# Interview with Vince Speranza

# VR2-V-L-2015-039

Interview #1: May 26, 2015

Interviewer: Mark DePue



DePue: (applause) Thank you, Eileen. It's great to see you all here tonight. You're in for a treat. I've been the oral historian at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library since 2006. Over the years I've come to realize that I have just about the neatest job in town because it's my job to talk to fascinating people and to get to know them at a much deeper level than I might otherwise have an opportunity to do.

Certainly Vincent Speranza is a perfect example of that. Now, you see me up here at the podium, those of you who have been to the Civil War series, and you see PowerPoint slides up on the screen. So you're probably already a little bit worried, but I promise you, tonight is about Vince's story. We're going to just kind of set the stage and then turn it over to Vince. Eventually we'll get to a Q&A at the end, and I'm sure you'll have plenty of questions for him.

One of the reasons I wanted to do this is to illustrate what our Oral History program is about. There are a couple of excerpts of our video interview we did in 2010 that I'm going to be playing as part of the introduction here.

So, coming to America, this is Vince's grandparents, Don Vincenzo Speranza—I don't know if I got the name right, but you'll correct me later on, I would hope—They came from Sicily, then they got here, and like many families did—sometimes we lose track of this—they wanted to make enough

money and then head back to Sicily, so they could buy land. That was the plan. Now, it's much better for you to hear Vince tell the story from there. I think, right from the beginning, you'll get a flavor of what kinds of stories this family has.

(plays a recording)

Speranza: My father's family came here, and as many of the immigrants that came in the early '20s and the really early 1900s, some of them came here to make a home, but some of them came just to earn enough money to buy a piece of land. That's what they wanted. Back in Italy, it was impossible for the peasants, the lower class in Italy, to own any land. They were impoverished and so on. Some of them just wanted to buy a piece of land, come to America, put the whole family to work, make enough money and go back, and then buy a piece of land and live in their homeland.

Well, my father's family was one of those. He came to like the country when they moved here, and when it was time to go back, when the family had earned enough money to go back and buy a piece of land, my father didn't want to go, neither did his brother, Patsy.

DePue: How old were they at the time?

Speranza: Eleven and thirteen. My father said to his parents, "We want to stay in America." They said, "Absolutely not! The family goes back." And he said, "What?" His father said, "Listen, the family is going back to Italy." So he didn't say anything.

When it was time to get on the ship, the whole family got onboard the ship. Just before they took the gangplank down, my father and his brother, Patsy, ran down the gangplank and disappeared into the crowd. Their parents didn't even know it yet. They pulled the gangplank down; the ship takes off. I guess my grandparents asked, "What happened to Patsy and Don Vincenzo?" "They probably stayed on board." My father and his brother never looked back. They never wanted to go back to Italy.

Now, here they are, two boys, eleven and thirteen, of course my father went to the fourth grade and then went to work. And his brother, Patsy, didn't do much better. So they were already street wise. They went to the church, the Catholic Church, and they told the church that they had no place to go. Their parents had just left and left them ashore by mistake (both laugh).

DePue: You mean they didn't quite tell the truth to the church?

Speranza: No. The priest would have been upset; I think. Whatever the story was, they asked the priest for asylum or something to eat, a place to sleep. And the priest said, "You could stay here for a day or two." He said, "But you've got to go find a job." They said, "Yeah."

Well, my father heard that they were hiring on the docks. The ships that were leaving—they were going to San Francisco—that they were taking on cabin boys. So my father and his brother signed up, my uncle Patsy, signed up as cabin boys on a ship. They were sailing from New York to Panama—the canal wasn't ready yet—and then they were going overland catch the ship on the other side and go to San Francisco. California was going to be the place where everybody was going to be rich, and that's what they had in mind.

My father said that they weren't out of port two or three days before his older brother, Patsy, was in a fight every day, warding off these predators on the ship who thought a cabin boy should be other than a cabin boy. So, he said that they decided, as soon as that thing hit Panama, they were going to get off. And they did.

I said, "How did you earn your money to get back to New York?" He said, "We sold frankfurters." They went to a hot dog stand and told a man that they were good workers, they'd take him on and so on. He said, "We sold frankfurters because we could eat free (laughs)." They stayed on that job until they earned enough money to get passage back to New York. (recording excerpt ends)

DePue: That should give you a pretty good flavor of what the rest of the evening is going to be like. Growing up in Staten Island... Actually I'm a little bit ahead of the story.

Vince's parents, Frank and Frances Speranza, were married in April 1917. He came along in March of 1925, born in Hell's Kitchen in New York City. But after a few years, his Mom decided it was best for the family to move to Staten Island, even though that meant their father had a very long commute—that was before any bridge—so he took the Staten Island ferry every day. It was about a two hour commute to get to his job in Queens, I believe, Vince? In Queens.

I heard lots of stories... I like when I do interviews, with veterans, especially, and politicians. I like to figure out who they were before they became adults and before they earned the reputations that they have. Certainly that was never more true than Vince, in terms of how important it was to get these stories.

Vince's father's job was in R.C. Macy's. He had lots of stories about the extended family, lots of stories about holidays and the games that they played and some of the risks that they took. It was different growing up then than it is today, I can tell you that much. I was fascinated by Vince's story about his father making wine and that detailed tradition that was involved with just making wine and about how he made pocket money and had a part-time job at a very early age and, obviously, a little bit about school as well.

But by the time Vince comes of age, the United States is at war. Here's a picture of Vince at sixteen years old. He graduated from high school in 1943, ended up joining the Army, went to basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1943 and then was assigned to the 87th Infantry Division. And I have one more excerpt that I'd like to play. Then we get to turn it over to Vince, and he's going to tell us about some of the wartime experiences.

(excerpt from recording)

Speranza: It was a whole division, the 87th Infantry Division, and they were going to go on maneuvers to Tennessee and then overseas, from the scuttlebutt, you know. Who knew what the story was? But while we were there, one morning they called us all out, and they said, "Hey, everybody sit along these bags and so on; there's going to be a demonstration." Now this is regimental strength; there was a regiment. We're sitting all around there. We're sitting on the ground waiting.

All of a sudden, three C-47s comes roaring over the sky. When they get out there where we can see them, all of a sudden, the doors open and parachute after parachute after parachute. Here these guys come flowing on down and coming down to the ground. They roll over and pick up their parachutes, stick them in a bag, put them on a deck, double-time off the field, and then line up in front of us, brilliant shiny boots, silver wings, pants bloused. Nobody else could do that at that time, by the way, pants bloused into those jump boots and those jaunty caps and attention, all big, beautiful guys.

They said, "We're taking on crews for the parachute troops; anybody here interested? You have to have had advanced infantry training, which I understand you all have," This is an officer talking to us. He said, "We're looking for a few good men." We're still thinking about it and finally he said, "And there's $50 extra a month, jump pay." (DePue laughs) A whole bunch of hands went up.

At the time, you got $50 a month, $50 a month. And those of us who wanted to help the families signed an allotment over to the parents. So, $30 out of that, and the Army added $20 to it and sent it to your parents to help the family out. When you pay your laundry and so on... At the end of the month, I used to end up with $16 for the month. That's what I had to do whatever I wanted to do for a month.

The $50 jump pay sounded real good but also the glamor. Those guys, they looked... I couldn't wait; I couldn't wait. (excerpt ends)

DePue: Okay, Vince, I got you to the Army. I'll turn it over to you.

Speranza: I got to stay behind the blue line here (everyone laughs). Folks, I don't make speeches. A prepared speech always seems to have an agenda. I just talk to you like friends and neighbors.

In 1943, I was an eighteen-year old kid, and as you saw before there that I had a certain kind of upbringing during the Depression. Things were tough and so on, but my father was a ultra-patriot. He was so grateful for what this country had done for him and what he and my mother were able to do, raised eight kids. He lined us up, even though my two youngest brothers were twelve and fourteen, and he said, "Boys, the country is calling; I expect you all to do..." We said, "Of course, Pop." So I had the full support of my parents going into this thing.

Now, in '41, when the war started, I was a sixteen-year old kid in high school. Hey, we were outraged! It wasn't fear or concern...outrage, We said, "How in the hell could you be…" I better pause here for a moment and apologize in advance. When I tell stories, I'm reliving them, and I tell them in the language of the day. Excuse me if I... (audience applauds). We said, "How could you little bums do something like that? We didn't do anything to you."

Those of us that had a little hair on our faces in the neighborhood, we let them grow two or three days. We went down to the recruiting office, and we said, "We're eighteen years old, and we want to join the Army." The recruiting officer said, "Go home, kid. Come back when you're really eighteen" (everyone laughs). So we had to wait. But we couldn't wait to get into that war, when our country was being threatened and we thought, you know, it wasn't our fault.

Well, in '43, when I did go in, They give you a big meeting, an interview. When you first get in the Army, they do not allow you to volunteer for anything. They have a quota, and they have to put so many men, places. You take a battery of tests, and an officer sits down with you afterwards. He says, "Hey, Speranza, you did a ninety-seven in mechanical aptitude; you like tanks?" "Yeah." "And you did ninety-four in math and science; you like the artillery?" "Yeah." He goes through a whole bunch of stuff like that you quality [for], and he takes a big stamp, Infantry (audience laughs), which is what we all wanted anyway. If you're going to get into the fight, that's how you're going to get into the fight, in the infantry.

When I got into the infantry, nineteen weeks, and then "We're going to go, right?" "No, come back another four weeks [for] advanced infantry training." You got to do that, and then you've got to come back for heavy weapons training. We're saying, "When the hell are we going to get into this fight?" They said, "Well, first you got into a line outfit." So they sent me to the 87th Infantry. "Now we're going to get in the fight, right?" "No." Maneuvers in Tennessee, maneuvers here, we were just besides ourselves. We

thought the war was going to be over before we [would] be able to do something.

Finally, as you saw, the demonstration with the paratroops, I couldn't be happier. With the paratroops, you didn't fool around. Once you got out of jump school (claps his hands), overseas.

One incident before we went over... The Army used to give us spaghetti now and then, what they called spaghetti (audience laughs). And I used to complain. We were in Fort Benning, Georgia, and I'd say to the guys, "If we ever get anywhere near New York, I'll let you taste what real spaghetti tastes like." I said, "My mother's spaghetti..." There's eighteen men in the stick when you make your jumps, and my stick kept saying, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Well, just before overseas, we were at Camp Upton in New York. So the guys were saying, "Alright, Speranza, what about all that baloney about tasting real spaghetti?" I said, "Okay, okay, let me call my mother." So I call my mother, I said, "Mom, I can get home for just a day." "Oh," she said, "that's great." And I said, "By the way, I've been telling the guys [I'd] let them taste some real spaghetti if we ever got to New York. Can I bring a couple of guys home with me to…?" She said, "Oh, sure. How many?" I said, "Eighteen" (audience laughs). She said, "Eighteen!" She said, "Well, how much time have I got?" I said, "Oh, we won't get there for three or four hours" (audience laughs). She said, "Plenty, bring them on."

Well, when we got to the house, and eighteen guys piled in—my mother had a very small, modest house—she had that thing set up with tables coming out of the kitchen and the living room, down through... I almost thought they was going to get into the bathroom, but fortunately there was enough places without going in there.

We sat down, and what a meal my mother put on, I'm telling you. Those guys were all beside themselves. She asked me, she said, "By the way, do we do wine, like we usually do?"—By the way, at that time you had to be twenty-one to drink, and we were all eighteen year old, nineteen year old kids—I said, "Hey, we're going over to fight for the country, we're allowed to eat. Give them all wine too."

We started feeling good. We put on a demonstration, jumps, so on. My sisters were going crazy, eighteen nice young guys (audience laughs). We had a great time. About the time we were ready to leave, my mother says, "When was the last time you boys wrote your mothers a letter?" Everybody went (shrugs) (audience laughs), me too. She said, "Don't move." She went upstairs, and she got a bunch of paper and envelopes. She came back down; she said, "All of you, right now, write your mother a letter." And everybody

wrote a letter. She said, “And you, too.” “Okay, Ma” (audience laughs). She collected them; she didn’t trust us, and we left.

That was the last, very pleasant meeting, get together with those eighteen guys that we had. When I got home from the war, the saddest moment in my life was when my mother said to me, “Vinnie, all those nice, young boys you had here to dinner, how many of them came back with you?” You know what I had to answer. I was the only one of those eighteen who made it back.

Well, we were overseas on the Queen Mary. The Queen Mary was a troop ship. It had been converted to a troop ship, and it had (laughs) bunks. In a stateroom, that’s for two people, they had fifteen bunks, you know, just a pipe with a canvas stretched over it and all kinds of...about that much space between (gesturing). If you had a heavy guy on top of you, he was in your face the whole time you slept in the bunk. Most of the time we slept overseas. Mickey Rooney was on that ship. We met him when he went over. He made jokes and stories.

When we got to England, they took us by train down to a little place called Hungerford. About three weeks later, I was at Camp Mampalon, meeting the 101st Airborne’s 501 Regiment.

Now, when you’re a replacement in a combat outfit, you are nothing. Until you prove yourself in combat, you are nothing. Nobody talks to you; nobody... Some of them even feel sorry for you because the replacements are the ones that get killed off first. I met Joe Willis and Steve Pentek; those two were a little friendly and so on. And we’re getting ready, according to what the officers are telling us, for this division to be refurbished, to be replaced, because they took a beating in Holland, and a lot of the weapons were missing and so on. So we started looking forward to integrating the replacements into the Army.

December 16, surprise to everybody, even though we were supposed to have good intelligence, Hitler had saved up twenty-five German divisions, nine of them Panzer divisions. That’s tanks with the latest Mark 4s and title royal tanks. His idea was to smash through the Ardennes, you know, Germany, Belgium, Antwerp and seize the Port of Antwerp.

Antwerp was our port of entry; therefore, he would have gotten all the gasoline and food and everything else he needed to make a difference in the war. I don’t think they’d have won it, but it would have lasted another two or three years maybe. The problem for them was, to get to Antwerp, right here, there was a little town called Bastogne. Bastogne had five roads leading out, two railroads going through it, and it was situated in the valley where the Germans could not go side to side; they had to stay on the roads because of

the terrain in the Ardennes there. And if they had to stay on the road, they had to come through Bastogne.

Eisenhower said, on the first day of [our] new division, "You go up there, and hold them." Now, the division was ill-prepared. We had no winter clothes; we had no galoshes; we had no wool hats. We had summer clothes only. We were supposed to get all that stuff. When the sergeant came through that morning, about 4:00 in the morning, he flips on the light, "Hey, grab your (unintelligible), and grab your socks. We're moving up." (few laugh) (Speranza addresses audience) You military men, shame on you (audience laughs).

We said, "You're crazy; the ground's frozen; we'll all break our legs." He said, "No, you're not jumping; you're going up in trucks." There's hell all over the barracks, "Sarge, I haven't got a helmet." "Sarge..." I was a machine gunner without a machine gun. I had a trench knife stuck in my boot. We said, "What are we going to do?" They said, "Don't worry; make a list; we're going to stop along the way" (audience laughs). Dutifully, we... (laughs)We were green; we made a list of what we needed. You know, I need socks, and I need this and that.

Of course, the joke was, the emergency was bad because the Germans had smashed through three American infantry divisions that were supposed to be holding that line and just ate them up, destroyed them as fighting units. We got up there one day before they hit us. The 101st Airborne Division was understrength. Half of the officers were on leave. Our commanding general was in the United States, giving a speech. The assistant commander was in England; the artillery commander, General McAuliffe, took over the division, and he was our general during the whole fight.

What happened to us... When we got there, it started snowing. Later they told us it was the coldest winter on record in Europe for the last twenty years. The temperature stayed around zero all the time, a little above, a little below, snowing, freezing. We're in these open trucks, and they didn't even stop for bathroom breaks. What do you do, all day and all night? You take your helmet and then try to maneuver it till you throw it over the side, and you spill it all over the guys down here. So, we were mad at each other more than we were at the Germans by the time we got to Bastogne.

But we finally got off the trucks, and the lieutenant says, "Alright, five yards apart, and watch out for snipers." I said, "Lieutenant, what am I supposed to do with this?" He said, "Stop bitching, Speranza." He pulls out his forty-five, and he shows me the bottom of it. He's got no clip. He's going into battle with an empty forty-five.

What saved us was that the guys, the remnants of those three divisions that the Germans had smashed, had to come through Bastogne. They were

ordered to the rear. So we would just walk up to the guy and say, “Hey buddy, you’re going back; you don’t need this, right?” and take the rifle off his shoulder. “You got any grenades?” We’d take grenades out of their pockets and so on. With all these guys coming through, those of us that were unarmed became armed, so that we started the fight with at least decent weapons.

I found a nice guy with a light thirty machine gun. And I said, “You know, that looks awfully heavy. Don’t you need some help carrying that thing?” (audience laughs) I took it, and I got two belts of ammunition. So I was at least partially armed before we got there.

The first night they told us, “Dig a hole.” Man, the ground was frozen. You hit it with a shovel, it bounces right back in your face. You whack, and you whack, and you whack, and we had had no food and no water on those trucks. You finally got a hole dug, and you’re exhausted. You get in the hole, and the lieutenant comes by, “We’re moving out” (audience moans). Oh, man.

Move over here; we have to dig in over here. So we dig another hole. This time the tree roots are in there. It took what energy we had left, even though we were young, healthy men, to finally dig a shallow hole, so that... “We’re moving out!” The next place we went, we just scraped the snow aside and laid on the ground, to hell with it (audience laughs).

That morning, December 17. Now, all the while, this is my first combat, and I’m thinking. I’m looking at the other guys, you know. In the back of my book, I wrote a poem that pretty well describes my first day in battle. But the unknown is what you’re worried about. How are you going to behave? Now, you’re well-trained, but training can only do so much. There was fog all over the ground. When the fog lifted, all hell broke loose.

This is December 18 now. You can’t imagine the noise, the cacophony. Artillery is going up. The tanks are coming out, and they’re firing point blank at the fox hole. When they hit one, the guy disappears. And the first wave of German infantry comes out of the woods. They’re about 1,000 yards out there, and they start across the snow, across the fields. The tanks are on both flanks; the artillery is coming in overhead, and man, those Germans were deadly with mortars.

We hated mortars the most because you can’t hear that thing when it comes, until it explodes. The artillery, you got a little chance to hear the sound. At any rate, all hell broke loose, everything going in all directions, firing. What they didn’t know, and what we didn’t know either, was, down in about the middle of the field, where the ground sloped up, there was a string of barbed-wire fences, covered with snow. Nobody knew. Not just one string, there was like pens of strings all over, of barbed wire across there.

So when the German infantry starts up the field, they run into the barbed wire. They're shocked and surprised, and so were we. The lieutenant said, "Not yet, not yet, not yet." The tanks keep coming. The second wave of German infantry comes up, and then they're running into the barbed wire. They're trying to help their friends get off the barbed wire and so on. And, "Not yet, not yet, not yet, not yet."

The third wave of German infantry comes up. Now the tanks are way ahead of them, and tanks know that is very dangerous because, if the infantry is not right behind you, now the mortars and the bazookas and so on are going to start hitting you. The lieutenant said, "Now!" We opened up, and what a slaughter it was; what a slaughter it was. The snow turned red; the Germans, they were all over the field there. Of course, we didn't know yet, but when we turned around and looked at our fields, we had guys laying all over the ground too. They stopped; the tanks had to turn around and go back.

Our 705 artillery and tank destroyer boys did a good job on the tanks going back. They had, I don't know, all morning at least, to try to regroup or something, but they never did. They said later, they didn't know it was the 101st that was in there. We said, "Now you know." We stopped them; we stopped them that first day, and they never made an open field attack again.

They were cocky at first, in that first fight. They just thought that we were going to fall apart like the other infantry divisions that they had already hit. They left eight divisions to take Bastogne. The rest of them went north and south to try to get Antwerp another way. And the decision, I guess, that they made was to stay out there and just bomb and shell until the Luftwaffe came and, by the way, as soon as their planes appeared and started firing, we said, "Where's our Air Force?" Every night those people came and during the day, and none of our planes showed up. Where the hell? We found out later, that for eight days the weather in England was impossible. They could not get off the ground. That's why we didn't have any air cover during that fight.

So it became a battle of them bombing and shelling and trying to probe the perimeter here and there to get in, and us saying, "No, you're not going to make it; you're not going to make it." But day after day, with no relief and no planes or nothing, the situation started getting bad. Number one, they surrounded us, so we couldn't get the wounded out.

The only place that still had the walls that were up was the church and the seminary across the street. The church, they'd taken all of the benches out, and they just had the concrete floor. We had to lay the wounded on it. The Germans had captured the field hospital and all the blankets and cots and medicines and most of the medical personnel. We only had one doctor and one Belgian nurse, there in Bastogne during that whole battle. We went through the houses and pulled all the curtains, drapes and dog blankets,

whatever we could find, to wrap these guys in, the wounded guys. The doctors are trying to operate with candlelight (sound cuts out). (pause)

Speranza: You mean I have to do it all over again? (audience laughs, applauds)

Technician: Just that...

Speranza: At any rate, my buddy, Joe Willis, had gotten hit in both legs, and they took him back to the church. My sergeant sent me back to look for batteries or radios, the little walkie-talkies we had. The communication was bad (laughs). He said, "Speranza, you're small, light and fast; you go." In other words, while they're sitting nice in the foxholes, artillery coming [in] all over the place, I got to run down through that to get to the town. But, it's understandable, you know; it's the replacements that are expendable, no matter which outfit you're in.

I ran and spent half of the time in the ditch, but I got back to the town. When I asked the lieutenant for batteries, he said, "We'll look for some. Wait here." I went to see my friend. I went to the church. At the church, it was pitiful to see these guys all laying out. They were wrapped in all kinds of stuff, no medical attention.

I found my friend. I said, "Joe,"—His name was Joe Willis—"How you doing?" He said, "Ahhhh, [it's] nothing. I got a couple of pieces in the leg here." He said, "I'll be out of here tomorrow." I said, "No kidding." He said, "Yeah, it ain't nothing." So, I said, "Joe, listen, I'm glad. Hurry up because I need you." He was my assistant machine gunner.

I said, "I got to leave, Joe. Can I do anything for you before I leave?" He said, "Go find me something to drink." I said, "Joe where the hell am I going to find you something to drink? We're surrounded and cut off. There's no supplies." He said, "Go look in the taverns." I said, "Joe, the Germans are all bombed." He said, "Go look in the taverns; you might get lucky." So I come down from the church, go down the street. First tavern I go into, all broken glass, nothing there. The next one I went into, I pulled down (laughs) the beer handle at the bar; beer came out (audience laughs). I said, "Oh" (audience laughs). I looked around for... There was nothing to put it in.

I took off my helmet (audience laughs), the same helmet you use in the foxhole... (audience laughs) I swished a little snow in it. I filled it up with beer. I went running back to the church. I said, "Joe, I got some beer." He said, "Whoa." I sat down to start pouring beer. "Give me some of that! Give me some of that." It was like I was a mother cow there, feeding the guys beer (audience laughs).

I ran out. I said, "Joe, I ran out." "Go get some more." "Joe, Jeez." "Go get some more." I go down to the bar, fill up the helmet, come running back to the church; it's snowing like hell. Standing in the doorway is the

regimental surgeon, major—I'm a PFC [private first class]—standing right there.

He said, "What the hell do you think you're doing, soldier?" I said, "Oh, ah, uh, uh, sir, bringing aid and comfort to the wounded?" (audience laughs) He said, "You stupid jackass, don't you know I've got chest cases and stomach cases. You give them beer, you'll kill them? Get out of here before I have you shot!" "Yes, sir; yes, sir." "And put that helmet on!" (makes a splash sound) (audience laughs) Holy Jesus, I was not only freezing now, but I was wet and freezing. You should have seen what the next four hours were like with my guys trying to dry me off.

An incident that happened during the war, right? And, that's all, right? No, no, no. Sixty-five years later, when I and my daughter decided to go back to the battlefields to see them for the first time, I run into this Dutch paratrooper and his friend Johnny Boomer (?), a Belgium tank commander. When they found out I was there during the war, they said, "Oh, sir, you know, we got to do a little… What are your plans? We want to honor you. I didn't know all these celebrations that were going on.

They said, "Who were you with?" I said, "H Company, 501." They said, "OK. We've all studied the war, all the way down to our kids know everything about the war. I will take you to where H Company was dug in on both sides of the road." And I said, "Okay." He takes my daughter and I out to the... And we went by the church. I saw the church; I said "Hey, I want to come back and see that later, please." "Yeah, you will."

We go out to a little place called Mont, M-o-n-t, where we were dug in, and he shows me on both sides of the road... They're filled in, but you can see the outline. He says, "H Company was dug in here, here, here and here." He said, "And, that was your foxhole." I said, "Marco, how can you tell me that's my foxhole? I don't recognize anything here." He said, "Because your company commander, Captain Stanley, when he turned in his after-action reports, he had a diagram. You were the only machine gunner in Third Platoon, right?" "Yeah." "Here's the diagram, MG; that's your foxhole."

I'm eighty-five years old at that time. Am I really in where I was a nineteen year-old kid, sixty-five years ago? And I started to feel... I said, "Now, wait a minute, though, Marco, if that's my foxhole there's got to be another one here, and one here for the two riflemen they always put to protect the machine gun nest." He said, "Yeah! Go look."

I went over there, yeah, filled in, but there was the outline of the foxhole here. Now I am starting to shake a little. When you're an old man, you don't have control of your emotions anymore. I started feeling… Then I said, "No, wait a minute, wait, wait, wait. If this is my foxhole, down there,

there has to be a stream because I remember that morning, before the fog lifted, I went down, broke the ice and filled up my canteen."

I later found out that that stream went through a hog pen (audience moans). He said, "Yeah. You can't see it because of the grass. Come on down here." We went down there; there was the stream. Now there's no question; there's no doubt. I fell apart. My daughter pulled me aside, and she said, "Marco, my father has seen enough tonight. Let's go back."

I asked them to lunch. They said, "Yeah," so we went to lunch in the hotel there. I ordered three bottles of wine. I said, "I'm going to change the mood here; I want to feel differently." And we did (laughs). We started getting a little noisy, and people are looking. We embarrassed my daughter. They started telling stories. Johnny Boomer (?) told of the Belgium tanks, and Marco talked about Kosovo, where he was fighting Kosovo and Afghanistan and so on.

When it came my turn, I told them the beer story that I just told you. While I'm telling this story, they're going like this (gestures), "You? You were the GI who...beer and the…" I said, "Yeah." They said, "You took beer in a helmet; you gave it to the wounded guys in the church?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "Man, don't you know you're **famous** in Europe?" (audience laughs) I said, "What the hell are you talking about?" They said, "Waiter, come here." The waiter comes over. They said, "Bring us four bottles of Airborne Beer."

The waiter goes out, comes back. On the tray, he's got four bottles of beer and four little ceramic cups in the shape of a GI helmet (audience reacts) that they serve it in. And the label on the bottle of beer shows a paratrooper with a helmet full of beer, going like this (gestures). If you got a cellphone, just Google "Airborne Beer." You'll see pictures of it all over the place. That story now has 830,000 hits all over the Internet.

They said they couldn't believe though. Everybody thought that was just a rumor; nobody thought it was true and so on, and the guy's sitting in front us here now. We made a little noise, but we had a nice dinner.

When I went home, that story had gotten here. The [*State*] *Journal-Register* [Springfield's daily newspaper] came to my house and took pictures of all the Airborne Beer and so on. Today it's being sold—not in the states—all over Europe. I think I ought to call them up and say, "Hey, I ought to get a cut of this, right? (audience laughs) I made it famous for Airborne Beer."

At any rate at the, on the twenty-third of December we were really in bad shape. The artillery was down to two shells per gun per day. We had only two K-rations to eat per day. We had rifle ammunition. I only used to get two belts of ammo a day, and in the first five minutes of any fight, two belts goes

quickly. The rest of the time I got an M-1 with one clip of ammunition in it. It looked real bad. But on that day, the twenty-third, the sun came out. We were able to see our shadow; we couldn't believe it.

Out of the sky comes six P-47 Thunderbolt Fighter Farmers[1]. I'll never forget it. I can see them right here, right now. The nacelles were painted red, yellow and blue.[2] They dove down all around our perimeter, bombed and strafed all the German positions all around the place. And when they got finished, they lined up, came straight over our heads, and waggled their wings. We were never so proud or overcome. "Boys, thank you. See that? Americans. You call out for help; it comes."

After that, 134 C-47s come out and parachutes with supplies, food, ammo and gasoline, and they dropped in some doctors to help with the wounded and so on. Only one plane got hit and went down. The rest of them made it, turned around and left. We were never so proud in our whole lives, of our fellow soldiers, airmen, whatever they were.

Now, we're re-supplied, we expect that we're going to get relieved. Nothing happened on the twenty-fourth. The twenty-fifth, Christmas of 1944, the worst bombardment, I think, in the history of warfare, every two or three seconds, a shell was going off. The Germans had decided that—I guess they heard Patton was on his way—they decided that one more last attempt. We took more casualty that day. They bombed, and they strafed, and they had mortar squads going in, and they had the Panzerfaust there, knocking at our thing.[3] No matter what they did though, "Okay, show yourself and see what happens." Of course, nothing happened.

On the twenty-sixth, Patton broke through. I saw him, by the way. He was on the third tank, like this, with a scowl on his face. He had two six-shooters, the pearl-handled revolvers he was famous for. But they didn't stay. They just opened the corridor. We got the wounded out, and then they left because he had another job to do.

We thought, Now we're going to be sent back nice and get some warm clothes, some food. No, no. Eisenhower said, "You and the 82nd are on a roll. Now you going to take a take the next step, pushing the Germans back into Germany and get them home." We were taking casualties right up until May 8. Depending on where you were, who you were with, as the war wound down, the Germans going back to the town, they put up a big fight. They'd

[1] The Thunderbolt was effective as a short-to medium-range escort fighter in high-altitude air-to-air combat and ground attack in both the European and Pacific and theaters. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Republic_P-47_Thunderbolt)

[2] A nacelle is the housing, separate from the fuselage, that holds engines, fuel, or equipment on an aircraft. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nacelle)

[3] The Panzerfaust was a German WWII unique weapon. It was the most powerful anti-tank weapon used by infantry in the era. (https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Panzerfaust)

have a rear guard action, so that their troops could move back. Outside of Houffalize [Belgium] is where I got hit. [I spent] a couple of weeks in the hospital there, but right back to the outfit.

From Belgium, Bastogne, we went Alsace-Lorraine, big fight there, Hague Nau, Houffalize, big fight there, and then Czechoslovakia, Austria and finally Germany, Bavaria. It's right near the end of the war, but they're still fighting, at least where we were. We were still taking casualties. Well, just as we got across the German border—we weren't sure exactly where it was—we were told to get off the tracks. There's a woods out here. We got to clear it out, in case any of the Germans are dug in there, and clear it.

So, we were very unhappy about it. The war is almost over, and yet we're still going to get shot. We walked out there in the woods, fixed bayonets and going down the line, going through to see if there were any Germans dug in. There weren't. But as went through the woods, we noticed a smell. And the further we went, the stronger the smell got. When we got to a clearing, here was this big barbed wired enclosure, double barbed wire, two big barbed wire gates open and then the most disgusting sight that I have ever seen in my whole life.

Don't forget, we were eighteen and nineteen year-old kids. We didn't have must life experience to see... You know what I'm talking about. The ovens still had bones in them and smoke coming out. On the left side was a shed with cubby holes and people in there, half of them dead, half of them just barely moving. In the middle was a big hole, with a bulldozer that had—I guess we came too soon for them—and a big pile of the bodies that were skeletons. There was nothing but bones covered with skin. There was not an ounce of flesh any place. You've seen pictures of this.

Well, when we saw it, we couldn't believe it. These guys are crawling up to you on their elbows because they couldn't walk, kissing our boots and hugging us. Hey. So we tried to give them some of the chocolate that we had and so on. The medical officer came out there, "Don't give them anything. They've got to be fed a certain way. You're going to kill them."

When he left, the guy holding my leg was talking, and I heard "*madia, madia* [?]," which I believe was Hungarian. My friend Steve Pentek was Hungarian. I called him; I said, "Steve, what's he saying?" And he says, "There's fish in that pond, right over there." I said, "Well, we know what to do about that, right?" "Yeah." So we took a hand grenade and threw it in there, ducked down, and all the fish come up to the top. Here these guys come down there, grabbing it, even with the spines sticking up, eating the things raw. Of course, we got hollered at again by the medical officer.

It's a good thing that they sent us out to see if there were any Germans still around on patrol. If we'd have found any, I'd feel sorry for that guy; he'd had 1,000 bullets in him. We were just absolutely flabbergasted.

And the people in the town, just a mile and a half away... When we got to the town, "Oh, no, we didn't know it." We said, "You didn't see the trains coming in every day? You didn't see the smokestacks at night, when they'd light up? You didn't smell the human flesh?" "Oh, no, we were always anti-Hitler." There wasn't a Nazi in the whole place when we got there. They were all anti-Hitler. "The SS did this..." and so on and so on. We had had it up to here.

We didn't take any more prisoners after that. I shouldn't tell you that, but it was the most devastating experience for a young guy...for anybody to see what nobody thought was true. There was rumors, but nobody thought anything like that was true. And then, of course, you know the rest of the story, all the other camps that they found. What little respect we had for the German soldier disappeared after that episode, and we grew up; you know what I mean?

We took a nasty attitude for the rest of the few weeks that was left in the war. They used to send us to knock out a machine gun nest. We wouldn't go anywhere near it. We'd call for artillery; we'd call for bombardment and just destroy everything, not even try to take any prisoners. It was a traumatic experience, you might say.

At any rate, May 8th, the Germans signed a surrender. We had been [to] Bavaria, and then we went to Lake Königssee, where the Eagle's Nest was.[4] We went up to Hitler's Eagle's Nest. A bomb had hit it, and stuff was scattered all over the place. I got two books out of there that have all kinds of pictures and so on. And I had a few little adventures with... The German cellars were all very well stocked. They stole food from all over Europe to make sure the Germans were eating. The billeting officers now did not make us sleep outside anymore. We used to kick the Germans out of the house. I think Mark is going to tell you that one, but we slept in the houses. We kicked the Germans upstairs or on the way out or so on.

Just one incident after the war. When I got home, I couldn't get into college right away. I had to wait a year for the college I wanted to go to. So I ended up getting a job. Then a friend of mine came and talked me into going to the merchant marine. That was a great experience. What I had hoped was that I would catch a ship to Italy. I wanted to see where my parents were born

[4] Known as the "Eagle's Nest" in English-speaking countries, the Kehlsteinhaus is a Third Reich–era building erected atop the summit of the Kehlstein, a rocky outcrop that rises above Obersalzberg It was visited on 14 documented instances by Adolf Hitler, who disliked the location due to his fear of heights, the risk of bad weather, and the thin mountain air. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kehlsteinhaus)

and so and so. But every ship I signed up on, Bremerhaven [Germany] and back, ferrying troops, Bremerhaven and back.

Well, one day when we stopped at Bremerhaven, they gave us three days ashore. The crew and I went ashore. I had no wife or girlfriend or anything; I was still loose, looking for action (audience laughs), and here's this beautiful *fraulein*, sitting on a bench in Bremerhaven. I went up to her and showed off my German. I said, "*Gutentag, fraulein; wie gehts*?" ["Good day, lady; how are you?"] And she said, "*Wie gehts*?" ["How are you?"] I said, "*Was ist das namma*?" ["What is your name?"] "*Ich bin Hilda*." ["I am Hilda."] "*Ich bin Vincent*." ["I am Vincent."] "*Haben sie hunger*?" ["Are you hungry?"] [When she responds, "Oh, yes, Vincent," in German, invites her to dinner, and she accepts.

So we went to the Seaman's Club, and I bought her a nice meal. And then I didn't have to say anything. She asked me, she said "*Willst du meine Hause kommen*?" ["Will you come to my house?"] I said, "Oh, yeah, I want to come to your house." (audience laughs) We get to the house, and as soon as we get inside, here's the big, blond Aryan, tough looking, the typical Aryan soldier. She said, "This is mine brother, Hunzie." I said, "Who the hell wants to meet your brother Hunzie?" And Hunzie comes out and says, "*Willst du einebier*?" ["Do you want a beer?"] I said, "Yeah." So I went in to have a beer.

He says, [Vincent recounts the exchange in German.] He said, "Me too. German 6th parachute regimen." I said, "Me, 101st Airborne Division." He said, "Yeah, we kaputted you in Normandy." I said, "You're full of crap; we kaputted you in Normandy" (audience laughs). He said, "*Bist du in Holland*?" ["Were you in Holland?"] I said, "Yeah, the 101st was in Holland." He said, "Me too; we kaputted you in Holland." He was right there. But I said, "Na." He said, "*Bist du in Bastogne*?" ["Were you in Bastogne?"] I said, "Yeah, I was in Bastogne." I said, "There's no question about who kaputted who in Bastogne." (audience laughs)

Both of us at that moment—both of us—just stopped. We were looking at each other, and I'm sure that in both our minds, the same thing was clicking. Six months ago we'd have been at each other with a bayonet, and today we're sitting down having a drink, and I'm going to meet your sister." (audience laughs) Afterwards I said to myself, What the hell was the war all about?

We know what it was about. It was about preserving freedom for the world. And I want to end this way. Today, more and more we are not realizing how dangerous the world is and how easily what happened in World War II can happen again. There are 1.2 billion Muslims out there who don't like us very much. And what you young people now—I'm out of it; I'm ninety—

what you've got to be concerned about is, are we going to be prepared and, you know.

They've been damaging the military, in my view. They've been cutting the budgets; they've been soldiers out; they've been cutting the air corps fleet. This country has got to wake up (applause). World War II is the most devastating, the most dangerous, more casualties, more people, more houses, more destruction, more property. But can you picture a nuclear war? Forbid it, almighty God. As for me, give me liberty or give me death. Thank you (applause).

Speranza: Thank you.

DePue: Well, Vince, you are one of the lucky ones. An awfully lot of people paid the ultimate price, but Vince was able to come home and met the love of his life. They got married in nineteen... Not sure when you got married, Vince.

Speranza: Forty-eight.

DePue: Nineteen forty-eight.

Speranza: We've been married sixty-seven years. (applause)

DePue: He went back to Staten Island. He taught history there. Can you imagine being a student in Vince Speranza's class? (audience reacts) In fact, Vince, if I'm correct, one of your students ended up... Was he Commander of the 101st Airborne Division?

Speranza: Eighty-second in Fort Bragg.

DePue: Eighty-second.

Speranza: Commander General.

DePue: That's something else. One of his students, inspired by his teacher, his history teacher... All those teachers out there, it makes a difference what you tell them (applause).

Now to sell my own program a bit. I met Vince when he came to talk to our Breakfast Optimists group because he'd been in an Honor Flight recently.[5] I was watching Vince, and I said, "Boy that would be a good interview to do." As I'm watching Vince... In a lot of my interviews I do

[5] Honor Flights are provided by a national network of independent hubs working together to honor our nation's veterans with an all-expenses paid trip to the memorials in Washington, D.C., a trip many of our veterans may not otherwise be able to take. Participation in an Honor Flight trip gives veterans the chance to share this momentous trip with other veterans, to remember friends and comrades lost, and share their stories and experiences with each other. (https://www.honorflight.org/)

audio interviews, but it seemed like maybe I wanted to do a video interview with Vince (audience laughs). And it took me a while to convince him to do it.

He had his reservations for doing it in the first place. But I prevailed on him. There had to be some conditions from his perspective, and I was happy to accommodate. After that, I had not one, not two, but several sessions and something in the neighborhood of seven hours that we had by the time we were done.

Then Vince went off and kept having these adventures. He'd gone back to Bastogne for the first time in sixty-five years, and then he kept going back. The more he went back and the more he was meeting people and people were hearing about his story, it just kept evolving over time. He'd occasionally come back and sit in the office and tell me about it. So here's just a very brief summary of the couple of years after we first met.

He goes back to England in 2010 and 2011. He has Kelly Ann Sproul visit him in the United States, and I took the opportunity to visit, to interview both Kelly and Vince. Now, just a very brief explanation who Kelly is; she was and is, I suspect, a reenactor. She reenacts being a torch singer for World War II, so she goes to these reunions and sings. And Vince sings, and Vince dances and entertains the ladies and occasionally has some alcoholic beverages in the process, too. But that was a great time I had to talk to Kelly Ann when she came here.

That same year, in 2011, he goes to Pearl Harbor. He goes back to Bastogne, and his adventures are building over time. In 2012 he goes to England. And then he goes back in May to England; I'm not sure exactly when this is. We ended up doing another interview in 2012, to capture all of the many experiences that he'd had just in the last three or four years before that. The slide you're seeing here is of an inn. Vince, where is that inn, that little tavern?

Speranza: That's out of Brighton.

DePue: Brighton, England. He had a wonderful story about going to that inn, that tavern in Brighton, England, and coiffed a few beverages there. I suspect was beer. Didn't you say the poker, that they stuck the poker in the beer? Then he ended up going to the park and got mugged there in the park (audience and Vince laugh). Then a nice English couple came and rescued him and took him to their house and treated him like a king. So, in that very short period of time, he had a chance to see the worst of English humanity—I guess you'd say—and the very best. Part of why he was going back to this location was to see if he could find the family again.

All of this is part of our oral history interview. I don't want to take any more time away from our Q&A from Vince, but this is just to give you a

flavor of the kind of things he's doing when he goes back and the kind of experiences he has.

In July the 501st found out about him, so he went to a reunion in Atlanta. Some years later, I think, you ended up going on a helicopter ride and almost got a chance to parachute with them.

Speranza: They turned me down (audience laughs).

DePue: In August, the 101st Division reunion in Nashville, September... I'm not sure you did this one. Did you go back for the event in Holland that year, in 2011?

Speranza: Yeah, I went to that. I did the whole thing.

DePue: Then, of course, December in Bastogne. That was about the time I had a chance to interview him again. And I can tell you that, from that time forward, Vince's schedule is packed. He has more events, more activities. I guarantee you he has done more world traveling and traveling about the United States than anybody here. I'd be surprised if anybody could match what he's done. And he's still has the chance to swim every morning, keep himself in shape and visit his bride and come here and tell us these important stories.

We'll have a chance for some Q & A, and then we'll turn it over to Vince, and he'll continue to sign books. But thank you very much (applause). Okay, we've got the house lights up. Oh, right up front here, yes sir. Can we get microphones? If you could wait until we get the microphones, that would help, so everybody can hear your questions.

Audience Member: When did you ever get first back to the *familia es Speranza*? Did you get back home?

Speranza: Say it again.

Audience Member: In Sicily, when was the first time you were able to get back to your family in Sicily?

DePue: When did you have a chance to visit your family in Sicily?

Speranza: [In] 1994, my older brother and I decided... I was already seventy-five years old; he was seven years older than I. [I] said, "Listen, we've got to go back and see where Mom and Pop lived." We had fifteen beautiful days in Italy.

DePue: My favorite part of that story—if I can tell this very briefly—is you telling about the flight over and entertaining everybody, singing all these Italian songs, until you discovered you were singing this wonderful song that was about Mussolini, and they didn't appreciate it (audience laughs).

Speranza: Well, it was worse than that, in that the songs we learned were the songs my grandfather, then my father taught us. In my grandfather's day, Mussolini was loved by the Italian. He did all kinds of good things for them, before the war. So the songs that we have are praising him and the whole Fascist (laughs) movement. My brother brought his guitar, and I brought my harmonica, and we used to go around to the little piazzas and sit down and make music. The people would gather around say, "Ah, senor, I haven't heard that song in fifty years." And we'd play, and then we'd slip into (sings in Italian) "*Giovinezza, primavera Mussolino…"*[6] [Mussolini spring youth...] And the people would go, "*Ah, signore, no,* (continues in Italian.) We'd say, "What? This is a song my grandfather taught me." We don't know what they're talking about. (audience laughs)

DePue: (takes another question) Way in the back there.

Audience Member: I'll holler, Vince. I'm an old airborne guy, too. What camp was it that you helped liberate in Germany? You said you were going through, down in Bavaria. Was it Dachau or...?[7]

Speranza: Dachau.

Audience Member: Dachau. I've been there. Thank you.

DePue: And we had one right over here. Just a second.

Speranza: (to DePue) You listen to the question.

Audience Member: I want to make a comment and then ask a question of Vince. I am Jewish. I grew up in Chicago, grew up in Joliet. I had some family who got out of Germany just in time, and when we were working on our Bar Mitzvah, we wanted to go and get it done with and whatever. There was one gentleman who went to temple every day for two hours, every day for two hours. I said, "Once a week, what do you need to go every day?" And he showed me the tattoo. He said, "I was fourth in line to the ovens; I go every day."

Speranza: What killed us when we found out about this thing was that these people were being slaughtered just because they were Jewish. They didn't do anything. They didn't oppose the state or do anything. Just because they were Jewish,

[6] "Giovinezza" is the official hymn of the Italian National Fascist Party, regime, and army, and was the unofficial national anthem for the Kingdom of Italy between 1924 and 1943. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giovinezza)

[7] Dachau was a Nazi concentration camp that was in operation the longest, opening on 22 March 1933 and closing in April 1945. It was initially intended to hold political prisoners. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dachau_concentration_camp)

they were slaughtered. There were little ones, too, kids of all ages and so on. It was the most disgusting thing we ever saw. I haven't been back to Germany, by the way. I've been back to all the other countries. I know, as a good Christian, I'm supposed to forgive and so on, but I can't; the next generation, you do it. I got too much up here from...

Audience Member: On a little more positive note, did you ever get the damn brother out of the house, so you could get with the *fraulein*? (audience laughs)

DePue: Did you ever get the brother out of the house? Is that what you asked about?

Audience Member: So she could show her gratitude.

DePue: Oh, did you ever get the brother out of the house, so she could show some gratitude?

Audience Member: To the *fraulein*.

DePue: To the *fraulein*. To the German soldier's...

Speranza: Oh. Well, I think Hunzie took the hint. He went for a walk. (audience laughs)

DePue: We're skirting the edge of having to restrict this. Right over here.

Audience Member: Two things. First, let us not forget that there were hundreds of thousands of Poles, Gypsies, gays, people that didn't fit Hitler's thing, who were also burned in those ovens. That's beside the point but is not beside the point. But the question I wanted to ask you, Vince, is, there was some allusion on Eileen's part to finding out about that winemaking at your father's place, some details.

DePue: She would like to hear more details about your father's winemaking, the tradition that was making the wine. This is not a short story.

Speranza: Are you sure you are up to it? (audience laughs) Well, first of all, understand that in the old country in the old days everybody drank wine, and because it was expensive to buy, people made their own. The tradition goes way back to the Middle Ages, where in every little town the church is always supposed to be on the highest point in the town. And, of course, behind the church is the graveyard, where they bury the dead. When it rains, you know what comes down through to where the people drink water. So they didn't drink water; they drank wine.

My father, I'm sure, got his tradition in the old fashioned way. But it's a drama. Here's how it works. California grapes were as good as any in Italy because at one time California's grapes had all been wiped out, and they went to Italy for their cuttings to start the grape industry again in California. So these California grapes are also that. A railroad car comes up with all of these boxes of grapes, and Ralph, who is the guy with the truck, picks the boxes up, and then he goes through the neighborhood.

Now, your father stands out there with his pipe, the four boys, "Hey, up on the porch. Don't you come down where the negotiations are going to go on." As usual, Pop says, "Well, how's the grape this year?" "Oh, fantastic." "Really, and what about the prices?" "Well, you know," he said, "The prices are going up all the time" and so on (DePue laughs). They both light their pipes now and their tapping their feet and [are] talking and so on.

Pop said, "Well, about how much is a box of grapes this year, huh?" They haggled over the price a little bit, and then my father asked the pivotal question, "*qual è la tintura*?" which is, "What is the tincture?" He takes a grape and smashes it up against the white wood of the box. Depending on the stain, he knows the grapes are going to produce better wine or lesser wine, so you're only going to need this many white grapes and red grapes.

They finally come to an agreement, and Pop waves like this (gestures), and the boys come down, and everybody gets boxes of grapes and takes then down to the basement.

Previous to that—by the way, we were real little when we first started getting involved in it—the three barrels are out in the back yard, and Pop says, "Fill them up with water, and make sure so that the barrels swell Turn them upside down on a two by four, and let all the water run out." Then on a Saturday, he gives you ten cents and says, "Go to the hardware store and buy three sticks of Sicily sulfur." "Sicily sulfur?" "Yeah. Don't take it if it doesn't say 'Sicily sulfur.'"

So you go to the hardware store. Of course, the hardware store is your neighborhood guy. He knows what... "Oh," he says, "I know what your father wants" and so on. Then, for a dime, you get three sticks. Then you had to take a wire hook; hang it on the end of the barrel; light the sulfur stick, and put it down inside, and let it burn. Now, when we grew up, we asked our father, "What's the idea of the sulfur?" He said, "I don't know." (all laugh) I said, "Why do we do it?" He said, "That's the way you make wine!" (all laugh) "Okay, Pop."

And on the day that the grapes are bought, the wine barrels now are all down in the basement; the whole family is down there. The women are cleaning out bottles and maybe steaming corks and fixing all kinds of stuff. The boys, the littlest ones, got to take the leaves out of the boxes of grapes.

The bigger boys, we're on the grinder. And Pop takes the box, dumps it in there. My brother and I [are] grinding it up, until all three barrels are filled—He bought a certain number of boxes to fill three barrels—then he covers them with a big thick... What's [*Italian word*] in English? [It's] like a comforter, a thick, wool something, over the top of them.

Every night when he comes home, he goes down, puts his ear to the barrel, goes back upstairs. The next night, he comes home… until one day, he puts his ear to the barrel, he says, "Tonight. And by the way, I don't care if you got football practice; tonight the family makes wine." I found out later that what he did is, he knew the sound of when it had fermented enough. That's just a—I don't know—a talent. He would listen, and when the sound was a certain sound, okay tonight is the wine making.

Then the whole family is down there again, and we started. You use a *panada* [?], a woven basket, a hand-woven basket is the filter. When you break open the wine barrels and you filter it through, the first squeezing of the grapes is for the family. Those bottles are marked. Meanwhile the women are putting the corks in and putting the labels on them and putting them on the side. Then there's the second squeezing, and that is where they put all the *rahina* [?] back in there, and squeeze it again. Add a little water to it to make it... That's for when strangers come to the house, and you give it to them. (all laugh)

And then there's *laquada* [?]. That's where you just take water, put the squeezing's, the dried out squeezing, in there and swish it around a little bit. It comes out light colored. That's supposed to be for the kids and for the women. But you try to get my mother to drink that. She says, "Say. I get this kind of wine, not the baby stuff" The kids, at age two, you can have *laquada.* When you're twelve, you can have the secondary, and after you're sixteen—That was the tradition; I don't know if everybody did it like that—then you could drink a full glass of wine.

My father's wine was always praised all over the neighborhood. But I had an uncle who was just the opposite. His wine was terrible. (all laugh) By the way, in my book you'll read about Uncle Dominic. What a story that is, when he first came to America.

His son became a congressman. He was elected to the United States Congress for thirteen terms, twenty-six years. He used to make wine, and my mother used to say... When you go over there, he gives you a glass of wine, and it tasted like ugh (audience laughs). But you smile and say, "Ah, nice." He would always ask, "How's the wine? How's the wine?" My father would say, "Uh, this year..." (gestures) (audience laughs). He used to give us a bottle. We were going to throw it away, and Mom said, "No, no, we can use this for vinegar." (all laugh) Poor Dominic never knew that everybody used to call his wine straight vinegar. By the way, it's a fascinating story, my Uncle Dominic.

DePue: (takes next question) Right here.

Audience Member: I just have a comment. I'm here with my sister and my brother; my other brother can't be here, but we are the children of a 101st Airborne soldier. We didn't know, as kids, how brave he was. I think we want to tell you, thank you for your service to our country (applause).

DePue: Vince, these are children of another 101st Airborne veteran. They just thanked you for what you did and appreciate what their father did. (applause)

Anybody else? Way up front here.

Audience Member: (speaks in Italian)

Speranza: (responds in Italian)

DePue: I can't help you on that one (audience laughs).

Speranza: I know. I know. It's unfortunate, but it reminded me of a story I think I better tell you (all laugh). I was making a speech... Well, let me back way up. The 101st Airborne Division Museum in Bastogne was being dedicated. There's a museum in Bastogne dedicated to the 101st Airborne Division. By the way, in one corner of the place there's a lot of my World War II stuff, my old uniforms and this and that; there's a big display there. At the opening of that museum, they invited any World War II guys who fought in Bastogne to come. The only two that showed up was Herb Suerth from the *Band of Brothers* and myself, the two of us.[8]

It was a big deal affair. They had the American ambassador, the French foreign minister, the Belgian ambassador, this one, that one, the Dutch, and a bunch of NATO generals and photographers all over the place and stuff, a big deal thing. They asked Herb and I to speak as well, at the end. So then it starts in. First, the museum officials (drones on), and on and on; then the American ambassador and the same kind of speech, "The 101st Airborne..." da da, da, da, da, da. And then the Dutch.

By the way, it's a big French speaking audience, and most of the speakers were in French. We didn't understand half of what they were saying. I'm fidgeting. I had had my two scotches previous that thing (all laugh), and

[8] Herb Suerth, Jr. was part of the historic *Band of Brothers* of WWII. When the original book was released in 1992, his exploits were not included, perhaps because Suerth was a replacement, arriving in Easy Company just before deployment to the Ardennes Forest and the Battle of the Bulge. His character did make a brief appearance when the screenplay evolved in 2000. (https://stephenambrosetours.com/herb-suerth-jr-r-i-p/)

as thing kept going on and on and on... Finally they got to Herb, and I said, "Well, maybe Herb is going say…" Even Herb, "101st Airborne da, da…" I said, "It's time to shake this place up." (all laugh) When I got up there, I said... I'll even show you how to do it. Oops (sound of something plastic).

Can you still hear me? (all say "Yes.")

I got up there, and I said, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you so much for inviting us. (*Makes a few statements in French*)." The audience, all of a sudden, is going like this (gestures), and the generals got that look on their face as if to say, "What's this rogue paratrooper going to do to embarrass us today" (all laugh).

And I said, (speaks in French) I'm saying, "I don't really speak French, but I remember a booklet that the Army gave us when we first got here. It had English, French, French-English phrases." And then I proceeded to just throw out a whole bunch of disjointed phrases, which, of course, made everybody laugh (all laugh). I said, "Well, I'm sure...*Où sont les Allemands*? [Where are the Germans?] *Dépêche-toi* [Hurry up.] *J'ai besoin d'un verre d'eau. Où sont les toilettes?* [I need a drink of water. Where's the toilet?] *Bonjour Madame. Combien*? ["Hello, madam. How much?]" (all laugh).

That's what we used to do. That's the French language we learned. In the audience, the women are starting to titter; the men are starting to laugh out loud, and the generals are going nuts (all laugh). They're looking, and I'm sweating there. I said, '(More French words).' No, not that one; that means excrement."

Finally I said, (Several French statements), and I said, "Oh, yeah." She said, "You don't talk like that. You don't say 'Madam, how much?' You say, 'Madam, would you like to take a walk with me; would you like to... You are very pretty. I love you,' so on and so on." Only when mine came out, "*Voulez vous promenade avec moi?*" ["Would you like to walk with me?"] Mine came out, "*Voulez vous coucher avec moi ?*" ["Would you like to sleep with me?"] (all laugh). When I went by the generals, they were looking at me, and I said, "What are you going to do to me? I'm a civilian." (laughter & applause)

DePue: Well, Vince, I'm not sure...

Speranza: Excuse me. There was one more. Right at the end, when they kept looking at me, I ran out of those phrases. I said, "I'm not that way." I said, (French statement), and I sang (sings in French). Now the generals are really going nuts. That song was taught to me by a French prostitute. I didn't know what the words meant (all laugh). And the generals, whew. But I... (continues singing the song in French), I looked over at the generals and went, "boom, boom!" (applause & laughter)

DePue: Vince, somehow, I don't think we're going to top that, so this might be the time to call it an evening. But to give you (the audience) a chance, we're going to have to go off stage and get to the place where Vince can sign books. I would certainly encourage you to take that opportunity. You're not going to have many more opportunities like this, to see and to talk to somebody like Vince Speranza. Thank you very much, Vince (applause).

(end of transcript)