

Interview with Vincent Speranza

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Interviewer: Mark DePue

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DePue: Welcome. Today is Friday, December 21, 2012. My name is Mark DePue. I am the Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today, I'm delighted to be with Vince Speranza. Good morning, Vince.

Speranza: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: You and I are old hands at this now, aren't we? Let me just explain a couple of things here. Then we'll turn it over to Vince, and he can start telling his story. We met a little over two and a half years ago, and it was right at two and a half years ago that I interviewed you for the first time, about your story as a paratrooper in Company H, the 3rd Battalion of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment...

Speranza: Parachute Infantry Regiment.

DePue: ...of the 101st Airborne Division.

Speranza: Right.

DePue: The central part of your story, obviously, was your experiences at Bastogne, but we talked about so much more than just that and had a wonderful time doing it.

Well, since we got done with that series, your life has been evolving in ways that you could not have imagined. It had very little to do with the experience of doing the interview, but, because you became pretty well-known in the 101st and the Bastogne circle. What we wanted to do today is to pick up where we left off last time. We left off last time with that incredible story, I think in 2009, your first trip back to Bastogne—what, sixty-five years after?—

Speranza: Sixty-five years after the war.

DePue: —and the town of Bastogne, discovering that you were the source of this legend that had existed for sixty-some years, about a paratrooper who was delivering beer to his buddies in the hospital.

Now, Vince, we don't need to tell that story again. But what I wanted to do was to kind of pick it up from there. I think, maybe shortly after you came back from that 2009 trip, you went back to England in 2010, May of, or March? of 2010.

Speranza: March.

DePue: Tell us what happened on that trip.

Speranza: Well, I think I already mentioned Kelly Ann Sproul—she's a very pretty young British singer, known as the Sweetheart of the British Armed Forces—and how I met her in Bastogne, as she was singing the World War II songs for the troops. She and her mom and I sort of struck it, and they invited me to come to England. I went. It was in March, and coincidentally, we discovered that my birthday was March 23, Kelly's is March 24, and her mother's is March 25. We have a birthday cake made up. But, in the discussion, in fact, one of the things that they were mentioning when they invited me to come to England, is that they would take me to see where it was where I was stationed when we first got to England, and the old Quonset¹ huts at the town of Hungerford, where we first landed.

Well, going back, they took me to Hungerford. I also asked if the town of Brighton, which is the town that those of us that were stationed at Hungerford used to go to for recreation (Mark laughing). When they took me to Brighton, I asked them if they could help me find a family called the Radbournes.

¹ The Quonset was the ubiquitous temporary building of our WWII armed forces for all kinds of uses, from troop quarters to meeting/instruction space and airplane hangars, medical uses and equipment storage. Roofs were large-interval corrugated metal with a cross section of a half circle. At interview time there is one at the edge of Springfield on South Chatham Road which was part of the original Springfield Airport. It has served well for various commercial enterprises over the years since the Abraham Lincoln Airport opened.

Here's why I wanted to find the Radbournes. Back in '44, when we first went to Hungerford, three of us had a pass to go into town. Now, we're new, young kids, in England for the first time, for the first time out of our country, for me anyway. And we're looking for... action. The first pub we came to, we went in, and we sat there. We saw all these old Englishmen sitting there talking, smoking their pipes and drinking their bitters. We saw them go over to the fireplace, where there was a bunch of poker sticks in the fire. They'd take the poker out of the fire and stick it in the beer. We thought that was kind of strange, because the beer was warm enough, as it was. They don't serve cold beer in England, I guess! And they were making it even hotter, with the poker. So, finally, we asked them. We said, "What are you doing?" And he said, "It's a tradition, old boy." We said, "Okay, but" we said, "by the way, sir, do the ladies come in here?" And he said, "No, this is a pub. If you want to go to the ladies, they're down at the dancehall, down at the turning." We said, "Oh, well, thank you very much, sir."

So, we go to the dance hall. At the dance hall, yes, there was a lot of nice young ladies at the dance hall, but the evening ended up three guys and only two girls. They said, "Come on, Vince." And I said, "No, listen." Magnanimously, I said, "You go ahead. I'll go back to the pub and have another drink." They said, "No, well, come on." "Go on."

I went back to the pub, and they were pulling down the black shades, you know, for the blackout.² That enabled them to stay open longer. I proceeded to get royally drunk. We sang and talked and laughed. I didn't think I was in any kind of... When I walked outside the door, I started staggering, and three, four guys jumped me. They beat the hell out of me, took my money, my wallet, my pass. I had a little bleeding on the side of the head, and they left me lying in the alley there.

Well, about daylight, I started to wake up. I felt, got up and said, "The MP [Military Police] patrols are going to be on their way, you know? I don't have a pass. I'm AWOL. I'm going to go to jail!" I started walking down the hill; there was a little park and a bench facing the road. All I could think of to do is, I sat down on that bench, feeling sorry for myself.

An old Englishman comes by, walking his dog. When he gets past me, he says, "I say, Ike,³ are you all right?" I said, "No, considering a bunch of your guys just beat the hell out of me, took my money, my wallet and my pass, everything, and the MP patrols are going to start, and I'm AWOL." He

² Before the days of radar or GPS, all buildings were required to extinguish or shield all lights to avoid detection by enemy bombers. Even in Springfield, IL, houses had to turn out all lights or block windows with curtains during air raid drills; there were Air Raid Wardens in each neighborhood checking. It certainly created an atmosphere of potential disasters if we should ever be attacked in our homeland, and created a feeling we were all "doing our part".

³ Ike was the frequently used moniker for General Eisenhower, our Supreme High Commander of the Allied Forces. Hence the reference to Americans in general.

was horrified. He thought that was terrible! He said, “Please, Yank, come with me. I live right up there. Come with me. My wife will clean your uniform, press everything,” and so on. I wanted to get off the road (laughs), so I went. I can’t believe the way that family... He said his name was Radbourne. His wife and he had three children, little ones. He had been hit in North Africa with the British Army, and he was out of the war.

His wife cleaned my uniform. They washed the side of my head, and she pressed it [the uniform], and everything was just great. Then they put a meal out. Mark, at a time, when the British were being rationed to one egg a month and a quarter of a pound of tea per person, they put out a meal like you wouldn’t believe, with the...that stuff that you put the brandy on and light...Yorkshire pudding.

DePue: Oh?

Speranza: Yorkshire pudding. I mean, a whole meal, with a cake and everything. I was forever grateful. That night, he took me in his car to where our trucks were parked to take us back to camp. I had no trouble. I got back to camp.

The next week, I went by, and I hit the supply sergeant up for a bunch of stuff; among these was ten pounds of tea. She went crazy when I gave them the tea and so on. We talked a little bit and exchanged addresses and so on. We were going to stay in touch after the war, but, you know, nothing happened. I went back, and that’s it.



So, fast-forward, now, to 2010. Kelly and her mother and I are looking for...I had an address, looking for where the Radbournes lived, and the house numbers skipped the number I had on these addresses. We then stopped and talked to a neighbor and said, “Listen, we’re looking for this number, but it doesn’t seem to be...” He said, “Oh, that house took a direct bomb hit during the war. It disappeared. The family wasn’t in it at the time, but we don’t know what happened to them.” So, I was very disappointed, but I said, “By the way, to be sure I’m in the right place, is there a little road down to a pond, then...” He said, “Oh, yes.” I said, “With a bench facing the river?” He said, “Oh, yes, it’s called Queen’s Terrace.” He pointed, and sure enough, we went out to the pub called the Fairfield Inn, and go in the pub.

There is the little bench that we had sat on, and the fireplace, with the pokers sticking out of it, and an old Englishman, sitting in the corner there. I said, "Excuse me, sir," I said, "Was this pub here during the war?" And he said, "Oh yes, and so was I." I said, "Is there a road and a bench and a park?" He said, "Oh, yes, right down there." So, we went outside, walked down the road. There was the pond and the park and the bench. I sat on the bench, and I had Kelly take my picture, where sixty-five years ago, as a nineteen-year-old kid, who had just gotten beat up, sat on. I was sitting in that same bench!



In his 2011 return visit to England, Vince rediscovered the same park bench in a park he had found in 1944, while on a pass in Brighton.

DePue: I think we've got a picture of that that we can show, of both the pub and you in the park...

Speranza: Oh yeah, there's the pub! And the bench, right! Correct. Well, I had a very nostalgic moment, let's say, retracing those steps and finding those places still intact. Then Kelly and her mom took me to Brighton... Well, this was in Brighton, but they took me to the other parts of Brighton, where I recalled going to a movie theater and some other places. It was very nice and very nostalgic for me to see all these places and be following in the footsteps of a sixty-five-year-old adventure when you were a nineteen-year-old kid.

DePue: I think we've got a picture of you and Kelly and her mother as well, here, to show.

Speranza: Right. Right. That was one of the pubs where we went to lunch. I don't know if I dare tell this one, but they took us to a... Mark, hey, it happened. Look, they took us to a tea room. This is the tea room in Brighton. They're very proud of their old English tea rooms, where you have tea and biscuits and so on and so forth.



DePue: Tradition is more important to them than us, I think.

Speranza: Well, they didn't know they were taking me to one that I recalled from the time. I said, "You know, this tea room looks familiar." She said, "Oh, it is an old one. It was here during the war" and so on and so on. I said, "Oh, yeah. Well, I remember coming in here. We used to come in here and sit down and have a cup of tea for two pounds." She said, "Two pounds for a cup of tea?" I

said, “Oh, yeah, they were really charging us in those days.” What they didn’t know was, you came in, and you paid two pounds and had a cup of tea and then went upstairs to meet the ladies. So, they didn’t know what I was giggling about or laughing about, but that’s the picture that came back to me when we went into this tea room.

They also took me to the White Cliffs, and we saw the places where the old... They had a hospital built into the cliff and the old Spitfire,⁴ the British RAF Spitfire and so on. It was a delightful trip back to England in 2010.

DePue: Well, to move the story forward—because this is just one of many chapters here that we need to be talking about—I think, perhaps the next thing—correct me if I’m wrong—but you got an opportunity in 2011 to go to Pearl Harbor, on December seventh,⁵ no less.

Speranza: Yes. I was invited by a gentleman from Brooklyn. We met in Bastogne, and he was one of these people—you could almost call them groupies—who go to all the military reunions and so on. They’re really just fascinated by the World War II thing. He told me about this. I had never been to the Pacific, and I wanted very much to see it. He invited me to come on this tour, and I went.

It was a very moving experience, Mark. I was befriended by a couple of ladies, who had been on this thing before and knew the routines and so on. They sort of took me in hand and made sure that I got to see all of the proper things in Bastogne.

Mark, I know how this is going to sound, but, if you wear a hat—say you’re a World War II guy—every place you go, in Pearl Harbor, there was an admiral giving a speech in this theater and so on. We walked in. He stopped talking and said, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have a World War II person with us.” And, you know, I’m embarrassed, but everybody stands up and starts clapping. Mark, I’m an old man, now; these things are starting to pile up on me. But the general was talking about, you know, this is the anniversary of December seventh and so on and all that stuff. Several times, he keeps referring to, you know, the World War II people, the World War II people. And after that, we saw a movie.

From there, we went out to see the Arizona,⁶ you know, where the guys are still buried and so on. I actually saw... I went onto the monument there. The oil is still bubbling up from the ship, the sunken ship. And, at the ceremony, they rang a bell and announced each name of the people who were

⁴ The Spitfire was the famous British fighter aircraft during WWII.

⁵ December 7, 1941, was the day the Japanese Air Force attacked Pearl Harbor in the Philippines, leading to America’s decision to enter the war.

⁶ The USS Arizona, a battleship sunk in the attack on Pearl Harbor. Still lying on the bottom, it is the site of the famous memorial of WWII.

buried in that ship. They took me to the submarine, the *Bowfish*, or *Bowfin*, that was docked alongside there and played a part. Then, they took us through the harbor, where the sunken wrecks, some of them, are still visible. The Navy put on a demonstration that I was so impressed with.

Finally, at the beach, I'm walking down with these two young ladies, and I keep noticing these two guys following us. Finally, I turned around, and I said, "Hey, is there any problem? Are you following me?" They said, "Yeah, we're from the FBI." And I said, "Really? I haven't done anything, have I?" And they said, "Oh, no. We just heard your announcement of your name and so on. We're waiting to get a chance to talk to you." (both laugh) So, we dismissed the young ladies, and went out on the beam and smoked a cigar. They were just...one of them is from Illinois, Glenarm, just a few miles from my house, and the other one was from West Virginia. By the way, just opened a box: they sent me a bottle of Johnnie Walker! (both laugh) But we had a good conversation. The whole Pearl Harbor experience was, you know, a great one. I just hope that more and more people get interested in doing these things, and seeing... You can see pictures, but it's not the same.

DePue: Um-hm. I do think we have a picture of you there. Is that on the submarine?

Speranza: That's on the submarine, behind the gun. I was shooting down Japanese planes.

DePue: Well, you know, you're an old Army guy. It makes you appreciate what the Navy went through as well.

Speranza: Absolutely, absolutely. And the people who are keeping that memory alive ought to be commended, as a reminder to today's Americans.



DePue: Well, let's move on to the next chapter and more memories that are much more closely tied to you. Was it December of 2011 also, that you went from Pearl Harbor back to Illinois and then over to Bastogne again?

Speranza: Yes. I was home one day. I had from December seventh of that week and then, December sixteenth is Bastogne. Now, Bastogne, in 2011, was a repeat of 2010, in terms of, now I had gotten to know more people, and they had gotten...and they were also, now, done more research and so on. This time, Marco Kilian, the Dutch Army officer that I've been telling you about, said, "We found your foxhole." I said, "My original foxhole in the battle zone?"

They said, “Yeah. You were H Company, and Captain Stanley from H Company used to keep charts.”

In the archives, what they found is that, in his after-battle report, Captain Stanley also had the map: machine gun here, and I put a rifleman here and here, and I put the heavy weapons here and so on. They said, “We have this chart, and there’s only one machine gun foxhole. So, that had to be yours.”

Well, we went to go look at it. We couldn’t go out on the land. It was fenced off, and it was private property now; somebody else owned it. But I looked at that thing and looked at it and looked at it. I said—I just couldn’t believe it—I said, “Now, wait a minute, Marco.” You know, it’s filled in. You can see the outline, though, of a two-man foxhole. I said, “If that was my machine gun nest, right here there has to be a foxhole right here, on the ridge, because they always put two riflemen to protect a machine gun.” They said, “Yeah, look over there, filled in, there and here.” It hit me that, geez, this is the... This really is the place! I said, “No, wait a minute. No, Marco, if this is the place, there has to be a stream here, because I remember that morning, I broke the ice just before the attack started, filled up my canteen and came back, because we had dry mouth and so on.” He said, “Yeah.” He said, “You can’t see it because of the grass, but it’s there.” We walked over there, and there was the damned stream! And I said, “Yes! Yes!” Sixty-seven years ago, I was here, and this place was a mass of artillery and mortars and tanks and then noise and snow and German troops coming up.

DePue: Well, this particular trip, you were the invited guest of the people of Bastogne, were you not? Did you spend some time in the museum? Did you have any incidents there that stick with you?

Speranza: Well, oh, yeah. They have a museum now, dedicated to the 101st Airborne Division⁷ and so on. (coughs) Excuse me. I come back to the museum, and there are a bunch of people. Most of them want to take a picture with me or sign books. Fathers that take their young sons, “Excuse me, sir, could we please...My son would like...” I would say, “Sure.” They’d take a picture.

While I’m doing this and signing autographs and so on, a guy walks up to me. He looks in his seventies, maybe. He says, “Are you Vincent?” I said, “Oh, yes.” He said, “Are you Vincent who was here in Bastogne, during the war, with the 101st Airborne?” I said, “Yes.” He tears up, comes up to me and hugs me and says, “I am Dr. Govaerts. My father, Dr. Govaerts, and mother were here in Bastogne during the war.” I said, “Oh.” He said, “My father passed away eleven years ago. But, before he died, he called me, and he said, ‘Bring the blue bag from the dresser over here.’ I bring him the blue bag, and

⁷ This Division went by the name, *The Screaming Eagles*. Their embroidered identifying arm patch still pictures an adult eagle, America’s national symbol, descending in flight, with claws stretched forth.

my father pulls out two pieces of yellow cloth.” My father said I must find Vincent and thank him for our family. “My father starts to tear up. He says, ‘You must find him, because, during the war, in the battle, when we were surrounded and cut off, our house took a direct bomb hit. We were not in the house at the time, but, when we came back to the house, there’s the whole house collapsed. We’re on the sidewalk crying, your mother and I and Christine and Thomas and 12-year-old Ann Marie.’ And he says, ‘This GI comes walking by and says, ‘Hey, get down in that basement. This artillery is going to go on all day. You better get out of it,’ he said. He came down to the basement. He helped us pull out some of the beams and so on, and he gave us each a cigarette, and he said, ‘And don’t worry; the 101st Airborne will not collapse. The Germans will not come back to this town.’ And he walked away.

From day to day, he would come, bring us... He had a can of string beans one time, and always a chocolate for Ann Marie, the D_bar chocolate. Every time he left, he said, ‘And don’t worry; the 101st Airborne Division will not collapse. The Germans will not get back in this town.’ “And then, my father almost choked up. He said, ‘Christmas morning... Christmas morning, here comes this GI, and in his helmet, he’s got a bunch of things. He had two packs of cigarettes, wrapped in yellow parachute cloth for me and for Thomas. He had little bauble bracelets for your mother and Christine, and he had a coloring book and crayons for Ann Marie. And he wished us all a Merry Christmas, and he left.’ He said, ‘In the middle of the war, somebody comes to wish us Merry Christmas.’”

And then, he pulls the two pieces of yellow parachute cloth out of his pocket; they say, “Merry Christmas, from Vincent.” Then he told me that Ann Marie is still alive, but she’s bedridden. She wants to see me. She still has the coloring book and crayons that she wants to show me. I was supposed to go back this time, and I didn’t. But, you know, I took some pictures with—you don’t have them—I tried to give them to you, with Dr. Govaerts and so on, and return the thanks.

DePue: Had you remembered that story?

Speranza: Not until he started telling it. When he started telling it, about the family standing on the sidewalk crying, because their house had been bombed, some of it started to come back. When he pulled the pieces of yellow parachute cloth out of his pockets, man, boom! Mark, you know, like I said, since 2009, I’ve been on an emotional rollercoaster. And one of these things, they’re just—

DePue: I’m curious. Do you remember where you found the jewelry and the coloring book and the crayons? (laughs)

Speranza: Oh, I liberated them from a bombed out store in Bastogne there, down the road apiece... the spoils of war.

DePue: But that's another remarkable story you've got to pass on.

Speranza: Well, I saw him again this year, Dr. Govaerts; he came in to say hello and wish me a Merry Christmas. He brought me a box of Belgian chocolates and so on.

DePue: I wonder if you could tell us, also—you were just mentioning, before we started today—about December twenty-sixth at Bastogne, 1944, and finally, you've started to see some Air Corps.

Speranza: Mark, by December twenty-fifth—we were in there since the seventeenth—we had been surrounded; after the second day we were surrounded. There were seven German divisions out there, trying to get in, and one understrength parachute division, saying, "Like hell!" And, by the way, they never set foot in Bastogne, you know. One errant German tank ran out of control and got through the perimeter. They have video and everything of this German tank. And, by the way, the tank commander got out of the tank and surrendered. They never got in it; they never got into Bastogne.

By the twenty-fifth, we were in bad shape. I had four rounds of rifle ammunition, nothing for the machine gun. And the artillery... You don't know this at the time; you read about it later. The artillery was down to, like, two shells a day. They could only fire if there was a heavy concentration and so on. It was getting bad. Earlier on, the Germans had come in and asked us to surrender. We laughed at them. And you've heard the famous McAuliffe saying, "Nuts!" to the German [suggestion to us to] surrender. By the twenty-fifth, though, the situation had gotten bad. We couldn't act cocky anymore. It was snowing that night, and it was pouring, the kind of snow that hurts, you know, the stiff, almost like ice, icy snow.

DePue: Stinging snow?

Speranza: Yeah, yeah. And we had no gloves, and your feet were wet all the time and so on. When you had to go out in that kind of weather there, it was even worse. We were pretty miserable.

The morning of December twenty-sixth... Now, you know, you never sleep. You just doze here and there. The Germans had a *Bed Check Charlie* guy, who came over and bombed every night, 9:00. You could set your watch! He had no specific targets. He was just harassing us, keeping us awake and so on. The night before Christmas, *Bed Check Charlie* came over, and, all of the sudden, the sky exploded, and *Bed Check Charlie* was no more. What we found out later was that the Army had the new Northrop night fighter, and they sent one out and took care of *Bed Check Charlie*.

But the morning of the twenty-sixth, the sun came out! All of the sudden, we saw our shadows. You can't believe the feeling. It had been foggy and rainy and snowing all the time for the whole week, and then, all of a sudden now, the sun is out. It's not snowing, and you can see your shadow. Six P-47 Thunderbolts come out of the sky. I'll never forget. The sails on them were painted. One was red; one was blue, and one was yellow. And then, again, red, blue and yellow. There were six planes. They came out, and then they started diving down, strafing and bombing. From where we were, we jumped out of the foxholes. By the way, the Germans are shelling the hell out of us, but we're just going, "Give it to them, yeah, yeah!" We're yelling and hollering. The plane dives, and you see the yellow flash of flames and so on. Then the sound comes to you, wham! We hit them there, and they hit them here. They flew all around us, dropping bombs and strafing. When they got finished, they flew to one end, and then flew straight over the town, overhead, and waggled their wings. (Mark laughs) We said, "Yea, man, the Americans have finally landed there." It changed the war.

Right after that, Patton. I saw the man sitting on the tank, like this, with his two white, pearl-handled six-shooters. But we had expected then that, well, okay, now we we're going to be taken back for a little rest and rehabilitation. Like hell. Eisenhower decided—the Germans are retreating to Germany—and he decided that we in the 82nd ought to encourage them a little by booting them in the pants.

We were in the area until January, about January nineteenth. And January nineteenth, we started moving forward. The Germans were fighting a rearguard action now, as the rest of their Army was retreating back to Germany. They stopped at a little town called Houffalize, about ten, twelve miles from Bastogne, and put up a fight there. That's where I got hit from a mortar shell, and I was out of the war for three weeks there, two weeks in the hospital and one week they give you to recuperate. I want to tell you about that, if we have time.

DePue: Well, I think we did talk about that in the earlier interview.

Speranza: Okay.

DePue: But I wanted to take you back to Bastogne and ask if you got an aerial resupply while you were there. Did that happen after the P-47s came around?

Speranza: Yeah, I left out the most important part, right after the P-47s left. I don't know what the number is, there's all different ones, there's 134, 234...C-47s and hundreds and hundreds of parachutes with, food, water, ammunition. No clothing! We still didn't get any winter clothes, but artillery ammunition, especially for the 705. And not much gasoline, because we weren't going anyplace, and we had no vehicles, much vehicles, that many vehicles, anyway. But the resupply, 95 percent—they told us all of this later—95 percent of the

bundles landed where they were supposed to. One of the first priorities was to grab all those parachutes and run to the seminary and the church, where the wounded guys are laying out and wrap them in parachutes, get them warm. They had nothing but curtains and things that we pulled off the windows—I told you about that—to wrap the wounded guys in. Those of us that had two blankets, donated one. Everybody was freezing, but the wounded is what bothered us. The parachutes were excellent. Wrap the guy in all that silk there. That made us feel good.

DePue: Well, that was quite a trip. Now we're not too much longer, into 2012. 2012, this year, has been a very busy year for you, sounds like, because I know, in March, I think, you went back to England again, didn't you?

Speranza: Yes. I went back to England. This time, I asked Kelly and her mom to take me to the local newspaper. I went to the local newspaper, and I asked them... because, a lot of times—maybe nobody else knew about where this family was—but the newspaper has investigative, or they have access to information. Whatever it was, I took a stab at trying to find the family at the newspaper. So, I told them the story.

DePue: You're still looking for the Radbournes, then.

Speranza: Yeah. I told them the story. They said, "Oh, that's a very interesting story. May we print it?" I said, "Oh yes, but would you put at the bottom, 'If anybody knows anything of the Radbourne family, lived near the pub, the Fairfield Inn...'" And I left my email address.

When I got home, about a week later, I get an email that says, "Dear Mr. Speranza, I'm Lind Taylor, granddaughter to **May** Radbourne, who says that, yes, she would love to see you, meet you, and so on," that she was the five-year-old girl, who remembered a GI coming to her house during the war and so on. "The rest of the family is gone, but yes, she'd be delighted to see you." So, I had a planned trip to Normandy and Holland in June, June the sixth, the D-Day thing. And I arranged to stop in London before flying to Paris. Marco met me there. I had arranged with Lind Taylor and her grandmother to meet me at a restaurant. I took them to dinner, and we took some pictures, which I tried to show you, and so on.



*Photo of May Radbourne, shortly after the war.
Vince met her again in Brighton 66 years later.*

But she and I were practically in tears when she said her parents told her the story later, time after time after time, about this GI that they picked up and helped to get back to his unit, without trouble.

I had a couple of pictures of her parents, and them as kids, that she had never seen. I showed them the pictures. But it was a nice, tearful, joyful reunion, again, with people, with things that happened at that time, sixty-eight years ago, now.

DePue: Well, you had mentioned that Marco was going to be your guide, I guess, for Normandy and into Holland. Was that your idea, or was that their idea?

Speranza: No, I did not jump in Normandy or Holland.

DePue: Right.

Speranza: I got to the war in Bastogne. I wanted to see... They kept telling me about that, on June sixth, the demonstrations there. They have a demonstration jump out of an OC-47.

DePue: Oh.

Speranza: And they would take me to the fields where the paratroopers landed, and show me the fortifications at Utah Beach. I can't describe to you how that went. When we got there, one of the first things we did was go to Utah Beach. I was actually in the fortifications.

DePue: Now, here we've got a picture of... This is a couple standard pictures of landings.

Speranza: Yeah.

DePue: I don't know if that would have been at Omaha or Utah. Certainly the one on the right is Omaha Beach. So, you were at Utah Beach, but—

Speranza: Yeah.

DePue: But that's Pointe du Hoc, isn't it? That's how you pronounce it?

Speranza: Something like that. But, okay, that's the (laughs) fortifications, and I decided to take an appropriate picture there. But, when you go inside that, Mark, you can't believe that... And by the way, there was one of these every 100 yards, every 150 yards, and that's an 88. The concrete above you is, like, four feet of reinforced concrete, and



then, a space about this big, that two machine guns, one on each side here, and the 88 in the middle and so on, and the rest of it, four foot, five foot thick walls of concrete. It's obvious that they're still there.

The Navy, 16-inch naval gun, they would make dents in the concrete and so on, but didn't knock them out. Some of the shells, if they were lucky enough to get in the space, yeah, it tore the gun up and tore everything up. But I sat in that fort there. And look, every inch of that beach was covered.

Mark, those guys that came up the beach faced murderous fire. The aerial bombardment and the naval bombardment didn't do a lot of damage. They thought it would, and they hoped that it would. But, you can't believe the feeling I got, you know? We always thought, hey, the roughest are the paratroops who land in the middle, behind the lines. But those guys that had to come up the beach, against those fortifications, I take off my hat to them three times. An absolutely fantastic experience to see and try to envision what those guys were up against.

From there I was invited to the E-Company *Band of Brothers* celebration to mark the monument to Captain Winters in the *Band of Brothers* thing. That was another moving experience, as my friend Herb Suerth, who was in an E-Company guy, made a speech, telling about the men who landed in Normandy and the paratroops who landed in Normandy. Then I went to the church, Sainte Mere Eglise, where they have the parachute hanging there...you saw that in the movie.

DePue: Yeah, anybody who's seen *The Longest Day* remembers that scene.

Speranza: Yes. Yes.

DePue: I think Red Buttons is the one who is in that movie.

Speranza: I went to that church, and I have all kinds of pictures of this, Mark, if you ever want to see them. But they have a parachute hanging there now, in the same spot where the original one was. Inside the church...Now, you know, during the war all the stained glass windows were blown out. When they replaced them, there's one with the logo of the 101st Airborne Division. There's another one with a paratrooper. In other words, religious, stained glass windows, but the World War II motif of the 101st Airborne Division in all the windows. They showed us the holes in the roof where a bomb had come in and so on and so on. Again, the experience—even though I know all about it. I mean, I read all about it, anyway and so on; still,



to be there and see the things that played such a prominent part in the history of that time was, well, a good experience for me.

DePue: I know that wasn't the end of it. Then you guys, as I understand, headed up into Holland and the Market Garden Campaign, did you not?

Speranza: Yes, from there, we went to Holland. I actually saw the bridges across the wall that—again, in the movie, you remember where they had to go across and try to bring some guys at night during the... The bridges across the wall—one of them is still there and being used. I think I was the only World War II guy there for that one. Mark, I used to be surrounded by people taking pictures. Finally I said to one, "Hey, listen," I said. "You guys are making me do the Hollywood thing here." They said, "Yes."

They showed me where my regiment, the 501, the landing field where they landed. They showed me the field where, when the gliders came in, they called it "Rommel's asparagus." They put sharpened stakes in the ground, facing the direction where the gliders have to come in against the wind, and the wind is usually prevailing off the sea. So, they set things up, so the glider coming in would be smashing itself. I actually visited a glider. A man had parts of a glider.

And then, Mark, one of the most impressive things, they took me to a big farmhouse. The farmer there, my age; he's still around. The farmer there told the story that when the Germans were there, they had equipment, you know, all over his farm. When they left, they couldn't take all of their equipment with them. The thing is still around; the equipment is still there. The Americans came in.

Now, you know that Market Garden Invasion failed, and the Americans had to pull out. But this farmer did not want the Germans to get this equipment that they had left there the first time. So he, with a bulldozer, dug big holes in his farm, and he buried a German tank, Bofors guns, an American Army duck—you know, the wheeled things there—and a tank destroyer. He buried them. When the Germans came back, they didn't have the use of this equipment. That was what he did!

DePue: Well, you're right. These are big holes, then.

Speranza: Yeah, I saw them. In other words, he has now dug out a little piece of each one, where you can see. There's a buried tank here and a Bofors gun there. But then he showed me the barn, where he had built a false wall and changed the roof line, so that it looked... The room—I went in it—was, like, maybe about twelve feet long and no more than six, eight foot wide, where he hid Allied pilots that got shot down and so on but did not get captured right away, and Jews. He hid them there overnight or for a couple of days, until the Dutch underground could take them and get them out.

Mark, the penalty for harboring those during the war was, not only would you get shot, your whole family, kids and all. Yet, these guys, these farmers, were willing to take those kind of chances, you know. Not only the military fought the war, Mark, there was a lot of civilian people who deserve an awful lot of credit for taking the chances that they took to help us out.

What else did I do in Holland? We saw the windmill, with the big windmill fight. It's still operating.

DePue: Did you have a chance to get to Nijmegen, I think, which was the bridge too far?

Speranza: Yes, Nijmegen, Eindhoven and Ede, and by the way...

DePue: Now, I think that's—

Speranza: Yeah, those are the bridges. I've been invited to go back. Only this time, the seventeenth of September, the anniversary of the Holland jump, when they say the whole country celebrates. They would love to have as many World War II guys as they can find to go back there. I've been invited. This one would be free, (laughs) all expenses paid.

DePue: Nijmegen was the British target, was it not?

Speranza: No, Arnhem was the British. Nijmegen, the 101s. The 501, anyway, led Nijmegen.

DePue: Okay.

Speranza: Nijmegen was one of the towns and so on. But Nijmegen, Erde and... what was the other one? There were three towns that the 501 was involved in. The British, you know, almost got wiped out. They were further north, to Arnhem.

DePue: Did you hear a lot of stories about both the D-Day jumps and the Market Garden jumps from these veterans, who were in the unit when you joined them?

Speranza: Mark, a replacement—which is what I was—doesn't get spoken to very much, or—you know. Until you prove yourself in combat, you're nothing in the outfit. Now, you try to be friendly, without going crazy, but I was only in the outfit three weeks before we went to war, to Bastogne. I didn't get to... Steve Pentek and Joe Willis and so on. But that's all.

Yes, I would hear some stories, now and then, but listening to somebody talking to somebody else. What you saw in the movies—especially the *Band of Brothers*—pretty accurate, pretty accurate at the way things really were.

DePue: Well, let's get you back to the United States. I think you went to a reunion in Atlanta for the 501st?

Speranza: No, the 101.

DePue: Okay.

Speranza: By the way, I told you that, when I got home from the war, I had nothing to do with any organizations. As far as I was concerned, the war was over. It was a job, that we did it. It's gone. I don't want to have anything to do with anything. I put all these pieces in one part of my brain, and I shut it down. Until sixty-five years later, I've mentioned this to you again and again and again, that I...I was not interested. No, I was interested, I guess, but I later find out, Mark, that probably...I was too cowardly to face the white crosses. I did not want to go back and see this slaughter. It's hard to describe. But, whatever the story is, when I went back, it was a revelation.

But, in Atlanta, I got a phone call one night, before. This guy, a voice I don't recognize, or I don't know, says, "Are you Vince Speranza?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Are you the Vince Speranza with the 101st, during the war, Bastogne?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Where the hell have you been, man?"

I said, "Who the hell are you?" He said, "Oh, well, I didn't mean to talk like that, but I'm Master Sergeant George Boss, 29 years with the 101st Airborne Division," he said. "Not World War II, I was Vietnam on," he said. "But we're looking for you guys. We're having a reunion in Atlanta. There aren't a lot of you guys around, and we're trying to get as many together to put into it." He said, "How did you never join the union?" I said, "I just wasn't interested." Said, "Well, we're interested. Will you join?" I said, "Sure, send me the papers, and I'll join." I got the papers, and I signed up and became part of the 101st Airborne Division Association.

By the way, they've got, like, 800 to 1,000 active in the organization. They are affiliated with the active 101st Airborne Division at Fort Campbell. So, the Atlanta thing was at Fort Campbell. I had...Are we running short of time?

DePue: No, we're good.

Speranza: Oh, okay. I had no idea what it was going to be like, or what it was all about. I had my hat, you know, that said World War II. When I got off the transport from the hotel into the hotel where the reunion was taking place, as soon as I got off the bus, the shuttle, four guys, big guys...Hey, by the way, Mark, the division is a division of giants. Every place...You should see the pictures. Every picture, you know, I'm like this, and they're all...During the war, there was a lot of little guys, like me. In fact, they preferred smaller paratroopers. We came down easier and lighter, and we rode...and the big guys came down like a ton!

But, at any rate, they're all giants today. These four big giants come walking up to me and said, "Are you 101st?" I said, "Yeah." They grabbed a hold, literally, grabbed me by the arm, moved me inside. They said, "Are you regiment O-5?" I said, "5-O1, H-Company." Took me inside the place. They said, "Man, you're not wearing enough." And they went over to where all the medals and ribbons and so on and so on. And now, all I was wearing was the Bronze Star and the Purple Heart. "Ah, you..." and they start pinning stuff all over my hat, all over my uniform. And then, they took me out to the hospitality—this is in the morning—room. They said, "This doesn't open until 1:00, but hey, bring this man a drink." I said, "Hey, it's..." "It's a celebration, man. You World War II guys, first time you're here," and so on.

To make a long story short, Mark, I was treated like a king. They took me everywhere. They took me to the museum; at night, at the hospitality room, people would gather to talk and so on and so on. Well, after scotch or two, I like to sing, right? (Mark laughs) So, I'm saying, "You mean, you guys..." By the way, they're all air assault now. They're not jumpers; they're helicopter. I said, "You mean, you guys don't remember the old jumping..." And I started singing, (sings) "*Is everybody happy, 'cried the sergeant looking up. Our hero bravely answered 'yes' and then they stood him up.*" And the guys are going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Meanwhile, on the stage, there's a disc jockey. He's supposed to be doing the entertainment and so on. Then, when I started the chorus, (sings) "*Glory, glory, what a hell of a way to die,*" everybody is joining in. The disc jockey comes down with the... He says, "Hey, if you're going to entertain, here." (Mark laughs)

Now, like I said, false courage, but you think it bothered me? I took the microphone, and we went up on the stage. I said, "All you guys, come with me." Now, by the way, somebody took a video of this. It's on Facebook, YouTube, someplace there. The whole thing, the video of... We went up on the stage, and we sang all the verses of the Paratroop Song, came back down again and had another drink. When I left, before I left, they were calling me "Airborne Vinnie." And they invited me to the February one that's coming up, and I'm going. They said, "And man, you're going to sing the Paratroop Song again." "Well, yeah, after two scotches." (both laugh)

DePue: Were there many other World War II veterans at that reunion?

Speranza: No. There were six altogether. No, seven – me and six other guys. And two of them were in wheelchairs. By the way, the whole division, Petraeus and a whole bunch of people going there. It was the birthday of the 101st Airborne Division, when it was first formed, I guess. But whatever the story is, the whole division is going to pass in review. The reviewing stand has [General] Petraeus, the secretary of the Navy, the secretary of this and that, the big shots at the State Department and so on. When the division from the far end of the

field—here's the reviewing stand—far end of the field, the division comes marching around—now this is 12,000 guys—comes marching around. About 200 yards from the reviewing stand, they stopped. They took the World War II guys, put us out in front—even the one in the wheelchair, with a guy pushing him—and the division starts up again. When the World War II guys get to the reviewing stand, Petraeus saluted us.

You know, we did the eyes right, and those of us that could walk, we march with the division. But, when we got to the reviewing stand, and we did the eyes right, Petraeus saluted us. We walked by. Of course, we fell out right away, and the rest of the division kept walking by. But, another marvelous experience.

After that one, I got a call from the 501 Regiment Association. They got my name, and they said, "You haven't come to any of the 501..." I said, "I'm not a member." "Well, please..." And I went to the 501, which was in Atlanta, also. Yeah, by the way, the 101st reunion was not Atlanta. It was Memphis, Tennessee.

DePue: Okay.

Speranza: And Memphis...and the hotel, you know, was like...Fort Campbell's on the line, Kentucky and Tennessee. Atlanta was the 501. You'll have to pardon an eighty-eight-year-old's lack of memory.

DePue: Well, I misled you, Vince, misled you.

Speranza: But I went to the 501 reunion in Atlanta, and that was a good experience, too.

DePue: Were these strictly World War II veterans? Or this is—

Speranza: There's a handful that are members. There was only one guy there, and he was older than even ninety-four. But he was with the 501 during World War II. He was actually a Normandy jumper. We had a great discussion. I asked him...the most important thing I wanted to know is, how close do the movies and so on come to them? He said, *Band of Brothers*, they made a real effort to make it real and look real and so on. He said, "*D-Day*, yeah, there was a little extra drama in there, but that was pretty accurate, too." He said, "And then there was another one, an old, old, old one called *Battleground*." "Oh, I know that movie," I said, "I was in it." He says, "You were in it?" I said, "Yeah," I said, "Yeah, you know what happened? In Bastogne there was a *Life* photographer caught in there with us, and he took pictures the whole way. When we went in 1948, they had a special showing in Columbus, Columbus, Georgia, right? Columbus is Georgia, Columbia is South Carolina. Columbus, Georgia. In Columbus, Georgia, they sent us all a letter. They said, "Listen, we want you to come," —you know, all expenses paid—"We want you to come, and we're going to preview this movie with you, and we're going to

give you a card, where you can say, ‘That’s crap. It didn’t happen like that,’ or, ‘Yes, that was correct,’” and this, and this, and this.

They showed us this movie. They started showing the movie, and there’s one scene where a squad is coming up the road, you know, snow. Coming up the snow, making a turn. The first guy was Sergeant Red. The second guy was...I forgot who. The third guy is me, carrying a machine gun on my shoulder. (Mark laughs) So, I went, and when I got home, the whole family, “Hey, listen, you’ve got to watch; we’ve got to go see this movie,” and so on and so on. When it got to the movie, that scene was cut out. A lot of the actual footage was cut out when they started showing it on television. While it was still in the movies, it was in there, and then a couple of my family did get to see it. But, when it got to television, and as soon as I seen it, I said, “Hey, hey, the movie, I’m in it.” So, no more.

DePue: Hmm.

Speranza: They cut it.

DePue: Did you have a chance to meet any of the stars? Van Johnson, I think? James Whitmore was another one.

Speranza: (laughs) That’s who was in it. No, they didn’t have any of the movie stars there. They just showed the movie.

DePue: It is one of the classics of World War II, and it was made just a couple of years afterwards. So, I would certainly recommend people to see that one, as well.

Speranza: Okay.

DePue: And they can think, oh, what a shame it was that they cut out Vince’s part. (Vince laughs) Did you have a chance, later that year, to also go to a *Band of Brothers* reunion?

Speranza: Yes, Kansas City. Herb Suerth, who lives in Minnesota—we met in Bastogne—is the president of the Band of Brothers Association. They have an incorporated association. They’ve been in business for years, reunions all over the place that I never knew anything about. But he invited me to come to this...this was going to be the last...it is the last reunion. There’s only two guys left that can travel, and they came to this one. We had an excellent time. I really had a chance to sit down and talk to these guys this time. One was an officer, who had been an officer during the battles there. He was really knowledgeable. In other words, they stayed together after the war. They kept each other’s stories told. That’s why Stephen Ambrose, when he wrote the book, went to see these people. He had the best resource group in the world.

Right after the war, they started meeting. They met every year since then. This is the last time, in Kansas City. They had a certain emblem. I've forgotten what it looks like, now. I have one that they gave me. You have to feel bad, you know. These guys, who stayed together and became famous, a book and a movie, And the best resource people you can find, the best guys you can find to sit down and talk with, because, you know, they had to go over everything again and again to make sure it was right and accurate, and so on. And yet, they're all dying off, there's only two of them left. A valuable resource is gone.

DePue: So that's got to be a very bittersweet kind of an experience. Did they have a lot of children and grandchildren there?

Speranza: Families of all kinds, yes. And I have pictures, and they gave me a photograph of whoever is left in the *Band of Brothers*, and they signed it. And then they did me the honor of letting me sit up there with them when they were interviewed by the newspapers and so on, you know. And of course, the first thing I would mention is that I was not in *Band of Brothers*, I'm an invited guest, and appreciate it. But great bunch of guys, and Mark, they're disappearing, well, like all of us.

DePue: We have certainly come to venerate those guys who represent that company, but your experience is really no different, in a basic way, than their experiences.

Speranza: To his credit, Herb Sewarth(??), who represents them, when he makes a speech, he says, "Let's be assured that we all know that E-Company was one of 100 rifle companies in the 101st Airborne Division, and our experiences were no different than the rest of the people in the 101 who fought these battles."

In fact, now, (chuckles) I'm going to get a little catty here. If you were to select, if you wanted to select for a movie or a book or something, the regiment that did the most in the war, in terms of battles and casualties and so on, you would have to select the 501. The 501 is the only regiment who received the Presidential Unit Citation twice. And they're the only regiment that received the Presidential Unit Citation for Normandy. They were singled out, from the whole 101st Airborne, for a Presidential Unit Citation, for what they did in that battle. They also got the Dutch Order of Orange in Holland and so on. And in Bastogne, got it again. So, I take off my hat to the 502 and the 506 and the 327, but also am proud to mention that the 501 is the only regiment in the history of the United States Army that received the Presidential Unit Citation twice, for valor and combat.

DePue: Well, however you slice it, you're in pretty elite company, Vince.

Speranza: (laughs) Oh, my. What a bunch of guys, Mark.

DePue: I think, in fact, I know, you just returned from Bastogne, for yet another trip. Can you tell us about that trip?

Speranza: Mark, this time I had my grandson with me. I wanted someone in my family to experience what I had been experiencing in Bastogne with these people. It's hard to believe that these people are the way they are. But, this time, Marco got the permission of the landowner for us to go, actually, out to the foxhole, where it is, not from the road. And Mark, I gave you a picture. No, you don't...it wouldn't—

DePue: Well, I do want to say, you've mentioned several pictures, and I'll make sure that, once we get this up on the Web site, people are going to be able to see these pictures.

Speranza: Well, okay, I've got pictures of this. But we were able to go out to the foxhole and stand in it. It's a field, and it's got water in it and so on. In fact, I was...half of my shoes were covered with water. But, I was able to stand in my foxhole that, by the way, Marco Kilian had dug out. And he found two bullets that had to come from my machine gun. They were both scarred from the breach. In other words, you know, when a machine gun doesn't fire, you do corrective action. You kick out the shell that won't fire. It must have happened twice, during the battle. Those hills were there and part of the belt, the machine gun belt. They found them.



And look over...Now, it's not the same without snow. There was no snow at this time. But the whole battlefield, again, the hill, the German artillery, was right behind that hill. When the first wave attack came, it came up here. There were the barbed wire fences down there that they got tangled up in. Mark, I stood, last week, on the spot where, seventy years ago, seventy years ago, I was a nineteen-year-old kid, with a machine gun. And my grandson, I put him right there—he's nineteen—and I said, "When I was your age, I was standing right here, with a machine gun." You know, you get emotional, tears in your eyes. Luckily, one of the boys had a flask with some good Irish whiskey, (Mark laughs) and we had a drink afterward and calmed down a little bit.



But I met with some people again, beautiful people, and everybody wants to take a picture with you and sign, people want...their coat, a civilian coat. "Please." "Your coat?" "Yeah." I sign my name on the coat.

The mayor of the town of Bastogne put... They call this the "Nuts Weekend,"... You know, McAuliffe and the Nuts. And one of the things you do is, you go into what they call McAuliffe's Cave. It's where the headquarters was, down in the cellar of a pretty strong building. There's all kinds of pictures in there. They've got a picture about this big, of me. The World War II guys that have visited—there's a whole bunch of them there—and I'm in there now, in the McAuliffe Cave. Another picture they have in there, the last time I went—not this time—the last time I went, there were a bunch of Belgian schoolchildren. I have a picture of this too. And they put a picture in there of me with these Belgian school children, because I tried to talk to them. Of course, they speak only in French. I said, "Do you speak English? *Parlez-vous Anglais?*" No, the kids all shake their heads. I said, "*Parlez-vous Fromelles?*" No, no, they were Flemish speakers. I said, "Well," I said, "I know you know this: (sings) *Frère Jacques, frère Jacques,*" and all the kids said, "*Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous? Sonnez les matines...*" Well, somebody took a picture of it, and now the picture is in McAuliffe's Cave, of me singing with the kids, the Belgian kids. (both laughing)

DePue: This isn't the picture, but I do think we have a picture of you with some people you were talking to.

Speranza: That's from Holland. They're journalists, they—

DePue: But it captures the moment of how fascinated people are of hearing your stories.

Speranza: Mark, that's what I'm trying to tell you. The people there, the people there seventy years later, are still saying to you, "Thank you for our freedom. Thank you for keeping the Germans out. Thank you for making sure that our children are born in freedom," and so on. And little kids come to up to you, and they salute you, "Thank you for our freedom."



Mark, you know, it does something to you. You saw the picture there. Adults, too. They look at you...and I'm doing my best to keep from getting a swelled head. The way the people of Europe show you that they are grateful—their ancestors—that they're grateful for what the 101st Airborne Division did. And, of course, any other division would have done the same thing in the same circumstances. But, as far as they're concerned, 101st Airborne Division, up against seven German divisions, said, "No, you guys aren't getting in here." That's all there is to it.

DePue: Remind us again. What took you back there the first time, when you returned after sixty-five years?

Speranza: Mark, I was in Florida and went into a store. It was a gun shop. I was going to get a sight for my gun, my rifle. The woman who came up to serve me, you know, well-dressed, middle-aged, good-looking, had an accent when she spoke. So, I said, "Oh, Madame, do I denote a French accent?" She said, "No, Belgique." I said, "Oh, Belgium." She said, "Yes. Have you ever been to Belgium?" And I said, "Well, yeah, but it was during the war. All I saw was bombs, bullets and snow." She said, "Oh, you were in Bastogne in the war?" I said, "Yes." She said, "The 101st Airborne Division?" I said, "Yes." "Oh, Monsieur," she said, "I come from Bastogne. I only in the United States nine years, eight years." She said, "You have not been back?" I said, "No." She said, "Oh you must go back. The people of Bastogne have never forgotten the 101st Airborne Division. They celebrate every year. You have not..." I said, "No." She said, "You must go back." She said, "You go back to Bastogne and wear a little pin or something that says '101st Airborne Division.' You don't buy a meal or a drink the whole time you're there." I said, "Well, that sounds good to me." (Mark laughs)

Started talking to my family. "Oh, Pop, you're eighty-five..." I said, "Well, then, one of you come with me." So, my daughter said, "Okay, I'll come with you." Now, Mark, we knew nothing. We know nothing about what's happening. We know nothing about the celebration. My daughter and I, we've got to go, just get a taxi and go out and look around town, see if I can spot something.

But when we got to Bastogne, we're going down to the bank to convert our money to euros. My daughter sees, in a window, a mannequin with a complete 101st Airborne Division uniform, with an eagle patch, in the window. I had walked past it. My daughter pulled me back, and the coincidences that are happening now, Mark, is incredible. She goes, "But Pop, look at this." I looked; I said, "Oh, well, let's go in and see what it's all about."

When we go in, it's almost like a warehouse. It's got all World War II Army equipment. There's a tank in there; there's a jeep; there's guns and all kinds of uniforms, you know. But, all World War II, in here. Behind the counter, there's a great big guy and an accent, "Can I help you?" I said, "Well, no. I was here



Vince with Marco Kilian, a former Dutch Army paratrooper, who served as host during Vince's 2012 visit to Bastogne.

during the war. I'm just looking around." "You were here during the war?" I said, "Yeah."

He came running out behind the counter. I thought he was going to attack me. I thought he was one of these guys that was mad at us because, when we went into their town, they had a beautiful little town. When we left, it was a shambles. But he picked me up off the floor, "Sir," he said, "We are so happy to see you. You were with the 101st Airborne?" I said, "Yeah." They said, "Oh." And then, they start telling me about the celebrations and how the kids are studying it in school, and said, "We know all about the war, and I know all the battles. Who were you with?" I said, "H-Company, 501." "Oh, I will show you where H-Company was dug in on both sides of the road, and were you..." Yeah.

He and Johnny Bourner—the Belgian tank commander that I met a little later—took my daughter and I. That's how the whole thing got started!

DePue: Was that Marco?

Speranza: Marco. And he and Johnny said, "You must come back in December when the celebration is here, and all the people come back, and we reenact the battles." That's what did it.

DePue: Well, we've heard so much about all of those trips back to Bastogne. What I'm wondering is, how has all this changed your life?

Speranza: Simply put, before 2009... My wife had been taken away from me. Now she's in a nursing home full time. I was an old man sitting around, waiting to die, literally, hey. I wasn't unhappy. I'd lived a long life. I'm eight-six years old now...no, eighty-five years old then.

All of the sudden, with this one trip, I don't want to die right away now. (laughs) I'm willing to stay around a little bit. I'm having a ball. I still can't take care of my wife, but the people I'm meeting, the events and situations, and what's happening to the circle of friends and, or people that I used to be able to speak to and so on and so on...also, I'm meeting a lot of guys who did the kinds of things in the war that I did and so on. What a pleasure to talk to another combat man who did this, because he knows exactly what you're talking about. And you can commiserate over a beer and be happy as larks, just chatting that you found another guy who has shared those experiences with you.

Mark, my life has also changed in this regard. I believe that I am now speaking to more people—not veterans, but other people. You know, I talk in the schools. I go to the church groups and so on. I, actually, one time put it in the newspaper, "If any organization is in need of a speaker," da-da-da-da, "call..." I'm doing this through...I'm the commander of the VFW, and I'm saying we have a speaker's bureau, and that, if you want... The more people

that I can get the message out to, the better, in that, from me, they're getting the real message, whereas I don't know what they've read about World War II. There seems to be a renewed interest in World War II, and I would like for people to have the right poop, okay?

DePue: I can't think of a better ambassador for your generation, for the paratroopers that fought in World War II, because, just listening to these stories here, it's just amazing to hear them.

Speranza: Mark, what you're doing is really a fantastic thing, because you've got all this stuff written down now. Anybody can look at it, read it. I hope everybody realizes that I have been extremely careful in everything I've said, to be telling the exact truth. Where I wasn't sure, I said that. But, what they're reading is the real story and the truth. I learned a long time ago that, if you don't tell the truth, it comes back to haunt you. You know the beer story?

DePue: Yes.

Speranza: Marco found a man, who came forth after the story was printed, who was a fourteen-year-old boy at the time, and says he even saw me carry a helmet full of beer into the church. (Mark laughs) I forgot what else. Another group I was telling a story to, when I got finished, the guy says, "Everything he said is right. I looked it up on the Internet." He had a phone thing there, and he looked up what I was talking about, said, "It's all there; pictures and all."

Tell the truth. Or you live to regret it. I don't know what else to tell you, Mark. I am having a wonderful rebirth the last three years in my life, for the better.

DePue: I wonder if you can reflect a little bit, now that you've had the experience of meeting today's veterans, members of the current 101st Airborne and other veteran as well, reflect on them. Are they different from your experience?

Speranza: No. Mark, a combat man in any war, from Alexander the Great's army to ours, to today's, only a handful of people are asked to face the ultimate, and the ultimate is your life. In any situation, it's just like you're some of our police, some of our firefighters, and so on. You know, I classify them as civilian combat men. The person who has to face the ultimate and can do it and still do the job, the mission, whatever it is and so on, has a shift in his whole thinking, in his life and everything else.

What's going to scare you, after you've been in combat? A job or political nonsense or an earthquake, you know? There's a—I don't like to use the word "bonding,"—but there's an instant comradeship as soon as you find out the guy you're talking to has been in battle. More than the civilian combatants, the military one knows it's out there, and it's immediate, and he's deliberately going into it.

The civilian ones, it's an iffy chance, you might. So, the guy that goes into combat and comes out, has a special position in my heart. The ones I've talked to now, like Marco, for example, was Iraq, Kosovo, Bosnia, He'd been wounded three times. You know, I'm as at home with him, the first day I met him, when he came out and picked me up off the ground, when he told me he was a Dutch Army officer and that he had been in combat and so on. I did right away.

I'm sure I'm not explaining it properly, but there's something... And, by the way, my heart goes out to these guys in Iraq, Afghanistan now, who have to fight battles, under rules. You can't shoot a man, unless he's pointing a rifle at you. What kind of crazy... (chuckles) I know I'm voicing a political opinion here and so on, but I'm saying, listen, the military is all you've got. If you don't have the military, you don't have a country. And you'd better make sure that that military is with you. Don't make them feel like you sent them into battle and then put one hand behind their back. And, by the way...no, I'd better not. Political opinions will go somewhere else.



Vince and grandson, Will, salute the American flag at the 2012 presentation of wreaths, honoring the men of the 101st Airborne Division in Bastogne.

At any rate, Mark, I really appreciate your giving me the opportunity to be with you.

DePue: Well, this is a rare honor for us. It's so vitally important to capture these stories and to preserve them. Again, you've done a superb job. I know people—I think, not just immediately, but fifty or a hundred years down the road—will be looking at these and have a much better understanding of what things were really like. So, I thank you very much for that and for having the chance to meet you.

Speranza: Thank you.

DePue: That will conclude our story, but I know that Vince's story will continue to evolve. (Vince laughs) Thank you for joining us.

(end of interview session #6)