

Courtenay Wright Oral History Interview

September 17, 2013

Interviewed by Aaron Pylinski

- Pylinski: Okay, my name's Aaron Pylinski, and I'm here with Mr. Sydney Wright.
- Wright: Well, Sydney is my first name, but the child of course Sydney was transferred to Kidney, so Courtenay is what...
- Pylinski: Okay, Mr. Courtenay Wright, and we're here to do your story of service.
- Wright: When?
- Pylinski: Beg your pardon, Sir? We're here to do your Stories of Service, and we're just going to go through kind of pretty much the whole story of Mr. Courtenay Wright. We'll just start from the very beginning: just a brief who you are, you're name, when you were born and where you were born.
- Wright: I'm Courtenay Wright. I was born on October the 16th, 1923, in Vancouver, B.C. Grew up there, got a Bachelor of Science degree from the UBC. At nineteen, left on April the 5th; the Canadian Navy snatched me up and shot me over to Europe. Well, Britain, which succeeded in staying without Germans on them by that time, but of course, Europe was completely covered by Germany.
- Pylinski: Oh yeah, there was something of a turmoil.
- Wright: And I was in Portsmouth for two or three months, went through training, and crawled around while a machine gun was firing above me, and other important things like that.
- Pylinski: Let's start with what it was like growing in Vancouver at the time. We can work our way through when you finished school, and then into your Stories of Service as well.
- Wright: Vancouver—when I was growing up—was a rather low-level city where major jobs were for cutting down trees and selling alcohol—which was not approved by the local government.
- Pylinski: So there was Prohibition going on in Canada?
- Wright: There was Prohibition.
- Pylinski: Was that Canada as a whole or just British Columbia?

Wright: It was Canada as a whole, but different for different provinces.

Pylinski: Okay, so different provinces enforced or didn't enforce it?

Wright: I'm not sure that Quebec was the same.

Pylinski: That's interesting; I never knew that Prohibition laws were ever in effect in Canada, but you learn something new every day. Did you have any brothers and sisters growing up?

Wright: Yes, my brother was seven older than I was; my sister five years.

Pylinski: Okay, so you're the youngest out of three?

Wright: Yeah. My brother was in the Canadian Air Force—training others to fly planes.

Pylinski: Oh, very cool. Excellent.

Wright: My sister was in London during most of the war.

Pylinski: Okay, wow, so your family had a pretty big part of the war, more or less, with your sister being overseas, and your brother teaching people how to fly. Was it ever a want for you to join? I know you said the Navy snatched you up.

Wright: No, I wanted to be in the Navy or the Army and managed to get there.

Pylinski: Excellent. What about your parents; what did your parents do?

Wright: Well my father was sixty when I was born, and both he and my mother had grown up in England. His brother was a major businessman in Burma, and my father went out there with him in his early days, and he was lumbering by using elephants to take down trees of...

Friend: Teak.

Pylinski: For teak?

Wright: Teak, yeah. And hauling them down to the river where they could be floated down further, and do portage.

Pylinski: Right, for export.

Wright: Yeah.

Pylinski: So your mother lived over there with him as well?

Wright: No, she hadn't met him at that time.

Pylinski: Oh, okay.

Wright: For reasons that I don't know, he landed up in Vancouver, and so did she. They met, and married some time later, and produced this family.

Pylinski: Okay. So, with the lead-up to World War II, what was going on in the country when you were getting ready to enlist?

Wright: Well, I was in high school, and...1923 plus nineteen gets you to 1942. And actually, when it had turned in '43, I was in—called the UBC at that point.

Pylinski: University of British Columbia?

Wright: Yeah. And I remember on April the 5th of '43, I was taken by the Canadian Navy, then and essentially shipped over to England.

Pylinski: Okay, so were you drafted, in essence?

Wright: Well, I just applied for it because I liked the idea of work in the Navy, and got up to Portsmouth, and a fair amount of military drilling, and then I was told to go up to the north of England where a ship was being built, the Arianda-class. The Arianda, they had one done, but in training. These were fast minelayers, prevalent to a modest cruiser, and the one I went to was the Apollo, which was just finished being constructed at that point.

Pylinski: So it was still pretty new, then.

Wright: Yeah, I got there before it was out at sea, and then it went out to sea and me with it.

Pylinski: Yeah, so when I got your questionnaire, I was doing some research, and I know in the '40s when the Royal Canadian Navy was starting to build up, they got a lot of old US surplus—US Navy surplus ships, and they were old, cramped. I guess you got lucky with a newer ship.

Wright: A lot of old-age destroyers, which were sent over to England by the US at that point.

Pylinski: Were you on any of those ships going over?

Wright: No, I wasn't.

Pylinski: How did you get over to England?

Wright: On the Queen Elizabeth.

Pylinski: Oh, okay. So you were on a nicer ship. I was going to ask, how was the trip across the North Atlantic or whatever?

Wright: I had a berth in the normal one for marriages, but there I was sleeping with twenty-four other guys in the same place. The Elizabeth was a fast ship; it could escape anything, any submarine which they thought was following them.

Pylinski: Right. At the time there was definitely a German U-boat threat.

Wright: Yes, I mean, they were taking down a huge number of ships—lost ships, which were shipping materials to England.

Pylinski: So when you joined the Navy, what was the job that you joined for? What position did you fill?

Wright: Well, I knew which end of a soldering iron to pick up, so I was made a radar officer.

Pylinski: Okay, what kind of training did you have to do for that?

Wright: I figured these things out myself.

Pylinski: Okay. Did they have a special school for radar training?

Wright: No.

Pylinski: Because radar was still fairly new at the time.

Wright: Yes, it was. It wasn't even called radar at that time.

Pylinski: Okay. They had another name for it?

Wright: Something, I've forgotten what it was.

Pylinski: LORAN? I think.

Wright: Could have been. But then, I got experience by being on this ship and learning how to climb up a mast. Did it once.

Pylinski: Were you scared of heights?

Wright: No. I remember the ship turned and the smoke coming out of it was blasting me—extremely hot. I climbed down very fast at that point. Actually, radar had first been tried by cruisers in England in the late '30s before the war started, but it was only on two of their ships. But the Royal Air Force realized what these things could be used for, and commandeered all the Brits—who, again, knew which end of a soldering iron to pick up for them. So when I started, got in with the Canadians, they shifted us over in a hurry to Britain because they wanted people—the Navy wanted people who knew something about...

Pylinski: Well things were heating up pretty quick.

Wright: What would work and what wouldn't.

Pylinski: What were you studying in college?

Wright: Physics.

Pylinski: Physics. So that might have had something to do with it too, you think? I mean, if you know physics, you definitely know anything and everything about a soldering iron, let alone which end to pick up.

Wright: It was just a bachelor's degree at that point. Actually, a very good chemistry teacher there, and then a physics teacher who didn't know his hole from a [WRIGHT CENSORS HIMSELF] in the ground; long story. So filled my eyes with a bunch of, "Say I know more than these guys." I learned a fair amount of that by myself.

Pylinski: Self-taught man. So what were your views on the enemy you were getting ready to face?

Wright: Well, Germany had taken over all of Europe, and this was no war where it was much trouble about whether you should be in it or out of it, such as the Vietnam War. And while we were in the Vietnam War, we never should have been there. We lost tens of thousands of brave men, and some women, in the military and in the Air Force there. And it was just this drive by some Catholics, particularly, to get in there, which was how it happened, and we got related there, but it was a point.

Pylinski: But the idea of fighting against fascism in Germany?

Wright: Well, that was going on, and we didn't want Britain to get taken over. Although there was an effort there, but it was put down principally by the Navy and the Air Force. At that time, you know, it was: you didn't really argue about whether you were going to be in the military or not, you were just in.

Pylinski: Right, it wasn't a matter of *if*, it was a matter of *when*.

Wright: Yeah, it was clearly critical that take place. So, you know, that was when I was nineteen or twenty.

Pylinski: Right, headstrong, courageous.

Wright: I don't think so.

Paretsky: I think he was.

Pylinski: Well, that's a matter of opinion. That's one of those things, when you're young you don't think about how tough you are until you look back on it.

Wright: Well, I was never hurt, particularly.

Pylinski: Well, I mean based on your job and your position, you did your part for the war effort. Everybody has a job; not everyone's a gun-wielding grunt on the frontline or whatnot.

Wright: Right. Well, I preferred the Navy to the Army.

Pylinski: Absolutely, absolutely.

Wright: About twenty of us went over in the group, the one I was with. And with Wright in that group, and he perished.

Pylinski: In combat?

Wright: Yeah, on a ship, went down with him.

Pylinski: So there was a group of twenty of you guys. Was it twenty men that you all went through the same training together?

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: Were there a lot of friends—I mean, did you guys follow each other through the war?

Wright: No, we were friendly with each other, but I didn't have any relationship later with them.

Pylinski: Okay, so basically, everybody kind of went their own way?

Wright: Yeah, a lot of these people were along with the Apollo: this was this very fine minelayer, which could go forty knots, which was quite unusual for ships, for warships.

Pylinski: Yeah, I know you were saying that the HMS Apollo could sail from Gibraltar as the sun was setting and reach Malta and be back before the Germans even knew.

Wright: Because it got dark.

Pylinski: Were you involved in those missions, going through the Mediterranean?

Wright: No, I got aboard the Apollo just as it was being launched. It went up to Scapa Flow, north of Scotland, which was a fine place for ships to be. And actually, there was a battleship in there, which in the early days of the war was sunk by a German submarine; brave guy came in, torpedoed this ship—which was just stationary there—and it sank along with 700 people, and the German officer got out of there without being attacked.

Pylinski: Without even a scratch.

Wright: Yeah.

Pylinski: So how long were you up at Scapa Flow?

Wright: Let's see. From Scapa Flow, we went out and did a workup of the ship, and in the following...about April we started coming down and I remember in—let's see, the west of England, at about 100 miles north of how far you can get in England, I was translating some secret state, which gave the date for holding the Normandy invasion. Then, I went on down there in the ship—this was in Southampton—and I remember watching all these ships, small craft, large craft, all sorts of things, going out on the night of June the 5th.

Pylinski: Yeah, Getting ready for D-Day.

Wright: Going over to Normandy, the Normandy area. And on the 7th, Eisenhower ordered our ship; he was the general in charge for that battle, and we took him over to Normandy and became the headquarters ship for the battle that was going on then. I've said that the Americans were in ferocious fights, and they weren't properly supported, in my opinion, by General Montgomery.

Pylinski: Right, Omaha Beach was one of the hairiest situations.

Wright: Omaha Beach was a ferocious fight.

Pylinski: How do you feel that Montgomery didn't support the Americans as much?

Wright: He should have gone in to detract. He should have gone fiercely into the part east of Omaha Beach, and that would have required Germans; all of German army, which was rather thin at that time. I mean, it was mostly over fighting the Russians; he should have detracted people from there and made life a little less miserable there for our guys. You know, I was still Canadian at that point, and felt that I could tell Montgomery where to go to, based on my feeling about what should have happened. I remember I'm on our ship coming in—we had an admiral aboard, we had several generals aboard since we were the headquarters ship, and then I was up on the bridge as I pointed out in this about ten feet from Eisenhower, and I looked up at him—a little to the starboard ahead—and saw some rough waters, and within a few seconds our ship had banged into something underneath. It didn't stick us there, but it pulled the screws back. So instead of being able to do forty knots we could do three.

Pylinski: Oh yeah, slowed you down significantly.

Wright: So we were not such a popular ship after that for the top guys, and they were taken off to some ship which could behave itself, and we drifted over to England—being aware that I was on the bridge most of the night wondering if some of these submersibles—which were made—would get us.

Pylinski: Oh yeah. Easy pickings, right?

Wright: Yeah.

Pylinski: What was it like having Eisenhower and all those big-name generals on the ship at the time?

Wright: Well, I didn't see much of them, you know; I did when we ran aground. They were having a conference inside; I was not invited. So then, when we had been cut down to three knots—slowly shifting over towards England and keeping an eye out for what something underneath we didn't like could do to us—we weren't hit by any torpedoes. And as we slowly went back, with all this stuff coming over from Europe towards England and being most unwelcome there because it was being shot at as much as they could with anti-aircraft guns—and these were these little things making a lot of noise, fire coming out of their rear ends. And didn't know what they were at that point—I think this was the first time they were sent, which was after the battle had started there. They were the V1s, which carried explosives and aimed principally at London and would shut off the power some place over London, and if you were there—which at one point, I was; while our ship was being repaired, I was on Earth, not just water.

Pylinski: So you were in London when they were getting hit with some of these V1s.

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: What was that like?

Wright: Well, you know, these things were coming over and they were [IMITATES V1 ENGINE NOISE].

Pylinski: That's a loud noise to hear right before.

Wright: Then, sort of a long thirty seconds, they would go BOOM fairly generally, rather close to you.

Pylinski: Right. How close were you to some of these explosions?

Wright: Well, some of them, down the street. But, you know, I was twenty: live forever. But a lot of people were hurt by those things, were killed. There were also things which I first saw when riding in a London bus; you can get up on the second floor of that. And I was looking up, and there was a flash in the sky, and about two seconds later, the bus shook from the acoustic...

Pylinski: Yeah, and the shock wave, right?

Wright: Yeah, and the shock noise came down, which made us wondering what this was. That wasn't a V1, it was a V2; these were rockets.

Pylinski: Large rockets, right.

Wright: Large rockets, and they caused a great deal of damage in England. I mean, that one didn't cause anything in particular—besides being a little hard on my ears—but others did.

Pylinski: Right, the V1s, definitely.

Wright: Yeah, the V1s seemed to be in fairly large numbers coming in. But I only saw one of these V2s—or at least heard it, 'cause that's when I looked up and saw a flash in the sky.

Pylinski: So you were in London while the Apollo was being repaired?

Wright: A bit, yes.

Pylinski: Did you have a job? I mean, what were your normal duties while you were on shore?

Wright: Well, I was called back to Canada a little while, then somewhat later, sent back first to England, and then from there, down through the Mediterranean—which at that point, no longer belonged to the Germans—and went across the Mediterranean to Egypt, down the Suez Canal, and then below that, went down with Ethiopia along down there, along the side. Remarkable things seemed to happen there—with blue skies, and then rainbows which seemed to fall...not circles but parts of Ethiopia. Very strange. And finally, we get down near the bottom, and we'd go around Aden, and went over to Colombo. And then, from Colombo is the center, is the major city in those islands—that island, really. And I went across on an interesting train, which had nothing over us to Trincomalee—which was up somewhat near the north of Ceylon, the island there. And there, I got aboard the London, which was a heavy cruiser, which was getting prepared to get wound up in a battle in the Pacific, but it was a little late for that. And we dropped a couple of atomic bombs on Japan and the war ended.

Pylinski: So when you went back to Canada, was this still 1944?

Wright: Forty-five, really.

Pylinski: It was '45, okay. So you were in London for a significant amount of time then?

Wright: No, I'd spent a lot of time doing other things.

Pylinski: What were you doing when you went back to Canada?

Wright: Well, it was very fine in treating its military people and paid for their education. For me, I got to—I decided to go down to Berkley and get in the university there. My sponsor there was Emilio Sprey, which was one of Enrico Fermi's Roman cohort in the '30s. He

was a fine physicist; got a Nobel Prize, not as fine as Fermi. And Fermi invited me to come to Chicago, which was how I landed up in this spot.

Pylinski: Been here ever since? Off and on?

Wright: Off and mostly on.

Pylinski: So before you went back to Canada for your degree—I'm just curious about your time going through the Suez Canal and out into the Pacific before the war was over. Did you get back on the Apollo and go to meet with the London?

Wright: I left the Apollo because it had been damaged, and went up north to get repaired, and I never saw it again.

Pylinski: Okay, so that was the last time you were on that ship.

Paretsky: Excuse me, you might want to ask about the court martial.

Pylinski: Okay. There was a court martial?

Wright: Yes, there was, because you shouldn't ground a ship.

Pylinski: Oh yeah, I completely understand that, yeah. So somebody had to pay for running the Apollo aground.

Wright: Didn't mean to do it, but that's what happened to ships. So there was a court-martial, which dealt with the captain and the navigator. I was stuck around, you know, I was around, sitting there waiting for something to happen.

Pylinski: Were you pretty in touch with what was going on with the court-martial then?

Wright: No, saw the end where they come in and naval purposes, and you see swords placed pointing towards you when you're guilty of something. Not to me, but to the captain and the navigator.

Paretsky: He had to testify because he was on the bridge.

Pylinski: That's what I was going to ask. Since you were on the bridge, you probably—you said you saw the rocks.

Wright: I saw it, but I didn't get the ship to move. It was just seconds after I saw it that we ran into something.

Pylinski: Okay. And then—so after that you were sent back to Canada for a while?

Wright: We had a good captain, but boy when you get court-martialed, you don't go up a pay rank.

Pylinski: No, I mean, that's pretty much a career ender for most people—especially in that situation; you got the Supreme Allied Commander on your ship.

Wright: Yeah.

Pylinski: So your time in the Pacific. How did you spend your time in the Pacific before the end of the war?

Wright: Just sitting around on a large cruiser. I got there, not on a naval ship, but on a passenger ship, which went down from England across the Mediterranean, through the Suez. And at one point, as we went down through beyond the Suez, I ate something that didn't taste very good, and in fact, it made a number of people rather ill, and two people dead.

Pylinski: Oh, my. Did they find out what it was?

Wright: I never did. Must have been fish that's rotted or something. They weren't buried; they were wrapped up in a flag and shipped overboard.

Pylinski: Yeah, buried at sea.

Wright: Yeah. Well, it's a nice way to go.

Pylinski: Well, I mean, especially for a sailor. That's kind of a sailor's way, right?

Wright: Well, I have little desire—when I have been terminated—to be buried underground. I want to be taken out to sea—maybe as ashes—and tossed in the sea.

Pylinski: Were you ever a part of occupation duty at all in Japan, after the dropping of the atomic bombs?

Wright: No.

Pylinski: So you came home to Canada, got out of the military?

Wright: Yes. And I wanted to; I went down to Berkley to earn my Ph.D. down there.

Pylinski: In nuclear physics.

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: What kind of sparked that? What got you interested in nuclear physics?

Wright: I was quite interested in physics. Not taught by physics when I was in school because as I said, I had a good chemistry teacher, and then the physics teacher was always asking: where do you get this formula for this stuff that's swinging around your head with some string attached? And the teacher there would go [BURBLING], and so it always came out to: that bastard doesn't know what he's talking about, but I can figure out for myself. I was into physics, anyway, at that point, and I found that a very interesting subject. So I

pushed forward. I got a bachelor's degree at UBC. At the end of the war, Canada would pay for your further education, which I got down in Berkley.

Pylinski: And they allowed you to go to college in the States, and they still paid for it?

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: That's pretty interesting.

Wright: Oh yeah, they were very fine, very fine treatment if you were in the military. They helped you get further educated, which is what happened to me, and how I got here.

Pylinski: Did you ever write home at all while you were stationed overseas?

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: Did you? What mostly did you write home about?

Wright: Home, not too much because...

Pylinski: Sensitivity.

Wright: Well, sensitive stuff that you don't write about while there's a war going on. But you know, casual stuff: sister-in-law did this and that.

Pylinski: Were you able to see your sister at all in London while you were there?

Wright: Yes, I stayed with her for a couple of weeks.

Pylinski: Nice. What about your daily down time? How did you spend your down time on ship?

Wright: When they let me off the radar, I liked to get up on the bridge and look around at what was going on.

Pylinski: Did you ever get R&R?

Wright: What's R&R?

Pylinski: Rest and relaxation.

Wright: No, I didn't need any of that.

Pylinski: Just being on the bridge was enough, I guess, maybe.

Wright: Oh yes, I enjoyed it up there.

Pylinski: Except for the smoke.

Wright: No, not much smoke; the smoke went back. I remember the smoke once when I climbed up to look at the radar up top. The ship turned around and the smoke almost took me down.

Pylinski: So did you receive any medals or anything for your service?

Wright: No.

Pylinski: No special awards?

Wright: No.

Pylinski: At least they paid for your college, got a free college.

Wright: Yeah, essentially, the Canadians paid for it. What the heck they pay now to go to universities?

Pylinski: Oh, it's ridiculous.

Wright: It's getting totally out of hand, in my opinion.

Pylinski: It's incredibly expensive, yeah.

Wright: I don't know why, but it's very bad for the country to make it so expensive for bright young people—both male and female—to go to a good college.

Pylinski: Yeah, I went to Columbia College in Chicago here, and it was about 19,000 dollars a semester. I mean, luckily I had twelve years of service myself, so I had my college paid for, you know, from the US government, so Uncle Sam helped me out there.

Wright: Now it's gotten tougher than that.

Pylinski: What's that?

Wright: The cost of going to college.

Pylinski: Oh, absolutely, it's out of control

Wright: I don't know why it has been allowed to do this, but I think that the government is stupid when they make it tough for people with little money to get educated because you'll find some very bright spots in that bunch.

Pylinski: Absolutely. So you said Enrico Fermi invited you to come out to the University of Chicago.

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: What was that like, coming out here?

Wright: Oh, that was great because while Berkley was a very interesting university, we had up on the hill there with Louis Alvarez—a very famous physicist—some others, but there was something different in Chicago, listening to Fermi talk various places. He was extraordinary. Unfortunately, he didn't live very long, he died in about 1953 or '4.

Pylinski: Okay, so what timeframe were you at Chicago? When did you move here?

Wright: Well, first came here, found a place to live down; same latitude we still live. I was married then—not to Sarah—had a family of three, and most unfortunately, my wife became psychotic and I tried to see her through for a long time, but it didn't work, she eventually left and committed suicide.

Pylinski: Sad. What kind of work were you doing here in Chicago?

Wright: Well, we had a long psychotron on the university at that time, and it was working with the particles that came out of that; I worked with mesons and sub-protons. And I didn't do too well—my approach to life being set for so long that I didn't get into any spectacular physics for ten years or so, so it was a harsh time.

Pylinski: Yes, Sir. And then, so, after those ten years, were you still at Chicago or did you move?

Wright: Yeah, I'm still in Chicago, and then not too long after that—and after meeting various people which I won't describe—I met Sarah and was very taken with her.

Pylinski: What was the timeframe for that?

Wright: It was about 1970.

Pylinski: Okay, 1970. And you guys met here in Chicago?

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: Are you a Chicagoan?

Paretsky: No, but I am now.

Wright: She was from Kansas.

Pylinski: Okay. What kind of work were you doing there, in '70?

Wright: There was some work I did where physics experiments with particles, and also I spent a fair amount of time down at Los Alamos—not in the bomb-making section, but there were other things that were going on there which were...I can't talk about.

Pylinski: I know that there's maybe still some sensitive information out there, or classified stuff that you can't talk about, per se. When did you become an American citizen, and what prompted that?

Wright: I think that's when I came to Chicago, which was in '49 or so. You could get a Ph.D. fairly quickly at that time, they were throwing them like hot cakes, I think I got one in less than three years. And after I became a citizen, I got connected with these JASONS.¹

Pylinski: I was going to ask about the JASONS. I've been reading this book by Ann Finkbeiner that kind of just gives an overview, more or less, of how the JASONS were started, and so forth.

Wright: Good things and bad things

Pylinski: And I know there are some things that are still slightly sensitive about the JASONS so far, as classified material or some of the things that they've done, but what was your involvement with all that?

Wright: Something which I won't talk about

Pylinski: Yeah, I was going to say, that you can talk about.

Wright: Something that I can, and the one thing that came out of one of the JASONS determination, was to look into what was happening in...

Pylinski: In Vietnam?

Wright: In the battle in...my memory is going, but...Ho Chi Minh's area.

Paretsky: North Vietnam.

Wright: North Vietnam and South Vietnam

Pylinski: So you were involved with the JASONS in the '60s, then?

Wright: Yes, and earlier. And then when we did something with South Vietnam. I think I was important that we kept it to ourselves for a while; eventually it was opened up. This was to make a very strong push that we never allow an atomic bomb to be dropped in Vietnam, although we never should have been in there because we lost tens of thousands of our fine men—and a few women—and it was a ferocious battle going on there, which the North Vietnamese eventually tossed us out.

Pylinski: In essence, yes Sir.

¹ "JASON is an independent group of scientists which advises the United States government on matters of science and technology." [https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/JASON_\(advisory_group\)](https://military-history.fandom.com/wiki/JASON_(advisory_group))

Paretsky: The thing that he worked on was McNamara, who wanted to use tactical nuclear weapons. I think that was what you were starting to talk about.

Wright: No, he didn't. But a lot of people in the Air Force, were, you know, they were having a hard time. They've got—their planes were shot down and they wanted to blast the damn place.

Pylinski: I know, I read somewhere, too, they were talking about using nukes to just, like, take out bridges and certain big pieces of infrastructure, as well. It was kind of on the JASONS' shoulders to kind of sway them otherwise.

Wright: Yeah, well there were several other things that we worked on there, which were not reported and I won't talk about.

Pylinski: Yes Sir, I understand. I held a top secret for twelve years. I can understand the sensitivity of some of the information that's inside your head. The JASONS were outed in the Pentagon Papers though, and that didn't receive a whole lot of praise from the public, if you will. What are your thoughts on that?

Wright: Oh, we were hated for various things. You know, unlike World War II, we just got drafted, and there was no crap about getting away from it. The Vietnamese area was lots of movement here to stop being sent there in the Army, with good reason. Lots of effort to try to pull us out of there.

Pylinski: Right, there were a lot of protests in the States, a lot of pushback from the Vietnam War. Did you personally ever, were you ever personally involved in any of these protests? Was there ever a moment where you were on your way to work and people were protesting?

Wright: Oh, I saw there were a lot at the university doing this, but I didn't participate in this.

Pylinski: I know you have a strong stance on the Vietnam War, what brought that on?

Wright: First off, the French were beat out there—been lords of the place for a long time—and were finally beaten out by the Vietnamese—particularly Ho Chi Minh's north part—and we were brought in. There were some people in our military who wanted to be there with a vengeance, and it was a very bad thing. You know, I didn't do anything about it, but I didn't approve of it.

Pylinski: Absolutely, I understand.

Wright: I did one thing, which was that part of JASON, which became public that we should never let atomic bombs be used there. But that didn't stop, you know, tens of thousands of guys from getting killed.

Pylinski: How long were you involved with the JASONS?

Wright: Oh, ten years or so.

Pylinski: Was it pretty fruitful?

Wright: Oh yeah, lots of interesting things that went on.

Pylinski: Probably have some interesting colleagues, and so on.

Wright: Oh yeah, I knew a lot of those guys. I brought a bit on the end of that one part was to see what you could do with submarines. And we went down to Key West—which is as far south as you can go in the US, go any further and you'll fall in—and I managed to get into a submarine—not a normal one, one of the big atomic submarines, not a regular size submarine—and we went out east of Key West on this submarine, tilted downward.

Pylinski: Right, was that a pretty exciting experience?

Wright: That was exciting to feel that.

Pylinski: It's a lot more intense when you're actually feeling it

Wright: Are we going to stop or something?

Pylinski: Hit the bottom?

Wright: Well, no, there were smart navigators there who—we went down about a hundred feet or so, and in a certain area, maybe ten miles, about ten miles, we went through a process to see if that submarine could be detected from the north with—well acoustics and other methods, which I won't talk about. So it was an interesting experience.

Pylinski: Was this still in the '70s? When was this timeframe, roughly?

Wright: No, a little earlier than that.

Pylinski: Was it? Okay, so this might have been during Vietnam War then. During the same timeframe as the Vietnam War?

Wright: Before that, at least

Pylinski: Oh wow, okay.

Wright: A little obscure, lost exactly what the date was.

Pylinski: I understand, yes sir. You said you worked for the JASONS for about ten years, so I'm assuming you started sometime in the '50s?

Wright: Yes.

Pylinski: And were you invited?

Wright: JASONS were a bunch of young physicists. I happened to be a young physicist, so I got in.

Pylinski: Well, I mean working on Enrico Fermi, maybe some of those other people?

Paretsky: I think it was by invitation, you didn't apply.

Pylinski: Right, that's kind of the way I understood it. I just didn't know if there was sometimes people—sought-out individuals—just to talk, and then all of a sudden it's like, “Hey, we're doing this thing every summer, you should come out.”

Paretsky: It was Gomer who invited you.

Wright: Yeah, a friend of mine. Chemist.

Pylinski: Yeah, they had kind of a mixed bag of economists, chemists, biologists, physicists; all kinds of different sciences involved in the JASON program.

Wright: Later, principally. Earlier it was almost all physicists. That's the way that—I mean, they're still around.

Pylinski: So post-JASONS, what did you do for work?

Wright: Well, I do some experiments at university and at Los Alamos, and when we had the large accelerator, about fifty miles west of here.

Pylinski: At the Fermi Lab?

Wright: Yeah, Fermi Lab, I did some experiments there, quite a number of years. That machine came on a little bit slowly, unlike the one in Europe, which came in fast, but when it did come in, we did some of the great experiments there. I wasn't involved in some of those, but there were more interesting results here than there were in Europe for quite a while.

Pylinski: That's interesting.

Wright: Now, it's shut down because the—an economists decides we won't pay for it.

Pylinski: Sequesters and so forth, and so on. My Paretsky's an engineer; she feels that pain too. So did you retire from Fermi?

Wright: Well, Eventually. I'm eighty-nine now, so I guess I was about seventy-five when I stopped getting involved with physics experiments.

Pylinski: Gotcha. How have you been spending your retirement years?

Wright: Oh, enjoying the, enjoying life.

Pylinski: Do you travel at all?

Wright: Not much. She travels a lot more than I do.

Paretsky: We used to travel a lot.

Pylinski: Did you? What were some of the best places you ever traveled to?

Wright: Well, Paris was interesting.

Pylinski: Okay.

Wright: I'm going to Germany, at one point with some interesting people there in Europe.

Paretsky: Maybe you should mention that you have your Go playing hobby of going to Japan and taking professional Go lessons

Pylinski: What's that all about?

Wright: Much better than chess, which I like to play.

Pylinski: What's it called again?

Wright: Go. It has different names in China and in Korea, but Go in Japan

Pylinski: So you just hop on a plane and haul out to Japan?

Wright: No, I play—you can play on the Internet. There used to be places where a bunch of people here were playing—mainly Japanese, some Chinese.

Paretsky: He went to the international Go headquarters in Tokyo and took a professional lesson.

Pylinski: I was going to ask if you'd been to Japan?

Wright: Yeah, I was also in Japan for other reasons, it didn't involve these games.

Pylinski: Work related.

Wright: Worked related, so which I got there at one point. One with Leon Lederman, who, unfortunately, is a really great physicist, and his mind is gone. Here's this guy who had a huge effect on starting a place out in Aurora for young students who are very smart in mathematics. He started this group out there. He does a lot of other things; he was the

head of the accelerator near Aurora and generally a very good physicist, and it's a real shock that his mind failed him.

Pylinski: Happens to the best of us sometimes, yeah?

Wright: Apparently, yeah. Best, worst, and in between.

Pylinski: So looking back at all your experiences, with the war and the rest of your time, what part of your service do you think best exemplifies your time serving your country?

Wright: Well, probably as a naval officer during the war.

Pylinski: How rewarding was that for you?

Wright: Well, I liked doing it. I never got shot. If I was an infantryman, things might have been much worse. Since I was on ships, and the ships were never shot down or sunk, that was a good thing. I was glad that I was involved in that war, and not with the next one.

Pylinski: Right.

Wright: I've started making nasty remarks about it to people.

Pylinski: What about the Korean War? Do you have any opinion on our actions in Korea, with the United Nations?

Wright: I have my opinions about the Korean War. Of course, it started out with the north going down and practically tearing apart South Korea, and we got there with MacArthur, finally building it up, and he got to Pyongyang, finally off the coast in North Korea. But he went too far, and the Chinese came in, and it was very hard on the Marines—a very brave group in that they were hit very hard by the Chinese north of Pyongyang. And then, they came down and the line across has been there ever since, and it's a pain in the ass now.

Pylinski: Yeah, it's still a thorn in everyone's side. Nothing seems to change for the Koreans.

Wright: This is an example of MacArthur doing the wrong thing: first okay, then too far. He wouldn't have brought the Chinese in if he hadn't tried to move so far north. The strange things which happen in our weird world of politics.

Pylinski: Yeah, it's these wars which define our generations. And as time goes on, these ideologies change a lot for people—whether its communism, or terrorism, or extremism, or imperialism, or anything other “ism” you can think of out there.

Wright: Lots of “isms.”

Pylinski: Definitely. So, in your opinion, how would you define a person who is willing to volunteer their services for their country?

Wright: Oh, I think that depends what the services are.

Pylinski: Well, military service.

Wright: It depends on what's going on in that military service, but for things which are appropriate for your country, I think this is fine. I'll tell you, you know, we make far too many atomic bombs. They're stored—we've only used two, but we have tens of thousands of the goddamn things.

Pylinski: Right, the book that I'm reading, a lot of the gentlemen that were involved in the Manhattan Project say that now that the genie's out of the bottle, it's impossible to get back in.

Wright: Yes, yes it is. I knew the people that were in that. My hero in physics is Feinman. Feinman developed the most remarkable theories, but he was also in the making of the first atomic bomb, but no more.

Pylinski: So is there anything else I haven't asked that you'd like to talk about, or anything I've missed?

Wright: Probably have, but I can't think of anything at the moment.

Pylinski: That's understandable. I know that your service takes you across different bridges, more or less, and bridges different things, and having served as a naval officer in the Canadian Navy and having those experiences, and then coming to the States and helping to advise our government in certain aspects of different parts of war, and everything else, you've gone above and beyond the call, I think, in my opinion. Myself, I was just a paratrooper, jumping out of airplanes for twelve years.

Wright: That's a tough thing. I was in one of those—[PLANE NOISES]—and listen to that without getting shot at.

Pylinski: I think its different strokes for different folks, you know. I thank you, Sir, for your service and everything you've done for our country, definitely. And I appreciate you coming in here to talk with us here at the library and sharing your story of service.

Wright: It's been my pleasure.

Pylinski: The pleasure's ours too, definitely. But if there's nothing else?

Wright: Let's call it quits.

Paretsky: I just want to add something about him, that is, Courtenay. I mean, you ask if he was scared, and maybe he was and doesn't remember, but he loves, or at least used to, a life of risk. And he's more alive when there's physical danger than at other times. He used to keep a little cabin cruiser on the lake, and he only liked to take it out if the waves were twelve feet. And there was one time his mother gave him a wristwatch; she thought she wouldn't see him again, and it was kind of her farewell present to him. She was a widow by then. And they were out on the North Sea in heavy seas, and everybody else was under the hatches, but Courtenay was out on the deck and a wave came and tore the watch off his wrist, and he followed it across and got it just before it went into the 20-foot seas. So that's his nature, to want to be kind of on the edge. That's all I wanted to say.

Pylinski: That's awesome, that's great. I'm sure that keeps you on your toes, as well. Or scares the hell out of you.

Paretsky: Right.

Pylinski: He's still here.

Wright: Yeah.

Pylinski: Well, good deal. Well, thank you both for coming in and sharing your time with us.