart: Yeah.

And you obviously knew who Jimmy Stewart was.

John Tschirhart: Oh, are you kidding? I used to watch him when I was a kid in France. So it was strange.

Boy, that's got to be surreal.

John Tschirhart: Yeah, so we spent about maybe one month there. Then they sent us to another field for a different combat training. Then eventually I made my crew, and we started flying B-17s. So I was training in B-17 after I was commissioned, and we did a lot of training, simulated combat missions. We used to bomb Boise, Idaho, and I used to get my cross hair on Boise.

What was the name of your unit, your bomb group?

John Tschirhart: We got shipped and very important, the fact when you are on the ship, you don't know where you are going. And me, I wanted to go to Europe. I didn't want to go to the Pacific. So not until we saw the coast of England that I knew that I was home again.

I mean my question was what unit were you in? What was the name of your group?

John Tschirhart: The 305th Bombardment Group, under the 8th Air Force.

And Jimmy Stewart was the commander of your bombardment group.

John Tschirhart: No, 305th Bombardment Group, that's in England. He was the squadron commander but later on he went there as a major.

So he was your squadron commander for training in Ohio.

John Tschirhart: He was squadron commander there, he was assigned there. But we didn't follow each other.

OK, I wasn't sure if they trained you all together.

John Tschirhart: Oh no, you go without your assignment. Only in England then they assign you, you go a week to some kind of unit and they say OK, you guys go to the 305th. So from the 305th, I used to bomb pretty near my home. And I had a lot of newspaper coverage because the press was very interested in my story. They called me the French refugee. In America, I'm a French, refugee, in France I'm an American.

Now of these clips you have here, were these English newspapers?

John Tschirhart: Oh, this is in San Antonio. The San Antonio press, you know, San Marcos, San Antonio, and then here, that's when I was recruited, and I didn't know I was going to be accepted because I told my cousin, I said no way, no way they're gonna accept me. I don't know enough English.

That's amazing.

John Tschirhart: So then here we go, 37 cadet, I'm in there. We go to Kelly Air Force Base. Then this is our bombardier squad group.

We're looking right now at pictures of members of your unit and it has their names and their home towns. Under yours it says home town is Paris, France.

John Tschirhart: I wish, I don't know where those guys, we became good friends especially with the same initials. We were in the same barracks. I don't know what ever happened. I'm sure half of them probably never come back. So here I am now, Victory Field here. Oh no, I was doing some pilot training there.

So when did you reach England?

John Tschirhart: I think it was September – no, March 1944, around March 1944.

So you spent quite a bit of time -

John Tschirhart: That I arrived, but between March – wait a minute. No, no, '43. I'm sorry. It was somewhere mid-1943 because I flew 35 combat missions. I mean sometimes I flew two, three a day. Because sometimes we would fly at night and we would drop leaflets.

How long did you spend, so basically after Pearl Harbor was attacked in December of '41, that's when you decided you wanted to sign up, and then from there how long did you spend in training?

John Tschirhart: Well, I graduated in January 1943. Then I probably spent four or five months of pre-combat training. They're not going to send you just after you graduated from school. You went through a lot of stuff.

So you really went over a year of training from when you signed up before you were able to actually get to Europe.

John Tschirhart: Well, I signed up in March, probably I was accepted in March 1942. For the paperwork, you know, and then so March 1942 until probably mid-1943 when we arrived in England. Then I re-upped twice, I re-upped, in other words because after 10 or 15, they send you back to the States. But because I was so close, you know, my objective was to go to France, not to go back to the Pacific. So I had a kind of argument with my commander, and I told the commander that my family was living in France, I had a girlfriend there. He didn't know. He said you mean you lived in France before? I said yes sir, 21 years. You speak French? I said yes sir. Better than English. He called now headquarters. I changed Supreme Allied Expeditionary Forces in London. He said I got a lieutenant here, he doesn't want to go back to the States, but I've got to send him back. I understand that you guys are setting up a psychological warfare division. Then he tells him about me. Send him right over. So I transferred from the Air Force under temporary duty to the psychological warfare division of SHAEF under Eisenhower. Then they put me in what they called the 305th Mobile Radio Broadcasting Company, and in other words, that was my chance to go to France with the Army. With the Air Force I couldn't go to France because we flew from England.

So you would do broadcasts into France.

John Tschirhart: Yes. Then on D-day, here's my Mobile Radio Broadcasting Company (picture) – for two or three months I was training in intelligence. This was kind of a cover-up in a way. We'd go right behind, or sometimes behind the line, sometimes in front of the line, and broadcast to the French people. So I had an assignment and I was in charge of a broadcasting unit. It was an ambulance converted into a radio station. So I would go through the different villages right after the liberation and then we would do recording of intelligence from the people.

What were the types of things that you would say in those broadcasts?

John Tschirhart: Primarily the news. I was receiving the news from the BBC through our system, and I was translating in into French. Of course the news, and sometimes the ___ affairs that just started, they would make announcements. But also we gathered intelligence from some of these French people who had lived under the occupation. Then it took two months for the Normandy campaign, which by the way the French gave me a medal of tribulate, and he came

right over to the University of Texas to give it to me, to the veterans. That's where I met Laura Bush.

Oh really, so just not too long ago then.

John Tschirhart: Not too long ago, yeah. So here I am, we are about 50 miles from Paris. The American troops, Patton, I was under Patton, and Patton is ready to enter Paris, and De Gaulle went to see Eisenhower, said don't you let Patton get to Paris before we do. And Eisenhower sent the 3rd Army back to the west, including me.

Oh wow, yeah.

John Tschirhart: And I went AWOL. Things were kind of, I was really, I had two assistants with me, and I was really on my own, any judgment. So I told my sergeant, I'm going to go on a mission for a couple of days. Then I went to Paris to the hotel.

Did you take your vehicle, your broadcasting truck with you? How did you get to Paris?

John Tschirhart: First, I had Opella, I requisitioned an Opella, we had a lot of German cars, you know, and from the motor pool. So I just go to the motor pool -

So an Opel was a car?

John Tschirhart: I got an Opella car, and then it broke down, then I finished on a bicycle. Anyway, so I arrived in Paris when actually it was still, the Germans had gone, it was still some French were pro-German, fighting in the street, but it didn't bother me. So I got to the hotel and then that's how I found out that she was dead.

Wow.

John Tschirhart: So, then they sent me, when Paris was liberated they sent me to the radio station in Luxembourg. I went there in radio Luxembourg for a little while. Then they reassigned me to Scott Field.

Let's talk more about when you got into Paris and you found out that your girlfriend was deceased. Who told you and how was the news broken to you?

John Tschirhart: When I was three years away from my family in San Antonio and throughout my military training, we didn't have any communication. I used to write all the time, and they used to write me all the time. I only got one letter in three years that passed from my family. As far as I knew, we thought it was the Germans, of course, that intercepted the mail. They were censoring the mail, opening all the letters coming from overseas. But in my film, when I got to Paris and saw my friend, said ha, was still there, because I went to see him. She was not in the hotel. And the landlady in the hotel was scared when she saw me with my .45, you know. I'll tell you she was scared because the first American she ever saw. She recognized me because she knew me from the time I lived there. So she said oh, she's gone, she's been gone a long time, blah-blah. So I run to my friend's apartment, to Jerard, the same guy who was with me in San Dizet when we worked together, and he tells me she is dead. He says we think that she got killed by the Germans because she worked underground. Now, that's a story when I came back to America to Scott Field and I didn't want to look for her grave. I didn't want to make it factual in

other words. Her mother didn't like me anyway. I didn't want to go to her family. Still, could be a mistake. So I come back to the United States and I started working on my screen play, and the part there where she is dead and what happened when I went to France and looked for a location – I was going to produce it myself with my own money – I need \$9 million now to do it – but I was in France and there is a director, very well known, Donichet Gallet, and he said, I don't want to work on your Malou film, but I want to do a documentary on you. So we begin doing some research about Malou and me, and he said I'll come with my crew to the United States and I'll follow you to wherever you were, Cali Field, Boise, you know -

When was this?

John Tschirhart: 1994. So this is where there's a difference of opinion about how she died. So when I came back, he wanted \$200,000 to do the documentary, OK, and he had a nice script, a very good idea, but I didn't want to do it. I eventually did it myself, All About John is essentially what he wanted to do and I did it myself later on for \$50,000. Anyway, he calls me and leaves the message on the phone in 1996 I believe, and he said John, and I didn't answer the phone, and he left a message – John, I got something to tell you but I need something very important, I need your permission to tell you. It's rather strange, you know, how do I know? But I had a strange feeling he was going to talk about Malou. And I called him back and he said I found Malou's grave. She did not die killed by the Germans. She died five months after you left of typhoid fever, pregnant.

Wow.

John Tschirhart: So there are two stories. Because I finished my screen play before he called me. I kept the same ending because my screen play is 75% factual and 25% cinematic, when you write a screen play. It's not a documentary, it's a movie drama.

Have you ever gone to visit her grave?

John Tschirhart: Not yet.

But you plan to?

John Tschirhart: Not yet. I'm going to France in two weeks. But I probably won't go.

Why, it's too emotional?

John Tschirhart: I'm still – if I don't see the grave, I still -

Have you ever talked to any of her family?

John Tschirhart: When he went to investigate, the only family she had was a sister-in-law, and she's the one who told him. She may be dead by now, I don't know. But then she doesn't have too much of family left behind.

That's a sad story.

John Tschirhart: Yeah. Then in 1946, my family packed and came to Texas. Then went to live in LaCrosse which is right next to Castroville.

How did your family survive the war?

John Tschirhart: My father was arrested and my brother, Henry, we were arrested one time by the Germans because he was actually helping American flyers who had fallen, parachuted around the area, and he was hiding them in some dark room in a barn in the haystack around the back somewhere, and then he would pass them on to the next guy. That's what they were doing. There was a system for helping those Americans to go back to England. He was involved in that.

How did the Germans find out that he was doing that?

John Tschirhart: I never had somebody, my brother doesn't want to talk too much about it. He's the only one, he's in Fort Worth. My father died without giving me the details. All I had is from my sister who lived right there in Austin with me, but she was working away from the farm, so she only knew certain parts. One part that is very important is the fact that my father was living alone with a German because he spoke German, I mean Alsatian. So he was getting away with a lot of stuff.

How long was he, he was arrested, was he in prison for a period of time?

John Tschirhart: They were in Paris in the big, the pact they had in Congress where it showed 7 were arrested – my father, my brother, and 5 leaders of the underground in that little town. But one of them was a good friend of mine. He was a senator actually, but he was a senator who worked in an office in the capital, but that's where he lived, in that small town – Senator Moscret, a very good friend of the family. There were 5 of them leaders, but young guys, too. They were in a truck, and the Germans picked them up. And my mother told us, said we'll never see them again. They were the only two plus one younger brother of another brother who never came back. So three came back out of the 7, and my father, and I never know why they let him go. I don't know why they let him go. I never had a chance. When my family came, see I was not working on the screen play. I was not doing a documentary. I was actually working in Vietnam for the state department, you know. Today I would ask questions, you know, and write it down.

Do you know how long he was in prison for?

John Tschirhart: Oh, they were gone maybe three or four days. The others got killed, and they were studying the little town because there was a doctor there and very prominent people, the senator, you know. And the senator wanted to put me in the French Air Force by the way. I started training when I was in San Dizet courting my girl, and there was a movie star called Shalmulla, and he was a sergeant, and his job was to train people before they got in the Army. That was his job. So we spent weekends fooling around in the woods and exercising and all that. So I was planning on going into the French Air Force. But of course after the Germans came in -

So all your family was able to survive the war and come to Texas.

John Tschirhart: Oh yeah, in the farm, you know, they had more because they were confiscating. But for example, they kept a pig in the attic and they put a muzzle on the pig so he wouldn't make any noise. In other words they cheated. That's how the French survived. They had to cheat. But they also were feeding the underground. They would come at night and collect food. So my father played both games to save his family.

Yeah, absolutely. Before the Nazi's had invaded Germany, or actually after they had invaded, did you ever think at any point of joining the French underground resistance, or any sorts of things?

John Tschirhart: Oh no, not the resistance because I didn't want to leave her. But my friends Jerard was in the resistance, after I left. But no, my idea was to get into the French Air Force.

What was your feeling before you left the United States? What was your feeling towards the French that collaborated with the Germans? The Vichy government and those sorts? Did you think of them as traitors?

John Tschirhart: We, me, my family, we hated collaborators even more than the Germans. In fact, we had some soldiers who were very friendly with us. My mother, we'd cook for, she always cooked for everybody, you know, pies, and they loved her cooking. So they got a lot of favors for some of these Germans, chocolate and beer. So they had some bad relations with some Germans, but then some good relations with others. So with me, I was not involved at all. I mean it was completely out of my thoughts. It was just her.

How did the two of you meet?

John Tschirhart: Oh, at the dance hall. Every Sunday there was dancing, the town dance hall, and that's how I met her, and every weekend we'd go dancing. She was a very great dancer. So they were very happy, almost two years very happy. In Paris, you know, there was some problem because of the occupation, but we maintained our relationship and that's what she used to say, let's go to the Seine River and forget about the Germans and have fun.

When was it that you first decided you wanted to write a screen play about your life story?

John Tschirhart: When I was in Hollywood and was struggling as an actor and producer, I met a girl who had a crush on me, and she was working for a publishing company, and I told her my story.

When would this have been, in the 50s?

John Tschirhart: 1948. A year after I arrived in Hollywood. And she and I had an intimate relationship, and she had a crush on me. I liked her but – she thought that my story would make a great book, and that began, but I didn't have time to write the book. So throughout the year while I was in Vietnam, it began to dawn on me that I should write a screen play, and I began probably writing in 1993 probably. But you see, I left Vietnam in '68, then I went to Tripoli for another year, then I was until '84.

So during that time you were working for the state department?

John Tschirhart: The state department and the Department of the Army. In Vietnam I was advisor to the Ministry of Information and Education. I got enough to write a book about Vietnam because as an advisor to the Minister of Information and Education and being bilingual, I saw exactly what the double game the Vietnamese were playing with the Americans. They were keeping double books, and our aid was being wasted, and I would write reports on it, but it would go to my chief of U.S. aid and my chief would say John, you're right, that's the truth, but

I can't send it to the embassy because LBJ told, the embassy said I don't want those damn American advisors to write any negative reports, because he was trying to win support for the war. So advisors were shackled. In 1968, they reassigned me to Fort Hood. You know why. And I worked for the Public Affairs at Fort Hood for about 14 years, and I retired from Boise Air Force, Reserve and the civil service in 1984. Then my daughter was 15 years old and I wanted her to have a better school, so we came to live in Austin. And from 1984, then I began to think about writing stories and things.

So you had much success in selling your screen play or having people look at it?

John Tschirhart: I spent four years, from 1944 to 1948, two years in France and two years in Texas, getting everything ready. I interviewed 400 actors. I had Camp Mabry, they were going to provide a lot of tanks and a lot of armored stuff for me. I had location – I forgot the name of it. I had a staff that was looking for a location. And I went to France to do the part over there. This was going to be shot half in France and half here to follow the story. When I came back from France, my budget was a million and a quarter. All I had was \$250,000 cash, and the million would be deferred. In other words people would have to defer their salary until the film was distributed. Then I went to see the film commission and the director, I forgot his name, the Texas Film Commission, and he told me, John, don't do it. This is too great of a story. You can't make it with a million and a quarter. And as an independent, you're going to be caught in the middle and you won't be able to finish it. So he said here's what I recommend, for you to get yourself a marketing agent, then do it the other way, which means looking, getting a distribution contract first. When you are an independent, you shoot it and then you go to a distributor. But like most big guys do, they get a distribution contract. The distributor says yeah, I like your story, I like your stars, I like your crew, OK, I'll give you a contract to so many theaters all over the world guaranteed. You have a minimum guarantee.

Have you ever thought of just selling your story?

John Tschirhart: No, not now because I have a contract with my marketing agent in Dallas and I don't want to do that anyway because I'm the producer, I'm co-producing with them, so if that film makes money, then I am loaded. Now we have a \$9.5 million budget right now, and if we spend a lot of many years kind of fiddling around, my agent didn't do me too good because he had six other films, so he was putting Malou in his package of six other films. Now he changed his mind, he got rid of the other six films and he's concentrating on Malou.

So you have confidence -

John Tschirhart: Yeah, we'll make it, when I don't know. Spielberg took 10 years to do Schindler's List. Nobody wanted to talk to him, and I'm a nobody compared to him. And as an independent, I'm kind of an unknown and I can direct this film better than anybody else, but they won't let me direct it because the distributor is not going to agree to give me a ___ percent contract unless we give him a known director. They won't give us a contract unless we give them two international stars, and so on and so forth. We have to produce the film on paper before we get a distributor, a bond, we also need a ___ bond, which is a million dollar policy. Then we need the money people. You got three huge elements in there, each one has to be satisfied and each one depends on the other. Can you get the money? Can you get the distribution? Can you get the bond?

So your goal is to do it yourself more or less rather than writing a screen play and selling a screen play.

John Tschirhart: Oh no, because I'm getting \$100,000 out of the budget anyway. I'm not going to get anymore by selling the screen play. I'll get \$100 for my production budget for the screen play. I'm not interested in the screen play, I'm interested in making the film. But that's not my objective. So I'm going to France right now because when I was in France, the number one television station offered me \$400,000 to help me, provided that I would give them an exclusive distribution for France, which was OK. The only problem was they didn't want the girl to die at the end, but that's why I kind of let it go because I want the girl to die at the end, because this is not the real end because I got a metaphysical scene after that where she is coming back from heaven. If there is a religious kind of ending, you know, kind of -

Well it's an amazing story and you said you had gone out to Hollywood in the late 40s. How long did you spend in Hollywood?

John Tschirhart: I worked in Hollywood from 1948 until 1951 doing some small parts, I guess starting a couple of episodes at Paramount. Then I started to produce a series of radio shows, detective mystery. I was starring in that, called Monsieur Destiné, and a guy who changed his clothes to catch his gangs. So we did 13 masters and then we sent them throughout the radio stations. The radio was still big then before we switched to television. Then from 1948 to 1952, in '52 I go to France, Paramount Vice President Arnold Baker, Vice President of 20th Century Fox, said John, I'll make a deal with you. You go to France and set up a co-production. We provide the American star, we provide the crew, we provide the director, you go down there and get the studio, get the location, get a script. And I was a nobody. And we shoot cam, never wrote a contract, because I knew if I were in there, if I set it up, then I had that to bargain with. So I go to France, meet several people, and one of the big production companies down there were glad to collaborate with 20th Century Fox and make a picture. We worked on Charlotte of Mexico, the wife of Maximilian, who became crazy after they killed him in Mexico. That was the story, and I wrote it and they had it in France. I wrote it in English.

So it was a movie that you guys made.

John Tschirhart: That's what we were gonna make, Charlotte of Mexico, great story.

It got made?

John Tschirhart: No. The third dimension technology came in with the glasses, Polaroid glasses.

Yeah, 3D.

John Tschirhart: You are too young probably to remember that.

Yeah, I'm familiar with it though.

John Tschirhart: But they had appeared it in there where they brought in this new technology and all of a sudden there was a revolution in making pictures, and now we're going to have a third dimension. But because the French government sponsored the film in France, it's the government that funds it because they get the taxes in return. So my producer down there,

Tushrer, went to see the government, the particular film department, to say that we need to do that in third dimension. I see American in 3D, we are not gonna do this in third dimension with the glasses and all that, no, no way, this is just a fad. The Americans will never make it. So that was my deal in France was dead. I go to Spain just at the time that America reinstated its diplomatic relations with Spain because Franco was a friend, just at that time. I got an idea there must be a lot of money down there because they couldn't invest anywhere. I go to Barcelona, I meet two guys who were big producers and distributors, and they said we got the money. So I started working on the script for Gary Cooper called *A Cowboy in Spain*, I think, I started working with some of those writers and all that, and I got involved in a murder there, by the way, while I was in Majorca. I lived in Majorca 5 years, and it's a long story, but I got involved, because the guy who killed the girl was called Johnny in Palma Majorca, and me, John Tschirhart, I also was Johnny, so when the girl got killed and they said Johnny killed them, and the dumb Majorcan police came to see me. But my Spanish was pretty good. I told him you got the wrong guy.

Obviously you were cleared of that.

John Tschirhart: Oh yeah, just the suspicion lasted about one day. Then while I was about part of the way working with the French – I was a hero down there, but I was the first American since the reinstatement of the diplomatic relations to come to Spain to do business. So the press went all over me. Arnold Baker sent me a telegram. He said I quit Paramount to go into the production of Polaroid glasses. There were millions to be made – all the theaters asking for glasses.

Let me ask you two last questions before we wrap it up. It's been a great interview. Do you remember where you were when the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan? And what your reactions were?

John Tschirhart: Truman, what year?

August of '45.

John Tschirhart: Oh, I was in Scott Field. I was an education officer at Scott Air Force Base. They deserve it. But you know, I was involved in Scott Field. We all were very happy that Truman made the decision.

What about VE Day? Do you remember where you were for VE Day?

John Tschirhart: Well, I was watching all the Navy kissing the girl in New York on Times Square. So I was pretty happy, except you know, what still because of my girl, you know, in other words for me it was not -

So you were in Times Square?

John Tschirhart: No, I was watching the celebration on TV, that famous picture where that guy is kissing that nurse?

Where were you when victory in Europe was declared? Were you still in Europe? Or had you gotten back to the United States?

John Tschirhart: Well, I went to Europe several times to visit my mother's family down there, but I was there from 1996 to 1998 to work on my picture.

Well, my question on VE Day, Victory over Europe Day - ?

John Tschirhart: Oh, that was, remember they sent me back in September to Scott Field, I believe September-October 1944, so I was there.

So you were already back state side.

John Tschirhart: Oh yeah, I was in Scott Field both for the end of the war and then the bombing in Japan.

Those are just some standard questions we always ask our WWII veterans to add to our catalog. Well I guess, I know you are on a parking meter and we don't want you to get a ticket. We've had a good long interview. If there are any final thoughts that you want to leave future listeners with, this is your chance.

John Tschirhart: I am so grateful that I decided to repatriate to the United States. Today I am very patriotic. I am a very conservative American and I believe in traditional America, and for the past 20-30 years, I've did everything I could. I marched down Congress Avenue for certain causes, and I'm writing a book also, and one of the chapters, Freedom is Not Free, and What I Did for Uncle Sam, also one chapter, because I am doing a lot of letters to the senators, back and forth, and I was selected delegate to the convention in Houston, you know, Republican Convention. So I feel a sense of obligation towards this country. I don't resent and everything in combat, some of them do, you know, on the contrary I am still serving through VFW, I'm serving as well as I can. I still got a film-making office. So that's my thoughts, you know, Thank you America, and I'll keep on helping as much as I can.

Well I know everybody here thanks you for your service and sacrifice that you've made, and that's the theme I think of the interviews that we are doing is to thank our veterans and those that have served and so these stories won't be forgotten by future generations.

John Tschirhart: But a lot of these, they are very humble and sometimes they don't even want to tell their story. But I'm a media man.

Well we appreciate your story because you are right, there are a lot of veterans that haven't shared it, or can't, or are no longer here today to share with us, and Commissioner Patterson of the Land Office is a big history buff and he is a veteran as well, and I'm a veteran, and a lot of people here are, so we salute you for your service.

John Tschirhart: I deeply appreciate that and I respect you and appreciate the fact that you are a veteran, too. But one thing I'd like for you to do is to send me a letter to confirm the interview so I'll give it to my daughter so she might be able to find it someplace when I'm dead.

Well beyond that, we are actually going to make copies of this interview, burn it onto disk, and we'll send you as many copies as you want so you'll have those to give to your family.

John Tschirhart: Oh I see, that's nice, because I just finished my arrangement for my funeral.

We'll have that and eventually with your permission we'll make copies of some of these photos and put it on our web site.

John Tschirhart: You are welcome to hold onto this for about two weeks.

Yeah, I'll go through and make copies of it and then I'll mail it to you.

John Tschirhart: OK, then this is also, make a copy and send it back. And this is my screen play. It's a demo, I did a 30-minute demo on the screen play. Remember, this story is World War II, from 1939 this is screen play, 1939 until 1944, so that just sort of dedication part.

Well let me go ahead and turn off the interview, but we thank you very much and that concludes our interview with Mr. Tshirhart.

[End of recording]