Interview with Vincent Speranza

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Interview # 1: July 14, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

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(Special note: Interviews #1-4 were recorded on video at the Illinois Information Service Studio.)

DePue: Good afternoon. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Wednesday, July 14, 2010. Today it's my distinct pleasure to begin what I think is going to be a two-part interview series with Vincent Speranza—boy, it's almost a tongue-twister. Sorry about that, Vince. Good afternoon.

Speranza: Good afternoon, sir. How are you?

DePue: I'm doing great. We are here to talk to Vince about your experiences growing up in New York City, specifically in Staten Island, growing up the son of an immigrant family. We want to spend quite a bit of time talking about that because you've got some important and I think reflective stories about what that was like back in the 1930s and '40s. But the other reason we're here is because, as anybody who's paying close attention can see on your lapel, you've got the Screaming Eagle patch, 101st Airborne. We'll talk quite a bit about your experiences at Bastogne and then after the war as well. So, Vince, what we always start with is to ask you when and where you were born.

Speranza: I was born on March 23, 1925, on Mulberry Street in lower Manhattan, the Lower East Side, considered a pretty tough neighborhood; in fact, they called

it Hell's Kitchen. My parents were two Italian kids off the street, you can really see, who came here with nothing but the shirts on their backs. They were teenagers in Italy, and their parents brought them here—they didn't know each other back then—but …

DePue: Were they both from Italy? I thought one was from Sicily.

Speranza: Well, Sicily is Italy.

DePue: Very good.

Speranza: My mother was from Sicily; my father was from Reggio Calabria. That's right across the Straits of Messina from Sicily. They didn't meet until they were in New York. We lived on Mulberry Street, and, as I said, it was a tough neighborhood, and my mother didn't like it at all. I was number four in the family so far—eventually there were eight children. My older brother Joey, then my sister Nancy, and then the twins, Frances and Theresa, and then myself.

By the time I was three years old, my mother had had enough of the neighborhood; the clincher was when my older brother Joey got hit in the head with a milk bottle that required a bunch of stitches and so on. In those days, by the way, milk bottles were made of heavy glass, and in one of the street umm altercations, let's say … My mother just said, you know, "That's all."

My father though, was being disadvantaged—we were going to move to Staten Island where my grandmother lived; She had offered us the upstairs of her house, my father's job was in Flushing Meadows, (laughs) Queens. I don't know if that means anything to anybody except New Yorkers, but it's quite a distance, and from Staten Island, at the time when there was no bridge, there was the Staten Island ferry, only communication between Staten Island and Manhattan. That meant that if we moved to Staten Island, he would have had a two-hour trip to work every day and two hours back.

DePue: I'm going to back you up here a little bit, because I was fascinated when we talked earlier about the story of your father and his brother and how they ended up here in the United States. So talk about—

Speranza: Yeah, okay.

DePue: Let's go back a generation, if you will.

Speranza: All right. My father's family came here, as many of the immigrants who came here in the early '20's—and the 1900s, 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. It was impossible for the peasants, the lower class, in Italy to own any land; they were impoverished

and so on. And 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. But 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: Thirteen and fifteen. My father said to his parents, "We want to stay in America," and they said, "Absolutely not. The family goes back." And he said, "But—", and his father said, "Listen, the family is going back to Italy." So he didn't say anything more. When it was time to get on the ship, the whole family got on board 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. And I guess my grandparents decided, "What happened to Patsy and Frank?" "They probably stayed on board." And my father and his brother never looked back. They never wanted to go back to Italy.

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

DePue: Oh, 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 and something to eat, a place to sleep. And the priest said, "You could stay here for a day or two, but you got to go find a job." And 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, and that they were taking on cabin boys. And so my father and his brother, my Uncle Patsy, signed up as cabin boys on a ship. They were sailing from New York to Panama—the Panama Canal wasn't ready yet—and then they were going to go over land, catch the ship on the other side, and go to San Francisco. California must be the place where **everybody** was going to be rich, and that's what they had in mind. Well, 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. (laughs)

And I said, "What did you do? 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 them on, and so on and so on. And 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.

DePue: I assume your father and uncle were born in Italy, so how well did they speak English at the time?

Speranza: Well, when they came here—kids pick it up very quickly. My father, by the way, did not have an accent. He spoke English—well, maybe a little. My Uncle Patsy had a little more of an accent. Maybe he had more trouble with the language, though he was two years older. Both those men came back to New York—"men"—they were boys—and started working for anybody, doing anything. He said one time they were delivering roller skates. They didn't know it, but a truck had dropped off a big case of these single-wheeled roller skates—not four wheels, two—and whoever had picked them up brought them home and then sent the boys out to sell them because it was "misappropriated goods," let's say. (laughter) "But the thing was", Pop said, "it was a job. We made money. We sold them all, and they paid us well." And they took odd jobs and so on. My father took a job when he got old enough as a chauffeur. He got a chauffeur's license, and then the chauffeur car for hire.

The barber shop in those days was more than just a barber shop; it was also a political center; it was a half medical center. The barber used to pull teeth and fix minor cuts and scratches and so on. My father attended this barber shop—and by the way, my mother blushes when he told the story in front of her—and he said "I went into the barber shop, and you could see in the back room where the family lived. Here's this pretty young girl, and she's **dancing**." And my father imitates the (makes fluttery noises). (laughter) And my mother always blushes. He says, "And I saw her, and I said, 'Ooh.'" But, you know, in those days, you had to ask the father, may you take his daughter out, and with an escort and so on and so on, a chaperone.

But whatever the story was, my mother was only seventeen years old when she agreed to marry him, and my father was eight years older than she. Those two people put together a family of eight kids, and all of us turned out well. The four boys all did military service, the girls all married well, and we must have, because we all had good jobs and so on and so on. You have to **admire** a couple of people with no background, no education, no job skills—my mother worked in a candy factory where she dipped chocolate cherries and my father just did odd jobs until he got a job at R.H. Macy—and that's what I was telling you about.

When we moved to Staten Island, it meant that his job now in this warehouse in Queens out on Long Island, it took him two hours to get there,

and a half hour—you've got to be there early to change your clothes and so on. So he was two and a half hours to go to work, two and a half hours to come home.

DePue: I wonder if we can show the one slide that we've got of your parents, and it's next to a map of Staten Island. My understanding—and you can tell me how wrong I am on this one—but if you lived in Staten Island and your dad had to go to Queens, he had to go through Brooklyn to get to Queens?

Speranza: No, he had to go through Manhattan. He took two buses from where we lived in Mariner's Harbor: took a bus to an exchange, then you got to get on another bus, and that bus took you to the Staten Island ferry. Okay?

DePue: Okay.

Speranza: The Staten Island Ferry used to run every half-hour—during rush hour it runs more often—but it takes twenty-five minutes to get across to Manhattan. Then in Manhattan, you take the IRT subway to Chamber Street, where you switch over to an express which stops at city hall, and then you take the train all the way up to the Bronx and Queens, and finally it goes out to Flushing Meadows, Long Island. And it took him two and a half hours to work and two and a half hours back each day. We saw him a little bit in the evening. He got up and went to work before everybody else got up. He came home seven o'clock, 7:30, just in time for a meal, a bottle of wine, and … (laughs)

My job was to make sure that when he sat down, that he had a full bottle of wine. (both laugh) And the wine, you know, we used to make our own. I had to go down three flights of steps—and I was little. The wine barrel had a spigot and a funnel, and my father gave strict orders: "You never fill the bottle up to the top, only to the bottom of the neck, because the wine has to breathe. You understand, Vinny?" And I'd say, "Yes, Pop." He'd say, "You fill it up to here." I'd go down there and would fill up the thing. Now I'm a little kid. I climb up the stairs one at a time with that bottle to make sure that nothing breaks. But one day I went down there and I wasn't paying attention, and the wine went right up to the top of the bottle. And I said, "Ooh-ooh." And I remember this so clearly. I looked all around. Some idea is going to come from out of the woodwork. So I—

DePue: (laughs) I knew that was coming.

Speranza: I drank it down to the level it was supposed to be. (laughs) And at first, you know, I didn't feel anything different. I put the cork in and started up the stairs. I got up the stairs—and my mother tells this later—she said, "Here comes this little kid with a bottle and he's going (makes wobbly sounds), and he hands me the bottle and then drops down on the floor and slides under the table and goes to sleep." (laughter) When she used to tell the story later, she'd say, "I panicked. I said, I didn't know what's the matter. I went over there,"

she said, "and I smelled the wine, and I said, Already at this age you're drunk?" (laughter) But that was a story that made the rounds of the family for years and years and years and years.

DePue: Why didn't the family move to Queens instead of Staten Island?

Speranza: Okay. Now, that's a good question, and I was going to address that anyway, but the story came up. They built in Queens some city housing, and it was very reasonable and very close to his job. City housing meant, you know, that they would give you a good apartment for really a good, low rental. And they made sure you had enough room for all your kids and so on. And so my father announced to the family, "Hey, we're going to move to Queens. They just opened up this apartment house. I can qualify," and so on and so on.

All the kids started crying. (makes crying sound) And my sister, (whining) "No, I'm going to leave my friends at the high school." My brother said, "I just got a good job, Pop" and so on. Everybody, all the kids started moaning. And Mom didn't want to leave either because her mother lived downstairs, and she was sick. Mom was taking care of her. She kept saying no. Pop said, "But look at that. I can get to work in twenty minutes." But, you know, the measure of the man—he was willing to sacrifice himself so that the kids could stay in their schools and my mother could take care of her mother and so on and so on. He said if somebody had to sacrifice … That was never lost on me. I hope I've patterned my life on that concept, what the family means and what you need to do, what your responsibility is to the family.

But the next thing that came up about moving was, he heard that in Alaska, the Homestead Act was still in effect (laughs) and that you could get forty acres, and if you built something on it and occupied it for five years, it was yours, free and clear. The Homestead Act was still—by the way, I think the Homestead Act is still in effect today. But we'd sit at the table, everybody all around, sitting there, and Pop would say, "Now, listen. How about we all go to Alaska?" You should see the look on my mother's face. (DePue laughs) She said, "Another crazy idea." He'd go around. "You want to go?" My sister's (makes crying sound); my brother … I said, "Pop, I'll go with you." He said, "All right, Vinny. We'll go, you and me. None of you want to come?" I said, "Pop, we've got to have a gun." Oh, yeah, we're going to shoot animals. (laughter) And my mother used the beautiful phrase, she said, "Hey, *va iettade mare*, which in Italian means, "Hey, go dunk yourself in the sea." (laughter) There wasn't going to be any move to Alaska. I don't think my father was really serious about it. But from that moment on, he and I buddied up, and I think I was his favorite, because from there on in, he figured I was going to be the only one who was going to support him on any thing he wanted to do.

DePue: About what age were you at that time then?

Speranza: Oh, I was about a freshman in high school, maybe fifteen.

DePue: So that's well into the Depression era, as well.

Speranza: Yes. Now, we were poor. Everybody was poor. You know, anybody who says, Oh, how terrible it must have been during the Depression… Maybe it was for some people, but as far as we were concerned, hey, there was enough to eat, we had clothes on our back, we had a place to stay, my mother made sure everybody always stayed clean and healthy and so on and so on. And all of us were in the same boat. There was nobody in the neighborhood who was any better off than anybody else, so we didn't know what it meant to be poor.

DePue: The Macy's that your father worked at, is that *the* Macy's of the …

Speranza: Yes, R.H. Macy—but it was their warehouse. R.H. Macy's on Thirty-Fourth Street in Manhattan, the store. This is the warehouse that supplies their overseas shipments and imports.

DePue: Do you have any idea how much money your dad was making in that job?

Speranza: When my father started that job during the Depression, he made eight dollars a week. This was before the union and why I'm such a good union man now—I always have been—because he was making eight dollars a week, and until the bridge, the Staten Island ferry, it cost him forty cents a day to go to work. So you can see what happens there.

But of course, the four boys—as soon as you're age twelve, you go get your working papers. During those days, you were allowed to get part-time working papers where you could work twenty hours a week at age twelve. When you're age fourteen, you can get working papers for full-time work. A lot of people pulled their kids out of school after age fourteen, after elementary school—that was enough, and they sent them to work. My father did not want us to do anything like that. "A part-time job is okay," he said, "but all of you are going to graduate from high school, go to high school."

(laughs) Some of these things now … All the boys then had to do whatever they could to contribute to the family pot. Now, I got a job at age twelve after school from 3:00 to 6:00 every day, Saturday from 7:30 in the morning till eleven o'clock at night, Sunday from 9:00 to 1:00, and my pay was a dollar and a quarter a week. Of course, you know, the money was worth a lot more then. But I had a bicycle which my brother bought for two bucks at a junk yard and put it together,—all four of the boys used that bicycle—and I was a delivery boy. But then on the Saturday, I had to wash the refrigerators down and sweep the floors and clean this … To this day I hate cleaning.

But when you could come home at the end of the week and plunk a dollar and a quarter down on the table, and your father's only making eight, you're making a difference. And my older brother and the jobs he did, he put

two, three dollars on the table. Hey, we were helping, and it made a difference. Until the union got in in my father's warehouse there, and then his salary went up to twelve dollars a week, and that was a big difference. That's, you know, 50 percent more.

My mother would give me the quarter back, and with the twenty-five cents, I took my brother and I to the movies. The movies were ten cents each then, and you saw two features—cowboy serials, Flash Gordon, the news. (laughs) But ten cents apiece, and go to Woolworth's, and for a nickel you get a bag of candy like this. We'd sit down out there and eat at the movies.

But in growing up like that, where you realized early what it meant to make a dollar, you know, I've never regretted that. I think that has helped me all of my life to handle my finances right. We started with nothing, and we're fairly well-off today, and so how did you do that? Well, you work hard and so on. Nobody gave you anything. But you were trained early on about what it takes to make money, how to spend it wisely, how to save some of it and so on and so on. The early Depression training—in all areas—was an excellent education.

You take prejudice. We had everything in our neighborhood: Italians, Irish, German, Polish, Blacks, Jews—you name it. There was even a couple guys from India. But all the kids, we were all in the same boat, and so nobody paid any attention to if you've got a better-looking shirt than I have or … And the hospitality of all the people—no matter who was with you, if it's time to eat, hey, come on, sit down at the table, and eat. So half of the time, when you come home, if your two friends are with you, they sit down and eat with you. They could have been German; they could have been anything. Nobody paid any attention. I learned early that, hey, really, they're no different. He feels the same things I do, and if he gets hurt, I'm over there helping him, and if I get hurt, he's over there helping me. We learned early on that, hey, trying to judge people by color or religion or so on and so on—absolutely foolish, because we know better. We seen it growing up.

DePue: What language did you speak at home?

Speranza: Now, my father insisted on everybody speaking English at all times. They said, We're American; you understand that this is it. In fact, the kids were embarrassed to hear Italian spoken in the house, except when… There were two other parts of the family. In Brooklyn, there was the La Rosas. That's my mother's sister and her husband and their five kids.

DePue: Your mother's name, before she was married?

Speranza: Frances Paratore, but her sister married a Joe La Rosa, so it's the La Rosas. In Queens, there was the Addabbos, and boy, what stories I could tell you about my Uncle Dominic. The Addabbos lived in Queens, and there was three kids

there, and my uncle Dominic and his wife Anna. Now, I'll switch to them briefly because this is a real story. My Uncle Dominic came here as a kid. He was from Bari; he was Baresi, from Bari, Italy. And he was apprenticed to a baker. In those days, the family was only too happy to get their kids to be an apprentice. At age seven, the boss takes you in, he feeds you, clothes you, houses you, teaches you the trade. When you're fourteen, you can leave—seven years later—and from there on in, now you can become a journeyman and then a master.

DePue: In what, again?

Speranza: A journeyman is next, from fourteen to twenty-one.

DePue: But what was the craft?

Speranza: The last one is master. It could be any craft, any craft. This was a holdover from the medieval period in Europe. He said, "I hated it. You got to get up two o'clock in the morning, you got to make the bread, and then I had to take a basket and put the bread in there and go down the village, and everybody hollering, and from the upstairs, they throw a rope down with a basket, and you put the bread in there and then they haul it up, and then they don't send the money down and you got to go up and holler." (laughs) But at any rate, he said he hated it, he didn't want to be a baker. "Do not want to be a baker," he said. "I'm going to America." As soon as he was fourteen and he finished his apprenticeship, he said to his parents, "I'm going to America." They said, "Oh, no, you're not." He said, "I'm going to America. I can do better there; I can get a job." And they said, "No, no. You got nobody there, you have no family, you don't know anybody. How will you make out? Don't forget, there's this part of America; there are people taking advantage of you" and so on and so on. He said, "I'm going to America as soon as I save up enough money." And he did. Saved up enough money, came to America.

The first job he got was in the coal mines. He was recruited right off the docks, there, the coal mines of West Virginia. He said, "You know, the Irish were one generation ahead of us, and all the bosses were Irish, and of course they called us wops and guineas and dagos and … And when we asked for more wood to prop up the mine, they'd say, 'Eh, wops are cheaper than props. Do without it.' I didn't say anything, because, you know, they didn't pay you in money, they paid you in scrip that you could only cash at the company store, and you never had enough. You owed them for this, you owed them for that, you owed them for your food. You never had enough to save, put aside, to get away." And one time," he said, "I broke my leg." I said, "What did you do?" He said, "In those days, you know, there's no welfare, there's no unemployment, there's no … If you can't work, out, they throw you out." So I said, "Did they throw you out?" "No, no," he said. "I told them I would work as a bookkeeper for half pay until my leg mended." I said, "Bookkeeping?" He said, "Half pay." They took me on." I said, "Did you

know anything about bookkeeping?" He said, "No," he said, "but I looked at what the guy over here does, and then I did the same thing." (laughter)

Now folks, here's the shocker in this story: my Uncle Dominic's son Joe, Joseph Addabbo, went to college, became a lawyer, and was elected to Congress. Twenty-six years, Congressman Joe Addabbo from Queens, New York, with that family and that background. Only in America. Only in America. Joe Addabbo—he died early; he had liver cancer—but my cousin was a good congressman.

At any rate, the things that we did that I lament today, that the kids with their, you know, electronics and their things, so on, so on, are missing out on going out in the woods and looking for a slingshot. We're going to make a slingshot. By the way, you know, the inner tube, the inner tire tube, was the mainstay of all childhood (laughs) activities for boys, and the greatest crime in America was when they invented the tubeless tire, (laughter) because we had more uses for these old tire tubes and so on. You would go out in the woods, you'd have to cut the fork of a tree and then peel it down and so on and so on. You'd get your mother's permission to put it in the oven so that it bakes and dries the thing out. Then everybody had a pocketknife, and you cut a notch in the two forks up here and cut long strings of rubber bands from the tube. Then you had to find an old shoe and take the tongue of the shoe and cut this square of the tongue, make a slot here and here, and you tie the rubber to the slingshot, the other end to the leather piece here, and now you have a … And pity the poor ladies who had pebble driveways, because the pebbles were perfect slingshot ammunition. We used to go raid those (laughs) driveways and put pebbles in your pocket and run when the lady come out and so on.

And then there was putty blower season. There was a certain reed that grew down near the brooks, and you could get a section about this long if you cut it and just hollow out the knob here, and it was a—what do they call them now? I don't know. We called them putty blowers. Then before the cherries get ripe, when the little cherries are green and small, we go raid the cherry trees, pull off all those greens, and then you put a handful in your mouth, and (makes spitting noise). Of course we'd take them to school, and of course the teachers would fan us good if she caught us with it. But every once in a while, if you could get away with it in school, you'd **whoom** (makes projectile sound). (laughs)

DePue: So you had all kinds of creative ways to get yourself in trouble, didn't you?

Speranza: Oh, man. Yeah. We used to get a pair of new sneakers every summer. My mother and father had a thing about barefoot. My wife tells me that down South they couldn't **wait** for summertime to go barefooted. They liked to go barefoot, and I guess there's a lot of people today that like to go barefoot. To my parents, bare footedness meant poverty. They said, "A man that can't even afford to buy shoes for his kids' feet is a poor excuse for a man," and so they

would never let us go barefoot. So in summertime, you put your school shoes away and bought a pair of sneakers—eighty-nine cents, Keds, sneakers.

They had just tarred the road in front of my house. The road was not paved in front of my house when I was a kid, but they had paved it, and they tarred it. I had my new sneakers on, and I had this brilliant idea that if I could put a nice layer of tar under my sneakers that they would last twice as long (laughs) or three times as long. I went out there, and I stuck my feet in that tar, and I wiggled it around, and … And then I went running home proudly, and I opened the door. I hollered for Mom, and I started walking down the hall, and I'm tracking tar. My mother looked at me, and she said, "What did you do?" I said, "Mom, my sneakers are going to last forever." Whew! I got a whack. (laughs) I felt so hurt. I thought I was doing something good. I had to go take a brush and kerosene and sit down on the grass and take those sneakers and scrub all that tar off, (DePue laughs) and crying all the time that, how unfair. Here I was doing everybody a favor, making my sneakers last longer, and I got a smack instead.

At any rate, the things that we did, we played tickley bump in the wintertime where the brook is frozen, the ice. The leader picks out a spot, and he runs and jumps, one foot—bang—on the ice, and to the shore, and every man has to follow in his footsteps. Eventually, you know, whoever the unlucky guy's going to be, the ice goes down, and (makes slipping sound) you're in ice water up to your ankles, sometimes up to the knees, depending on how deep the brook was out here. But tickley bump then required that whoever got wet, we had to build a fire and dry him off, because you can't send him home that way; he'll get in trouble. In those days, the problem (laughs) was not, Did you get hurt, or something—Did you tear your clothes? Did you make a rip in your pants? Because that's worse than (laughs) than getting hurt. And you learn to sew, by the way, so you sewed that up before your mother came home, (DePue laughs) and try to hide it. I still know how to sew. I still know how to sew because I had to learn early.

DePue: The hard way, huh?

Speranza: But, you know, I could tell you a million stories like that, but we ought to move on, I guess.

DePue: Well, it sounds like you had a fun childhood, and you mentioned already you didn't really understand that you were poor because probably everybody else was.

Speranza: Right!

DePue: Was the family religious?

Speranza: In this manner: my father made sure that all of us went to church, but he didn't. (laughs) He went like the three times a year the Catholics go—Easter

Christmas, and New Year's. Now, my mother was. She went to church. But we never understood that other than he said, "Hey, I work hard all week, and so Sunday's the only day I've got to relax," and so on. We accepted that. We never discussed it, really. Mom had paintings, you know, of Jesus and so on, and in the bedrooms there's always the cross, Jesus on the cross. But we all had to dress up very nicely, and the boys had a nickel to donate—the girls didn't donate. At the end of the Mass, the priest—his name was Father Teroni—came out, and he'd have a box of bonbons. And the boys got in line, and he'd say, "Come here. What was the homily? What did I say?" And if you knew it, you got a bonbon; if you didn't, you get *boom* on the back of the head. "Next!" (laughter) He got our attention. (laughter) He managed to get our attention.

You know, things were so simple in those days. Nobody was worried about lawsuits. You did something wrong, any adult who saw you do something wrong would pat you on the bottom and so on. Any adult in the neighborhood. They all felt responsible for each other's kids. Well. And if somebody got hurt, by the way, the whole neighborhood was down to help.

And let me tell you something else. Let me reflect on something today. I've lived in big cities all my life, you know—New York and—but when I retired, I went to a small town in Florida, and I worked for a while in Springfield before I retired, and that was a smaller town. I now live in a real small town, Auburn. I think forty-four hundred people. I've been here ten years now, and I'm enjoying so much the old-time small-town atmosphere. It's really true. The people do care more about each other; the people do really concern themselves with helping if somebody needs it. I just like the attitude that I'm hearing now. For a person who's lived in big cities most of his life, it's a refreshing change. I feel it makes me a better person in that I want to fit into the town, and so I want to adopt the same attitudes and so on that they do, and I'm happy about the whole thing.

Now, getting back to growing up. When I went to elementary school, I must have had some kind of talent, because I was in all the school plays. I was in the sixth grade. The eighth grade always puts on an annual show before graduation, a play of some kind. They invite, and they make money for the school. Whatever the proceeds were went to the school. I was asked from the sixth grade to come up and be in the play because they wanted somebody to play the lead—the play was *Hansel and Gretel*—and my whole family was in it. My sister was one of the witches, my brother was one of the sandmen, I was Hansel, and the eighth graders, they had their Gretel. We put on a play, and we made good money for the school. If I was in the sixth grade, that was about nineteen thirty… Let's see. I started school at age six—'25, '31. Probably 1937, '38, somewhere in there. Just recently, just recently, going through a whole bunch of old stuff, I come across a little newspaper clip. I should show it to you. It says, "And the students of P.S. 22 put on a school play, *Hansel and Gretel*, a big success. They earned $117, and the leads

were—Gretel was Myra Hanson"—Hensen or o, Henson. "Hansel was Vincent Speranza." Now, that thing has to be seventy years old, eighty years old, seventy-five years old? Whatever the story is. How in the world did that survive all my moves and so on and remind me about something I had forgotten about (laughs) for a long time?

At any rate, I enjoyed elementary school. I was a good student. They had a contest. "Vincent, we want you to recite poetry." You know, the teacher says so, you do it. So they picked out a poem, and every once in a while I think back and I say, You know what? I bet you I can remember one or two stanzas of that poem. I won that contest.

"The Six Men of Hindustan"

There were six men of Hindustan,
to learning much inclined,
Who went to see an elephant,
though all of them were blind,
That each by observation
might satisfy his mind.

The first one, happening to fall
Against his broad and sturdy side,
at once began to bawl,

"God bless me, but this elephant
is very like a wall."

The second, feeling of the tusk,
cried, "Ho, what have we here,
So very round and smooth and sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear,
This wonder of an elephant
is very like a spear."

And then it goes on and on for six more—I've forgotten the rest of it, but …

DePue: I'm amazed you can remember that part.

Speranza: It came back to me. You know, look, I'm eighty-five now. (DePue laughs) I forget an awful lot, but there are some things that you just can't—they're as clear as a bell. I remember standing on the stage, reciting this poem, and winning the contest. I have a little medal that they gave me. And, yeah, it makes you feel so good. You succeed, and I, you know, always, later on in life, try hard to be a good student, because, you know …

DePue: Well, and then you spent your life as a teacher, which we'll get to. I want to ask you a couple questions. We do have to move on here a little bit. But

there's a couple things that we talked about before, I think, that really illustrate what life was like in your family and at that time in the United States as well. One of them dealt with a can of beef.

Speranza: Ah, yes. Okay. By now, you're getting a little feel for the character of my father. He was a proud man, not formally well-educated, but he was the smartest man I ever knew, and a man who was willing to do everything necessary to take care of his family. Well, during the Depression, the government came out with a program called Home Relief. They had certain cans of food and so on that were marked "Home Relief—not to be sold," and this one was tinned beef, canned beef. My neighbor brought one over to my mother's, and Mom took the can—"Oh, thank you very much"—and she put it on the shelf.

My father came home from work, and as he walked by, he sees this on the shelf. He says, "Francie, come here," talking to my mother. He said, "What's this?" She said, "The neighbor brought it." He said, "And you took it?" She said, "Yes." He said, "Hey. Bring it back and say thank you very much, but, you know," he said, "***I*** take care of this family." He took her to the bathroom—by the way, the bathroom was off the kitchen (laughs) in our apartment—and we kids are all sitting out there wondering what—you know, when Pop goes into the bathroom, that's the only private place—with Mom. So we were all scared and listening, and we hear him raise his voice a little bit, and he says, "I don't want every to see anything like that in this house again. If you need more money, I'll go get another job, and I'll pay; and if you need more, I'll get another job, but **we don't take charity**. Do you understand that?" Now, we hear this through the door, and, you know, we're afraid that something more is going to happen, but all he did was admonish her that he was embarrassed and insulted by her accepting charity from the neighbor next door. He said, "That's from the government. Now, if the neighbor was bringing you some vegetables or something, that's different, that's not the government program telling us that we can't take care of ourselves." What a lesson for today's welfare people. But at any rate, we had that brought into us from early on. You want something? Go do it yourself.

DePue: Yeah. Another story that really gets to the self-sufficiency that your father obviously approached life with was the whole experience of making wine every year.

Speranza: Oh. (laughs) Yeah, that's a story in itself. First of all, we weren't the only ones in the neighborhood. Everybody—all the Italian families, anyway—made wine. The traditions from the old country held here in how you make wine and what you do. It's a family affair; everybody is involved. In the fall, let's see, the grapes—June, July—they were California grapes, but whenever it was—late summer, I guess. But my father had three big wine barrels and he'd bring them out to the yard. I'm his second-hand man, now; I'm his buddy. "Vinny, come here. Now, you get the hose and fill up these barrels

from the bung here and swish them around and then put them on two pieces of two-by-four and turn them over and let them drain, wash them all good, and tomorrow, we'll take it." I said, "Okay." So I go out there and I do my job.

The next day he says, "Now, here's ten cents. (laughs) Go to the hardware store and tell them you want three sticks of Sicilian sulfur. Understand? Now," he says, "look. It's got to say 'Sicily' on it. If it doesn't say 'Sicily,' I don't want it. You understand? Ten cents will be enough. Three sticks of Sicily sulfur." I'd go buy the sulfur, come back, and I'd say, "Now, what do you do with it, Pop?" "Take a piece of wire, make a hole in the stick, light it with a match, and hang it inside the barrel with the wire hanging on to the side there until that stick burns itself out inside the barrel, for each barrel." And I asked him what that did. He said, "It purifies the wine." (laughter) You know, later on in years we questioned all these things, but only to ourselves. If we didn't understand it, so what? That's the way he made wine, and his wine was always good. It was always praised; everybody in the neighborhood liked my father's wine. That did something to the wine, but it had to say "Sicily" on it. No other sulfur would count.

On a Saturday, Ralph is going to come around with a truck, and he's got the grapes from California that he offloaded from a railroad car; then he goes around the neighborhood selling boxes of grapes—white grapes and red grapes. The boxes are made of a whitish wood. Ralph comes up, and he takes out several boxes of each kind and lays them there. All of us are sitting on the porch watching, but my father comes out, and only the boys behind him. He goes out in front of the truck, and now he and Ralph have to negotiate. They light their pipes. "How are the grapes this year?" "Well, the grapes, you know, this year are this …" And the other guy lights his pipe, and they puff on it a little bit. "What are they getting in California for grapes this year." "Oh, a dollar two cents." "Oh, no, they can't… " Ralph says, "Well, but, you know, this year, the grapes, they got more," and my father says, "Ah, *come la tintura*? How is the tincture?" And he'd say, "Ah, the red one is …" They'd take a grape and smash it up against the white wood, then the stain that that grape leaves on the wood tells them about the content, whether the wine is going to require more grapes or less grapes, you know. I didn't understand it, but they did. He and Ralph would talk and talk, and finally they agree, and Ralph says, "Okay, *fino tutto*. We're finished negotiating. Times up."

My father goes like this to the boys, (gestures, DePue laughs) and the boys go down, put the boxes of grapes on their back, take them down to the basement where there's a big grinder. Now, everybody's got a job. My mother and all the women are washing bottles and washing corks and steaming corks and so on; the littlest kids are picking the leaves out of the boxes of grapes; the bigger kids are dumping the grapes into the hopper; and the big boys—my older brother Joey and me—we grind the grapes and put them in the barrels and put them in the press. When you finished grinding all the grapes, my father puts a big, heavy, thick blanket called a *cutunina* on top. Every day

when he comes home from work, down to the basement, puts his ear to the barrel. Now, in those days I would accompany him. I'd go down there. I couldn't hear anything or know anything, but Pop's doing it … (laughter)

DePue: He has to be listening to something.

Speranza: Well, when it starts to bubble, you know, when the wine starts to ferment, you can hear it. It really … And so when the time comes that he hears a certain sound, "Okay, tonight. Cancel everything, everybody. Down in the basement." That's the night when they pour the first squeezings; the first squeezings are the best wine. And then the rest of it is put in—we call it *rashina*—that's the stems and the things that they put in the press. You have a big wooden bar, and you keep pressing. That's the second squeezing of the grapes. And then you take that stuff that's been pressed, throw it back in there, put water in it, *la quada* was the ladies' drink. It's just a wine-water, water-wine, whatever you want to call it, that would come out of the holdings there. And then you'd take them back. The best wine was saved for the family and the family company and so on. Strangers that you're offering a drink to, well, the secondary wine's okay. The third wine, you know, you just leave that to give to the kids and the women who can't drink full-strength wine.

My father must have been very successful at it, because everybody praised his wine. My Uncle Dominic was just the opposite. Every time we went to his house to drink a glass of wine, it tasted like vinegar. In fact, my mother one time threatened to bring home a bottle of it to use as vinegar. (DePue laughs) But, you know, nobody would insult him and say anything—we drank it, whatever it was—but his was terrible. My Uncle Joe, who lived in an apartment in Brooklyn, had a friend who, down in the basement, made wine alongside the bakery. So they used to go down there and get fresh bread right out of the oven and a glass of wine. And, by the way, that's what they used to feed babies in Italy. When they first started eating solid food, they'd take bread and just dip it in wine.

The story alongside of that is, my sister and her husband's first kid was terrible—cry all the time, moan. He had bellyaches, he had—by the way, the kid ended up becoming a doctor. (laughter) He and his brother both became doctors. But he was a terrible kid. Now, we're at a wedding, and my poor sister and her husband have to sit there because the kid will not sit still. He's still, you know, a babe in arms. And so they couldn't. So I'm single then. I walk over there. I've been drinking beer. I walk over there, and I say, "Hey, listen, you two go ahead out there and dance. I'll take care of the baby." They said, "Nah, Vin, he's crying" and so forth. I said, "That's all right. I'll take care of him. I know how to take care of the kid." I'd been taking care of them since I was eight. So they said, "Gee, we'd like to thank you." They went out there and started dancing. I had a glass of wine. I stuck my finger in the wine, opened the kid's mouth. (makes extended licking/sucking sounds (laughter) They come back from the dance; they said, "Oh, what did you do? How nice,

you got him to sleep." I said, "Yes." He fell asleep. I said, "That's superior child care" (laughter)

DePue: Well, I'm going to take this opportunity to change gears on you. I'm wondering what was on the table for Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners.

Speranza: R.H. Macy and Company gave each of their employees a turkey for Thanksgiving, free, and you got a bird proportioned to your family. Like, my father had a big family; he got one of the biggest turkeys around. People with smaller families got smaller turkeys. But my mother used to put sausage stuffing, bread crumbs, the chicken livers. I don't even remember everything that was in there; all I knew was that was the most delicious turkey you ever tasted. And what a … And sweet potatoes, and my grandfather grew—you know, we were at my grandfather's house—pears, and she did something with the fruit, too. I don't know what it was. But there was always lots to eat, plenty to eat, and everybody got their fill.

It was not like the old joke that they used to tell about this family that company's coming. There's a big family, they got ten kids, and company's coming, and they've only got one chicken. So the mother says to the kids, "Now, listen. The company's coming, and we got to give the chicken to the company. When I ask you, 'Do you want any chicken?' you say, 'No thanks, Ma.' "You want chicken," you say, 'No thanks, Ma.' Everybody, refuse the chicken. We'll give it to the company." Then afterwards, you know, the dessert and stuff. So the kids said okay, they were going to cooperate. The company comes, and the mother hands out, said, "You want any chicken?" The kids say, "No." "You want chicken?" "No." "Chicken?" "No." So she gives the chicken out to the adults. So afterwards, now, the kids are already sitting there, the dessert comes out on the table, and the kid says, "We'll have some dessert." The mother says, "Hey, you didn't eat any chicken; you don't get any dessert." (laughter) That's the kind of jokes that used to be told apropos to the times.

We, as a family—now, you know, there were arguments, but they didn't last long, because justice was swift in those days. My older brother was more the master of the house than my father in that my father wasn't there. Of course, my father's rules were applied, and he made sure that he backed up my mother's discipline at all times. But my brother! How I wish that man was still around. What a wonderful guy he was. When it came time to figuring out how to make a little extra money and so on …

He'd pull me out of bed—now, I'm just a little kid—he'd pull me out of bed and say, "Come on, we're going"—it's still dark outside—"Come on, we're going to the farms." "What for?" "Shut up and get in there." He's got a bicycle, puts me on the crossbar of the bicycle, and takes me to the farms. He asked my mother for fifty cents. My mom said, "Fifty cents—what are you

going to do with it?" "Ma," he says, "it'll come back multiplied." So she gave him the fifty cents, and we go to the farms.

There were a lot of truck farms on Staten Island, growing all kinds of vegetables. When the buyers would buy up all the produce, there's still like odd bundles left or scrap or some pieces and so on, and my brother, for fifty cents, would pile his wagon up with all kinds of vegetables, including some that were left from the piles. Now, he's got me on the bicycle, he's pulling the wagon in the back. This place is about six miles away, but we go back home, then he sits down and bundles everything up, make it attractive. He's got the carrots like this and the celery like this, all bundled with the spaghetti string and so on. And when he's got everything all cleaned, he takes me in the house, puts on a clean pair of shorts. Now, in those days, you didn't wear long pants until you were fourteen and you made your Communion Confirmation. You were allowed shorts, knickers at the most. But he'd say "a new pair of shorts, and"—you know what a Buster Brown collar looks like?

DePue: Mm-hmm.

Speranza: Yeah—"a shirt with a Buster Brown collar. He'd wash my face, he'd comb my hair. He'd stand in front of me, look, and I'll look all clean. So he said, "Now, come here. We're going to go through the neighborhood. You go to that house over there, and you hold this, and you say to the lady, 'Lady, don't you want this nice bunch of carrots? **Only** five cents.' So I'd say, "Lady"—"**No!** You got to say 'Lady'" (with a softer appealing inflection). He made me practice until I had the right pathos in my voice and the right look on my face and so on. We made out like bandits. The fifty cents became five bucks. We sold out the whole thing in the neighborhood, and he did that several Saturdays in a row when the farms are selling that kind of produce.

On other Saturdays, which is the Jewish holy day, there was a Jewish cemetery near our neighborhood. He'd get a big, square can of water and two little pieces of carpet and digging tools, and then he'd dress me all up. Now he looks at me, and he says, "Now, listen. This time, no smiling. You understand? No smiling. Sad. Sad face." We go to the cemetery. We stand behind the mourners who were standing at the graves, you know, and they're praying, and then when they get finished praying, we go over there, put the carpet down and kneel on it and dig up the flowers around the grave and so on and so and so on. Then you step back, you take your hat off, you wait, and they give you a quarter, a dime, fifty cents, or so on, depending. You'd go home with a pocket full of money, just sitting around doing graves for the people around there.

He always knew how to make an honest dollar, and he taught us early on—you know, look, you may have to—not apologize, but you may have to act subservient if the occasion calls for it. Not slavery, but certainly if you want to work for somebody else, you want to get paid for working for

somebody else, you've got to act like you're willing to work for somebody else. All the boys were impressed with that. All the jobs we got, we all did well in them because I think we had that attitude. A man's giving you a day's pay, you do a day's work; you do it right, and you'll be a better man for it.

DePue: Vince, you mentioned earlier that your father very much wanted you guys to identify yourselves as Americans. I'm wondering, as you got into the later years of the 1930s, if your parents and any of the other relatives in the family were paying attention to what was going on in Italy with Mussolini and the fascists and if they talked about any of that.

Speranza: Okay. I'll give you an oblique answer, and then I'll come to the main question. In 1994, my brother Joey and I finally decided if we're every going to see Italy, we'd better go now. We're seventy …five years old at the time. We'd better go. And we tried to talk our wives into coming. They didn't want to come. They said, "No, you two go, and then come back. Next time we'll all go, but you figure out the best places to go" and so on and so on. I played harmonica, and he played the guitar. So I said, "Hey, we take the harmonica and guitar, we'll make music over there, too." He said, "Ah, we don't have room for them." I said, "Yeah. Listen." You know, because he and I love to play together. I have about a two-hour tape of he and I fooling around, playing with the harmonica and guitar. And he said, "Okay, but I got to buy a small guitar."

To make a long story short, we took the harmonica and guitar—I've got video of all of this that I had taken while we were there—and every place we went, we sat down, and we made music. We started even on the plane. On the plane, we were fooling around, and we put the thing down. We were by ourselves in one seat, two seat corners. And the stewardess came over, and we said, "Uh-oh," and we put them away. "No, no," she said. "They think it's great. Play some more." When we were in Italy, we'd go to these little piazzas when we're walking, and sit down on a bench, and we start to play. Now, Italian songs that we knew, were the Italian of sixty years ago—sixty years from then—because my grandfather, who taught us some of it, and my father and mother and so on, when they came, those songs were old songs already.

Well, we're sitting on a piazza and we're playing all these beautiful songs, "*Torna a Surriento*," "Como esta Iday, "*Sul Mare Lucica*." And then we would go into (sings), "*Giovinezza, primavera* (gets quieter) *Mussolini*" (hums a few notes), and the people: "Ah, *no, no, no, signori. Questo illegal… fascisti*." And we'd say, "What are you talking about? These are songs my grandfather taught me." "*No, no, signori, signor,* don't play anymore." And we would act innocent and say Ooh.

In other words, before the war, my grandfather thought Mussolini was great, that he made the trains (laughs) run on time, that he took Italy out of poverty and built up especially Sicily, which is the most impoverished part of

Italy. They were sort of supportive until Mussolini came down on the other side of the war. They expected him to come down like they did in the First World War, with the British and the French. But when they came in on the other side, now everybody's ashamed and embarrassed. There were people in New York whose name was Mussolini, they went to the courts and had their names changed. But the thing still was that most people had relatives there, and they're wondering if their sons are going to go bomb their relatives and so on and so on. And the question never came up, but I know that that was something they used to discuss. You know, what are you going to do if they tell you to go bomb …? You go bomb it. (laughs) Hey, I'm an American. So are you.

DePue: Well, the Italians were already into some places like Ethiopia before this, but September of 1939 is when the Germans invaded Poland. Was that something that caught the attention of the family?

Speranza: Here's what we knew of our parents' political views: My mother didn't know, care, or was concerned about politics. She was (laughs) a focused on the family; that was her entire life. My father would only discuss politics when my uncles came over for those weekend visits, and then the men there would talk about those things. We had one uncle who I think was giving that kind of warning: "Hey, you know what's happening. The dictatorships are going to take over." But too many—and my father was one of them—felt, Nah, they'll never go that far. They'll never go into a war against us. But then, you know, as soon as they did, everybody clammed up; nobody talked about it anymore—while I was home, anyway. Now, of course, I left in '43, and I don't know what they talked about later.

DePue: Did the relatives kind of clam up on the war because Italy was on the wrong side of the war?

Speranza: Exactly, exactly. They were always so proud of their heritage, you know, but now their heritage is stained with dictatorships and fascists. There was a song, (sings from "*La testa Nera*," but seems to have some lyrics mixed up) "*La testa nera, bell'abissina, e Mussolini …*" Mussolini went to Abyssinia when they invaded Africa and this was like a patriotic song. See, now, we've also taken the blacks in—*teste nera, blackheads*—in Abyssinia. That means now we're an empire; we've got a colony and so on.

Later perspective makes you see these kind of things. At the time, you know, there wasn't much… In fact, the United States was getting to be pretty isolationist. When they saw these war things coming, they said, we're going to stay out of this one. Look at the last one. We lost a hundred and fifty-eight thousand men. What did we get out of it? Nothing. They wouldn't even get the League of Nations set up. The Congress at that time said, No, no, no." They turned Wilson down. They said, No, we're not going to be part of that. All it's going to do is get us into another war, and we got nothing out of it. We

went into the war expecting that Wilson's Fourteen Points were going to be the things that the war was settled on, and the Fourteen Points set up a really nice world. You know, no more secret treaties, no armed forces, and open covenants openly arrived at. America at that time was saying—this is what I could glean from it as a high school student—No, we're not going to get involved in this one. We haven't been attacked, nobody's bothering us, and Europe, if you want to—cash and carry. You bring your ships over here, load the goods on it, pay cash, we'll send it back. Because in the past, if you haven't paid your debts to us—except Finland, I think—after the First World War.

There was a comedian named Eddie Cantor. He was a Jewish guy, but at that time, they didn't know what the Nazis were doing to the Jews. He had a radio program, he was in Hollywood, too, and on Sunday nights, he used to sing. (sings)

If they feel like a war
On some foreign shore,
Let them keep it over there.
If some fools want to fight
And they think might makes right,
Let them keep it over there.
From coast to coast you'll hear
A million doughboys cheer,
"Our job is to protect our loved ones
Over here.
We're for you, Uncle Sam,
But stay out of that jam.
Let them keep it over there!"

And everybody would applaud. (claps) Nope, we're not going to get into this war.

DePue: Well, that all changed on December seventh, and you were—

Speranza: Absolutely.

DePue: —I think sixteen years old at the time. Tell us about your memories of Pearl Harbor, then.

Speranza: Oh, my goodness. I was on a bicycle, pedaling to a Greek restaurant to buy hotdogs. It was a Sunday. The family kids had all chipped in—some of my older brothers and sisters had the money—and they were going to buy everybody these special hotdogs. This Greek restaurant made special terrific hotdogs with sauerkraut and everything. So I'm on the bicycle, and I'm in the Greek restaurant. In there I hear the radio, and I'm saying, "What are they talking about?" This and this and this and this, and they're talking about …

And I must have said it out loud. I said, "What are they talking about?" He said, "We're at war, stupid." One of the guys sitting in the restaurant, said, "We're at war, stupid." I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "The Japanese. They've attacked Pearl Harbor." Well, did I sober up. I didn't even buy the hotdogs. I got on my bicycle and went home, and I said, "Hey, turn the radio on. You know what? We're at war." The whole family was shocked. They said, "What happened?" "I don't know. Turn the radio on. The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor." And my sister says, (laughs) "What for?" and I said, "I don't know."

But that night—you know, we had the radio on all the time, and we heard more and more details. And then the next morning, we listened to Roosevelt's speech.

DePue: The "day of infamy" speech.

Speranza: Yeah. "Last night, December, 7, 1941, a day which will go down in infamy, the Empire of Japan—the armed forces of the Empire of Japan deliberately, dastardly attacked on Pearl Harbor" and so on, "and I asked the Congress to declare that a state of war ***exists*** between the United States and the Empire of Japan. And we will win the ultimate victory, so help us God." We said, "How old do you have to be?" you know, my brothers and I were, especially my older brother. "Hey, we got to get in this, right?" I said, "Yeah, but how old do you have to be?" They said, "Eighteen." Well, my brother went to enlist and he couldn't get in because when they asked him what he was doing, he was an electrician in the Elco boat yard. They were making torpedo boats. And they said, "No, right now, we need you right there." So he said, "But I hear you need… I'm …" "Yeah, we got plenty of men for that." So he stayed.

Of course, I was in school. But we had a physical education teacher named Lou Bernstein. "Boys," he said, "instead of pushups today, we're going to do close order drills. You might as well learn. It's not going to be long before you're going to be …" And we started learning how to march and so on, right in high school.

But it wasn't too hard an impact on us now. Once the war started and we started hearing things about how Americans are doing this and were doing that, that wasn't a lot of—you know, it didn't seem like we were getting enough of the—you want to call it war propaganda—about what's really going on, what the Germans were doing and what the Japanese were doing. Those of us that were still in school were really concerned about our grades and what are we going to do and so on and so on. I'm trying hard to remember what my reaction was, but I don't think after the initial shock wore off that we… We weren't afraid, let's put it this way. We thought America would rally to the cause. And some of the guys were saying, Hey, when our B-17E bombers get over there, in three months, this war is going to be over.

DePue: Well, it wasn't a day or two after Pearl Harbor that Germany declared war on the United States, and I believe that Italy was right there afterwards.

Speranza: Yes.

DePue: What was the reaction that you or the family had to know that, Okay, now here we are, Italian-Americans, proud to be Americans, but now we're at war with our home country"?

Speranza: Like I say, they clammed up. Here's the only thing my father said to me when I was leaving for the service, "*No far my macosa, la lade la testa*," which means, *Just don't do anything to make me hang my head in shame*. And I said, I won't, Pop." He didn't say a word to me the rest of the way to the train station. He took me down there, and he hugged me, and I went. But I remembered that all the way through the war. Would Pop be proud of this? Some of the things I did, Pop would not have been proud of. I got caught up in the war, too.

At any rate, there was not a, like, political dilemma. Oh, people: Is it going to be a problem to go fight the Germans and the Italians? No, hey. We are **thoroughly** Americans, and the enemy is out to get us, and we're going to get him before he gets us.

Oh, by the way, as soon as you get into the service, they had a series of, you know, propaganda films: *Why We Fight*. They brought out all this stuff about what the Italians were doing, what the Germans were doing, what the Russians were doing, and why we had to do this, and what the Japanese … And they had very, very, very good stuff. It was very convincing, and it really gave us the background to understand why we were there, what we were doing, and what we were going to do. I, you know, at first had the child's approach that, Hey, somebody's going to hit me, I'm going to hit him back. But as you learn more and you get a better education about the history of the events and so on and so on while you're training, hey, that gives you more of an incentive to really understand what's going on and to be a better soldier.

DePue: I want to spend a little time talking to you about what it was like while you were still in high school but the war was going on, because I would imagine the mood of the country—you already suggested it—changed dramatically after Pearl Harbor.

Speranza: Yeah, but it changed in terms of, Oh, we got to collect aluminum now and we've got to plant victory gardens and so on, but there was no pinch on anything yet. Rationing hadn't started right away and so on. I think for most people—but again, how can I talk for most people?—for the people I knew, it was a bad, distant thing. It's not affecting us right now, and we don't feel any pinch. There's nothing going on yet. The draft had just started, you know. By the way, it passed by one vote. The objective was still to get good grades and

finish high school and so on and so on. Some of us—and I know I was one—we used to think about it and say, you know—and of course we all want to be pilots. I kept thinking about—I wore glasses (laughs) when I was reading, and how I could do without the glasses and so on, because I don't think they'd take you with eyeglasses.

But the thing doesn't hit you until you're actually ready to go. There's not an impact until you start seeing around. Now, when my brother went and when my brother-in-law went and my other brother-in-law went, my sisters' husbands are all gone and I'm the only one left because I'm still seventeen when I got out of high school and I started CCNY.[1] Your primary problem, objective, is, hey, you're in school here. Finish up and get good grades and do what you have to do. But I joined the National Guard so I could get some pre-training that they gave you.

DePue: Was that still in high school that you did that?

Speranza: Yes. You were allowed, if you were seventeen—sixteen and a half, I think—something like that. They lowered the age to give the kids who are going to go in in a year or two a little preparatory training, which didn't hurt at all. We had Springfield rifles, and we were taught about terrain and how to shoot. When we got into the service, you know, we had some experience anyway. You know, the farm kids, hey, they're used to this kind of thing, they're used to firearms and so on. City kids is another ballgame; we had no experience at all with weapons. Most of us didn't. To try to recall what the mood was … You know, they were confident that we were going to knock this war off in a year, come home as heroes.

DePue: Were you worried that it'd be over so quick you wouldn't be able to make the war?

Speranza: Some of us did, yes. I was one that said, "How come you can't volunteer?" and they said, "You're a student. You can't. You have to finish up the semester" and whatever the story was. But, by the way, by that time, we could see what was happening. By 1942, Germany had taken half of Europe. By 1943, it was the heyday. The Japanese had most of Asia, and we said, Hey, no, there's going to be plenty of war for us. Don't worry about it. (laughs) It looked bad.

DePue: I'm curious. From what I understand talking to you earlier, you graduated January of 1943? When did you graduate from high school?

Speranza: January 1943, yes.

DePue: How was it that you graduated in the middle of the school year?

[1] CCNY - City College of New York

Speranza: In those days in New York City, graduation was twice a year. In other words, today, when you start school, you have to be six. If you're five and a half, you have to wait till you're six or so on. In those days, they had half-year semesters. You went to school from September to January and then February to June—two regular semesters. Nowadays you have annual semesters. And your courses ran—five-month courses. So if you were five and a half or something, you could start school, and you were a half a year ahead of where you would be if you had to wait to the six-year-old age to … However the whole thing worked out. And that's the way the whole school system was then in New York.

DePue: If there hadn't been the war going on, what do you think you would have wanted to do after you graduated from high school?

Speranza: Oh, well, here's what the story was. In those days, there were academic high schools and vocational schools. By the time you got out of elementary school, you had to make a decision as to which one you wanted to go to. If you said you wanted to go to an academic school, you had to take a battery of tests to get into that high school. If you said you wanted to go to vocational school, well, you just went there and selected your trade. Now, when it came time for me to do that… My brother was an electrician, I told you; he was working for the Electric Boat Company in New Jersey there on torpedo boats. He said, "Vin, take electricians. You'll graduate from the vocational school with a license and be …" You know, you take the regular subjects—English, history, and so on and so on—but you also specialize in the trade. Half a day of all your day is learning the trade. They taught plumbing, electrical work, aviation mechanics, plaster and …you know, all the skills to get a good job.

And so when it came time for me, I put down, I want to go to vocational school, and I wanted to go into electricity. My teachers sent a letter home. By the way, you know, your parents have to approve that. So the teachers sent a letter home. They said, "Mr. Speranza, it would be a big mistake for Vincent to go to … He is definitely college material; he should go to an academic high school." My mother and father said, "What are they talking about, academic high school? Who's going to send you to college? Who's going to pay for your college? We've got no money to pay for college. Get a good job, and …" But my brother Joey turned around, and he said, "No, listen, Pop. Somebody in the family's got to go to college, and he's got the best shot. I think we ought to let him go to the academic school."

They said to me, "What do you think?" I said, "I don't care. Go get a job or … But don't forget, if I go to an academic high school, then I've got to pay for college." They said, "Well, the family will do something. Don't worry about it." This is my brother; he talked my parents into changing the thing and sent me to an academic high school. So I went to school where you had to take four years of English, four years of Latin, three years of another foreign language—I took French—I took Italian—four years of science—two years of

biology, two years of physics—four years of mathematics—you know, the kind of thing that you used to hear about what a classical education was. And, they, you know, no fooling around in that school. I was grateful for it—you know, meet the challenge, and I graduated, and I did well. I didn't have to worry about college right away because (laughs) the war was on, and that's what the story was.

DePue: When did you actually enter the service, and how did you enter the service?

Speranza: I went to the draft board when I turned eighteen. Now, I was seventeen in March, which meant—I graduated in January, February—a couple more months, I would have been eighteen, after I graduated. I went to the draft board. I wanted to get in. I went to the draft board, and I said, "Listen, my parents will go berserk if I volunteer. Would you put my name at the top of the list?" They said, "Oh, we can do that. Don't worry about it." So they said, "Fill out this application thing." So I started to fill it out, and they said, "You're a student." I said, "Yeah, I'm going to CCNY." They said, "We can't. You have to finish. The draft law will not permit for us to pull you out in the middle of a semester. You have to finish the June semester.

DePue: So immediately you enrolled in CCNY after graduating from high school. How were you affording that?

Speranza: It's free. CCNY is free. It was a free college. I took the exam. Again, my teachers, while I was in elementary school told me to take this exam. The exam was given—and, by the way, you know what the competition was for that thing. (laughs) New York City, but, you know, the war had started and a lot of guys had gone. I guess I made it because the competition had lessened somewhat. (laughter) I don't think I'm that good. But I qualified for CCNY, and it's a free college. But, by the way, you had to take military science in your first year. But whatever the story was, my draft papers didn't come till October, I think. October? Yeah, October, or maybe they came a little earlier than that. But I didn't get drafted until October, and I didn't go in until November.

DePue: Yeah, I know your paperwork showed that it was October 25th that you were inducted and that November 15th that you entered active service.

Speranza: Correct, correct. November 15th. And you should see the advice I was getting. Everybody saying, "Now, if they give you a choice, take anything but the infantry. Understand?" I'd say, "Why?" They'd say, "Because the infantry is where you get killed." (laughs) They said, "The Air Force, the Navy …" I said, "They get killed there, too." "Yeah, but you got a clean bed and a place to eat and so on and so on." They said, "The infantry lives in the mud." Everybody put thumbs down on don't go in the infantry. And I said, Well, you know. To myself, I said, Hey, listen, if you want to fight, that's where you've got to go. But I didn't make a story of it. I kept saying, "Oh, yeah," took this

advice, that advice. Said, "Yeah, yeah, oh yeah." "And don't forget," they said, "do good on the test for radio. You can become a radio man or …" In other words, if you get a skill in the Army, you get stripes, you can make noncommissioned officer and so on. They said, "But don't tell them you went to college, because if you tell them you went to college, they'll pick you out for things like OCS and second lieutenants get killed faster than anybody else in the Army," they thought. But this is all, you know… I'm letting it go in one ear and out the other.

But when it came time to make a choice when I was inducted, they said, "Have you got a choice for a branch of service?" I said, "Yeah, I'd like to get in the Air Force. I'd like to be a pilot." They looked at my physical exam. They said, "Your eyes." And I said, "Well, then it doesn't matter. A good fighting outfit." He said, "But wait a minute," and they take out a file—because you had to take a battery of tests when you went in, and you sit down with this officer, and he goes, "Oh, Speranza, radio aptitude, you did ninety-seven … You like radio?" I said, "Yeah." He got to the next one. "Oh, mechanical aptitude test, so on. You like tanks?" I said, "Yeah." Da-da, da-da, da-da. And he goes through a whole bunch of stuff about all these wonderful things I qualified for, and then takes a big stamp: infantry. (DePue laughs) You know, that's what they needed at the time. All of this other stuff was just motions they have to go through

So I was sent to Camp Upton, New York, for induction, and—or was it Camp Shanks? No, Camp Upton. And I stayed there—and you go through all the, you know, the physicals, inspections, and more tests, and calisthenics and so on, and then got shipped to Fort Benning, Georgia.

DePue: Is it Fort Benning, then, that you're going to go through basic training?

Speranza: Yeah, Fort Benning for basic training.

DePue: That had to be a really busy place at that time.

Speranza: Ooh, my. We were put up in tar-paper shacks. You know, they were just putting up this stuff. The roof was just tar paper, and the sun hitting that tar paper, (laughs) it was so hot in there. But, oh, I took to the training. I loved it. You know, the calisthenics every day, and then rifle training, and then the running and jumping and … Now, I was a small guy and kind of compact, and I—I did well, let's put it that way, in the training, and I enjoyed it. You know, a lot of guys were bitching and complaining, but I said, Hey. And they used to complain about the food. I thought that was the best food in the world! (laughter) We used to get eggs and bacon for breakfast. Hell, at home, you got a bowl of bread and milk and coffee. You know, in the early days, breakfast was nothing. Here, we used to get bacon and eggs and sometimes pancakes, and the meat, you know, at lunchtime, the pork chops and so on. I thought the food was great in the Army.

DePue: How about the classic stories of suddenly meeting all these farm kids from the South and kids form the Midwest and big city kids and …?

Speranza: I just didn't have any trouble. I just reminded myself of when we were growing up, we were all bunches of kids from different places and so on—different colors, different religions. I just never had any problem with—what should we say?—adapting or getting along. In fact, I didn't smoke. (laughs) This is after I got into the paratroop training. I didn't smoke, and everybody said, "Hey, Speranza, give me a cigarette." "I don't smoke." "Hey, Speranza, give me a cigarette." "I don't smoke." Finally, in self-defense, I used to take my cigarette rations, and instead of giving them away to everybody, I'd put one in my pocket, so if somebody, "Hey, Speranza, give me a cigarette," I could say, "Here."

Well, I watched them. Well, let me put a connecting link in here. I did my infantry training. I got sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for advanced infantry training, and I was assigned to the 87th Infantry Division. That's the Acorn Division, green patch with a yellow acorn on it. The Acorn Division was in advanced training, and one morning—

DePue: Was this unit-level training, platoon-level, and company-level training you were in?

Speranza: No, it was a whole division, the 87th Infantry Division. 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 banks and so on, there's going to be a demonstration." Now, this is regimental training. It was a regiment. We were sitting all around there, and we're sitting on the ground waiting. All of a sudden, three C-47s come zooming over the sky, and 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 vrooming on down, and coming down to the ground. They roll over, pick up their parachutes, stick them in a bag, put on their packs, double-time off the field, and then line up in front of us. Brilliant, shining boots, silver wings, pants bloused—nobody else could do that at that time, by the way—pants bloused into those jump boots, and, oh, those jaunty caps, and they're at attention. Oh, big, beautiful guys.

They said, **"We're taking recruits 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—"and we're looking for a few good men." We start thinking about it, and finally he said, "**And there's fifty dollars extra a month jump pay**." (DePue laughs) A whole bunch of hands went up. You know, at the time, you got fifty dollars a month. Fifty dollars a month, and those of us who wanted to help the family signed an allotment over to the parents; so thirty bucks out of that comes out,

and the Army added twenty to it and sent it to your parents to help the family out. And when you pay your laundry and so on—at the end of the month, I used to end up with sixteen dollars for the month. That's what I had to do whatever I wanted to do for a month. The fifty dollars jump pay sounded real good, but also the glamour. Those guys, they looked … I couldn't wait. I couldn't wait.

So I ended up back in Fort Benning, Georgia, only this time, it's parachute training. In the infantry, you walk everyplace; in the paratroops, you run everyplace. In the infantry, you did thirty-mile hikes; in the paratroops you did fifty-mile hikes. Every time you turned your eyeballs the wrong way, "Give me fifty pushups." You didn't question, you just—he tells you why. "You didn't look me in the eye when I talked to you." When you finished the fifty pushups, "Did you cheat, or did you do fifty?" "No, I did fifty." He'd tell me, "Give me another fifty for not cheating when you had a chance." If you said you did fifty, he'd say, "Well, give me another fifty anyway." "Where are you from, soldier?" "New York." "What a lousy state. Give me fifty pushups for being from New York." Of course, they were building your back and your legs and your arms. I can't believe the shape we were in. You know, we were all eighteen-, nineteen-year-old kids, and the training and that … We used to take logs—six men to a log—and throw the logs to each other, back and forth. The training was fantastic.

I know, we got to quit.

DePue: No, no, no, we got time.

Speranza: No? All right. Well, the training on the ground… Fort Benning, Georgia, in the parachute unit had two towers, parachute towers. One had wires coming down so that the parachute is open, but it's guided—the ends of the parachute have rings on it—it's guided down the wires. Now, you've done the jumping on the ground. You jump out of the fuselage on the ground, and so forth. You jump on that wire that's got a harness, and it bounces you down all the way down the field.

DePue: And that's all about learning how to roll once you hit the ground.

Speranza: No, not yet. Not the wire. The wire is just getting you used to a harness and feeling the pull down the … Now, when you come to the jump towers, one of them, like I say, guides you just down, just giving you the feeling of coming down in a parachute. But the other one—no guide wires, and they turn it so that the wind is blowing this way. Now, your chute's already opened, and you're in the harness, and then they let it go, and you just glide gently to the ground, and roll. Do the roll. They taught you how to do it.

Well, when I was a kid, Coney Island in New York had those parachute towers. (DePue laughs) When I got to those, I said, "Oh, (laughs)

yeah." Some of the guys, you know, jumping in the parachute, but I had no problems. As a kid, we used to go up and down those things all the time at Coney Island. But at any rate, the day comes when, "All right, now, tomorrow, you're going to make your first jump. Today, you're going to pack the parachute you're going to jump in." You never saw a more careful bunch of guys (laughter) in your whole life. When we got to those parachute tables, this is my chute, and you folded, and you smoothed it out, and you measured—yeah, it's supposed to be thirty-two feet—and you fold it all up, and you put your name on it. And the next morning, they pick you up, and they take you out to the planes.

Now, in training, a lot of people talk. Some don't. Some keep quiet, you know, but others: Hey, what's there to it? So you jump out of a plane. Some of them are big talkers and froze in the door. Some of them were big talkers and didn't freeze in the door. Some of them were quiet, and some of the confident ones … But hey, here's where you separate the men from the boys. Now, everybody had the training, everybody had been psyched up properly and so on, but now, are you willing to throw yourself out of an airplane with a parachute and be ready to fight when you're on the ground?

And that's the day I started smoking. Before you get on the plane, they said, "The smoking lamp is out," and so everybody puts their cigarettes away. They get on the plane. Now we're all sitting there like this on those metal seats, and your harness is tight and everything, and you keep checking all the buckles and things. Then he says, "All right, smoking lamp is on," and everybody pulls out a cigarette, and they're going—and I said, Hmm, there must be something to this; everybody looks like they're doing it. So I pulled one of mine out. And I choked on it, but I—I was just puffing; I didn't know how to inhale. So I was puffing on a cigarette. Before you know it, they said, "All right, smoking lamp's out. Everybody put the cigarettes out. Make sure you stamp the butt completely," (makes a blah-blah noise).

And then it's stand up. Hook up. Equipment check! And the number twelve guy pats the number eleven guy on the back, after he's checked his equipment, said, "Twelve okay," "Eleven okay," "Ten okay," "Nine okay," all the way down. And I think I was number four or three or something for the first flight. "Four okay." My voice may have cracked a little bit, but, "Four okay." Three okay, two okay … "**Stand in the door**." Now you're saying, Really, am I …? (laughs) And of course your training takes over. Slide them to the front, and pay attention to your teachers. I made eleven jumps—never had one bad jump. Never even sprained an ankle, nothing, because I listened. I listened to what the teacher said. When the teacher said, "When you go out that door, you make a half turn to the left. Duck your head so the shroud lines don't hit your helmet, and count one thousand, two thousand. If your main chute hasn't opened by three thousand, pull this one."

When I went out that door—and by the way, there's no getting used to it. Every time you jump, it's the same. I call it a thrill. Some people might call it something else. I don't know. But when I went out that door I made that half-turn to the left and I started dropping down. Your chute's thirty-two feet, and the static line is another thirty feet, so you're down about sixty feet before the cord breaks, the propeller blast catches your chute, opens it, and you slide under. And I remember that part so distinctly on the first jump. The prop blast opens your chute. You look up—they say "Check your canopy"—that's another rule. Check your canopy, and you slide right down under it. (whispering) Then you're up there. It's quiet, and you're coming down with your parachute. I never got over that and didn't want to. I said, "Parachute jumping is the nicest thing in the world." Of course, during combat it's another ballgame when they're shooting at you, but that's the nicest thing in the world.

We made our four jumps, and then the night jump, we had a tragedy. You jump Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday—Friday is the night jump—and you get your wings Saturday morning if you qualified. At night, they teach you if you're landing in trees, cross your legs and put both hands over your face so that the tree doesn't tear you apart. If you're landing over water, release your chute, hang on to it until you're about ten feet above the water, and then let it go so that you drop and the chute gets blown out of the way; otherwise, it will come over you and drown you.

So that night that we jumped, there was a clear moon, and some guy thought he was over water. It was the concrete highway, and in the moonlight, it looked like water. He did what he was told, but again, he misjudged the distance—it's hard to look down and tell—but he was much higher than ten feet. He let go of the chute, and *splat*. And, of course, that made us all feel bad, but good that we had done it, you know, so …

My OCS papers came through then. No, first I was assigned—let's see. We finished jump training and were sent to—we had to go overseas. Oh, they send you home for two weeks. You get a two-week furlough at home, and then you get back and you get ready for shipment overseas as replacements. I was with a whole bunch of guys on the Queen Mary. That's another whole story, (laughs) for another time. We'll pick that up.

DePue: Yeah, we are getting a little bit close. I got a couple questions about what it was like going through the training. I've heard lots of stories about paratrooper training during the Second World War, and part of it was that there was a very high washout rate.

Speranza: Absolutely. Here's what happened. They make a deal with you when you go in. These are the regulations; these are official regulations. You can quit anytime you want. Whenever you think you can't cut it, you can quit. Whenever we think you can't cut it, you're out. During the training, all officers lose their rank. All the trainers are buck sergeants, and sometimes it

was very funny to see a sergeant grab a colonel by the seat of the pants and run him back up to there because the colonel fell out along the way and tell the colonel, "Either you keep up or we're going to have to ship you back out."

We used to do nine-mile runs—four and a half miles to this little town and four and a half miles back. Every morning before breakfast, you take off your shirt and start the run. You run eight minutes, and you walk two, and you run eight, and you walk two, you run eight, and you walk two. In other words, every eight minutes, there's a two-minute walking; the rest of the time, you're jogging. You do four and a half miles in, four and a half miles back, and then you put your shirt back on again and have breakfast. The training was difficult, and a lot of guys, for example, couldn't take the full field pack and the rifle and so on for a fifty-mile hike. You had to do that or you washed out. There were a lot of people who, at the last minute wouldn't jump, just froze in the door, can't do it, and pulled out.

DePue: Was there ever any question in your mind that you were going to make it?

Speranza: I loved it from the beginning. (laughs) I would have done anything to make sure I stayed in there. You know, one of those young things that it captured my imagination. Imagine, the enemy's looking over there where the front lines are, and I'm going to be right behind, jump down there and take them on from all directions. You know, you have …

DePue: Last question for today, then, Vince, because we are up against the tyranny of the clock, I like to say. Was the camaraderie in going through that school and being a paratrooper, even at that time, did it feel different from the training you'd had up before that time?

Speranza: Absolutely. In the paratroops, we were all volunteers. They were all people who wanted to be there, who wanted to be a paratrooper, who wanted to get the best training and be the best soldier he could. We had a nice bunch of guys. I mean, they were really, I thought, first class. Now maybe some of them in combat turned out a little bit different, but I didn't know of any. I didn't know of any. The guys I had—and I told you, I found one of them still living in Wisconsin there, Steve Pentek—we'll talk about him tomorrow—but for me, it was coming home. (laughs)

DePue: Vince, we have a lot more of your story to tell. We have to get you overseas, we've have to get you through the Battle of Bastogne and on beyond that point. By now, people, I'm sure are fascinated to hear what else you have to say. So we're looking forward to it, and we'll pick this up tomorrow. Thank you very much for being with us. Thank you.

(end of interview #1 #2 continues)

Interview with Vincent Speranza

VR2-V-L-2010-031.2

Interview # 2: July 15, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

(Special note: Interviews #1-4 were recorded on video at the Illinois Information Service Studio.)

DePue: Good afternoon. Today is Thursday, July 15, 2010. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today's my second session with Vincent Speranza. Good afternoon, Vince.

Speranza: Good afternoon.

DePue: We had an amazing conversation yesterday about what it was like to grow up in New York City in the midst of the Depression, just all the stories about how important family was, and took the story of your life up to the point where you had—Pearl Harbor; you had joined the military; you had gone through basic training; you had been given the opportunity to go to airborne and had decided, For fifty dollars a month extra, yeah, I think I want to do that; and gotten you through basic training. I think we got about to the point in the story where you're ready to ship overseas. So, Vince, I'd like to go ahead and turn it over to you at that point in your story and have you tell us how you got over to Europe and when that occurred.

Speranza: Well, we were assigned to Camp Shanks—I believe it's Camp Shanks—New York, as a point of embarkation. New York City was going to be the port of embarkation, out of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Didn't know it at the time, but

the *Queen Mary*[2] was waiting for us. The *Queen Mary* during the war had been converted into a troop ship, and I'll talk a little bit about that later.

Before we shipped out, I would like to recall this incident: When we were at Fort Benning there, every once in a while, the Army food would include what they called spaghetti. I would complain bitterly to my friends, "You call this spaghetti? If we ever get anywhere near New York, I'm going to take you to my house and let you taste what a **real** dish of spaghetti is like. My mother is the best cook in the world" and so on and so on. Well, when we got to the port of embarkation in New York, my buddies all said, "Hey, all right, Speranza, you said you're going to show us all these beautiful spaghetti dinners. What about it?" I said, "Okay, okay, give me a chance, there." So I called my mother, and I said, "Mom, we're going to be able to come home for a few hours"—you know, we couldn't tell them we we were going overseas or anything like that—but I said, "I've been telling the guys that if we ever get near New York, I'm going to bring them home for a real spaghetti dinner." And she said, "Oh, Vinny, great. You're going to come home? Yeah, yeah, bring them, bring them." And she said, "How many?" I said, "Eighteen." There was eighteen in my stick,[3] you know, the guys that I was with. She said, "Eighteen?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Well," she said, "how much time have I got?" And I said, "Oh, well, it'll take us three or four hours to get there." She said, "Ahh, okay."

We'd gotten a couple of cars, and relatives drove us down there and drove to my house on Staten Island. Our house was a small house, but my mother had the tables lined up from the living room going into the dining room and partway into the kitchen; she had boards between two chairs for seats and so on, but she had seating for eighteen kids. When we got in there, my mother and my sisters had put together a meal like you wouldn't believe. Afterward, my mother said, "All you boys, when was the last time you wrote your mother a letter?" (DePue laughs) And the guys were saying… She went upstairs and she got a bunch of writing paper and envelopes, and she said, "All of you **right now**, sit down and write your mothers a letter. Shame on you." And she said, "And you too" to me.

DePue: Well, I was going to say, I bet maybe you weren't writing as often as she'd like.

Speranza: (laughs) I was a little bit embarrassed, (DePue laughs) but okay, I took the paper too. We all wrote a letter. Then we demonstrated how you jump out of a plane. And so it was a wonderful evening. The poignancy to the story is this: When the war was over and I came home, Mom talked all about then, and we recalled this incident, and then she said, "Vinny, all those nice young boys

[2] The British Ship *Queen Mary* was a famous luxury liner. It was returned to its original status after the war.
[3] A "stick" is a group of 18 paratroopers. There is a stick on the starboard (right) side and a stick on the port (left) side. One stick deploys in line, then the other stick deploys.

from California, you know, all those nice young boys," she said, "What happened to them? How many of them are still around?" And you know what I had to say? (pause)

DePue: You were the only one.

Speranza: Not one of them came back but me. Now, they weren't all killed; some of them were just badly hurt and got sent back. But of all those eighteen guys, I made it back.

Okay, we got on board the *Queen Mary*, and here's what we found: In the small little staterooms—they were maybe eight by eight—there were five tiers of bunks, a metal pipe with a piece of canvas laced to it. Five high—one, two, three, four, five—and five on this and five on this. That was fifteen bunks with about that much space between them. If you had a heavy man (laughs) on top of you, his canvas was in your face. At any rate, thirty men were assigned to each of those fifteen-bunk rooms. You took turns. Fifteen slept on deck, and you had the bunks, and the next night, they slept in the bunks and you slept on deck. Thirty men's gear was in the room—you know, duffel bags, rifles, so on, helmets, and crap game in the middle of the floor all the time, so you can imagine what that room was like.

We were fed twice a day. Right after you got up—the showers were salt water. You know, the *Queen* was… By the way, there were six thousand men aboard that ship plus a thousand-man crew. To feed everybody, and only twice a day, as soon as you finished shaving and cleaning up in the morning, you got on line with your mess gear. Then the line went down A deck, plus C deck, and down to B deck and around to this corner and so on, and you're standing there talking. Maybe by nine, ten o'clock, you got to the kitchen. At that time, you know, the British were in bad shape and so on; the sausages were half bread crumbs, and whatever you got… We got tea, which most of us thought was—you know, we called it a bellywash. You get fifteen minutes to eat, and you get in line again, now to wash your mess gear. And the line goes down A deck and C deck and B deck and around there, and finally you get to the three big tubs where you wash your mess gear, and you get back to your place, and it's time to get on line for dinner, or mid-afternoon—whatever the second meal was that they called it. So we spent a lot of time on line. We didn't have time to get concerned or to fool around with anything.

Some of the lucky ones who were near the open decks got to do some training—they had taken the training logs with us from the parachute training—and got some exercise that way. They warned us, "Stay away from the rails. The *Queen Mary* goes unescorted, it's too fast for convoy, and it can outrun any submarine, but if they're laying in wait for you, you know. They said, Stay away from the rails, because if you fall overboard, the *Queen* doesn't stop. We throw you a life raft, wish you *bon voyage*, and you're on

your own. So stay away from the rail. And of course don't light any matches out on deck at night and this and this.

But I was on line one day, and two people in front of me was a little guy, even smaller than me, and somebody said, "Hey, that's Mickey Rooney." And we said, "Yeah." Mickey Rooney—nice, nice guy. He shook hands with us all, and we talked a little bit, and so on and so on. He was a soldier. They put on a show for us during the voyage. I remember a couple of jokes that Mickey Rooney cracked. He said, "You know, I came down on a troop train. You know what a troop train is? It's a string of crap games separated by boxcars." And then, "The officer on deck watching all the men throwing up—everybody's seasick—and the officer says to one of the guys, 'What's the matter, soldier, weak stomach?' The soldier said, 'Hell, no. I'm throwing it out there as far as the rest of them.'" (DePue laughs) But he put on a good show to entertain us on the way over there.

The *Queen* can make it across the Atlantic in three days, but it took us seven. She zig-zagged all over the place. One time we were off the coast of Spain. But the only place she could dock was in Liverpool, but, you know, that was on the European side, and they weren't going to bring the *Queen* in there. We anchored off Scotland, and then they brought us ashore with smaller boats. When we got ashore, they put us on a train, and they sent us, my particular unit,replacements for H Company of 501, 3rd Battalion—we're in a place called Hungerford. By the way, Hungerford became an infamous place later on where some nut murdered a whole bunch of people out of that little town that nobody ever heard of, but I remembered it as the place where we were stationed.

We were stationed there in Quonset huts, and every day they would take us outside and line us up and say, All right, volunteers for a special mission. We'd all step forward, and the officer would grunt, and say, "Good." We'd go back, and again, more training and so on and so on. What we didn't know was that the 101st Airborne Division, after having fought for seventy days in Holland—maybe at that time it was maybe sixty-five days of being in it—was pulling out. You find out all about this after the war. But all we knew was we were replacements, that we were going to join the 101st Airborne Division as it was pulling out of Holland.

DePue: Did you know specifically what unit you would be assigned to at that time?

Speranza: No. I believe that we knew that the Quonset hut people that I was with were destined for the 501 Regiment. In those days, there were three regiments of jumpers. The 101st had the 501, 502, and 506, and attached, the 327 Glider Regiment. And they just kept, I don't know, I say stringing us along every day. Some of us were, "We're going to join the outfit. We're going to join the outfit," and it didn't happen for I don't know how many days. We were all

anxious to get in. Finally it did, and we were assigned; I was assigned to H Company, 3rd Battalion.

We were taken to this camp in northern France. The name of the town was Mourmelon-le-Grand, and there was another town, Mourmelon-le-Petit—Mourmelon the great, the big, the small, so on. The first time we were assigned to barracks. It was an old German barracks. When the German occupation troops were in France, they had occupied these barracks. There were still Nazi signs on the wall and so on. They were damp, but at least they were indoors, and it wasn't bad. We were told that there was going to be a rest period because the 101st had just come out of Holland, seventy-two days of combat—and badly mauled, by the way—and so the outfit is supposed to get replacements—that was us—winter clothing; new equipment, because a lot of the guns and so on—for example, I was assigned to a machine gun, and my machine gun was in for repairs and so on and so on—we were supposed to get R&R[4]. I think I showed you the little newspaper and we learn that General Taylor was going to get all of the girls from the Folies Bergère in Paris to come to Mourmelon and perform for the 101st Airborne Unit. (laughs)

DePue: This was Maxwell Taylor, General Maxwell Taylor.

Speranza: General Maxwell Taylor, yeah.

DePue: He was a colorful guy.

Speranza: Yes, he was, and one of the youngest generals around. Supposedly, Taylor was… Let's say he was high in his praise for paratroopers and parachute jumpers. He thought we were the best, and this and that and the other thing. At the story of two young sol… I apologize in advance for language, but, you know, the story is the story. Two troopers standing in front of the tomb of Napoleon, and one of them says to the other, "People say that was the greatest soldier the world had ever seen." And the other guy said, "Bullshit! When did he ever jump?" (laughter)

DePue: Yeah, I think you'd lose something if you didn't include that. I want to ask you—you're a replacement. You already said that the 501st, the entire 101st Division, got beat up pretty severely during Market Garden, and so I imagine you're not the only guy who's joining your squad and the 3rd Platoon of H Company, but how did the old-timers treat you guys? How did the veterans treat you?

Speranza: You know, *Band of Brothers*, if you saw that movie, did it very well. They showed you how, until you prove yourself in combat, you're nothing. You're apologetic in that you haven't been in battle yet, but to the men who have been in combat, you're replacing Joe Smith who they trained with all the years and stuff like that. You know, you're no Joe Smith. And so their attitude

[4] R&R: rest and rehabilitation.

toward us was pretty hostile. I don't mean actively hostile, but let's say unfriendly. You can do what you can to try to be a good soldier, but you haven't had any combat experience, and so you're not really accepted as such. Now, after a while, some of them get to know you, they see you, and you do good things and you help them out and so on, and they may warm up a little bit, but until you get into combat with them, you're not much. You have to take a backseat.

DePue: Did you start hearing stories about D-Day and about Market Garden?

Speranza: Oh, yeah. Oh, yes. And these are the stories that they were told to me. They said that Normandy was a confused mess. They said that first of all, they were issued a clicker, and they said that the signal was, When we get there, we're going to jump at night, and if you don't know who's out there, you click one time, and if the other guy clicks twice, friendly, and you can go ahead and come out and expose yourself and talk to him and so on. They said that for a while there, it worked okay, but pretty soon the Germans had gotten their hands on those things and everybody is clicking every other place, and sometimes you'd get three clicks back, and sometimes you'd get one. They threw that away.

The other thing was a white armband with the American flag on it, and the white armband was supposed to identify you so that the Free French would recognize you and help you with what was going on in Normandy, but the white thing there was a **target** in the darkness. They said the next thing they threw away, they took that thing and put it in their pocket or threw it away, buried it or something.

And they said that nobody knew where they were… Well, let's say, the ones I talked to, anyway; you know, you can't speak for everybody. But they said some of the pilots wouldn't slow down. Now, I understand a C-47 goes about 350 miles an hour, but in training, the C-47 slows down to 150 so that when the paratrooper jumps out and the prop blast catches his chute and opens it up, has him sail under it, if he's going 300 miles an hour, 350 miles an hour, instead of the 150, it'll blow the panels out of the chute. He said some of the pilots would not slow down. By the way, the 8th Air Force, the ones that took the 101st over there, got a black eye from Normandy. They redeemed themselves on Holland; from what I understand, they did a picture-perfect job there.

They said, "But that's the way they thought it was supposed to be, confusion. We jump in the middle of everybody. And by the way, strategically, it was as bad for the Germans. They didn't know where anybody was, and here we are between their reserve units and the front lines on the Atlantic coast, and the paratroopers confused **everything** for them. And you know how methodical the Germans were. They said that Normandy was—

they got bloodied, but they learned a lot. In Holland, they said, the plan sounded great.

DePue: Let's go ahead and put up the first map that we've got, which shows the Market Garden campaign and leave that up for a couple minutes while Vince talks about this.

Speranza: Well, Market Garden was supposed to be… By the way, it was Montgomery's scheme. He and Patton were arguing over who should get the gasoline. Patton's going up right through the center, ready to hit the Siegfried Line, when they tell him they have to divert some of the supplies and so on over to Montgomery, who is taking the British and the First Allied Airborne Army. First Allied Airborne Army this time there was the 101st, the 82nd, the 1st Polish Brigade, the Canadian commandos, the British Red Devils. There were a series of bridges that had to be taken. At Nijmegan, the bridge across the Waal, and—I forgot the name of the bridge that the British Red Devils were supposed to take. Theirs was a bridge too far, the one too far, because… The plan in a way, you know, just an ordinary soldier looking at it from here, saying, It's got to be crazy.

DePue: I know that you guys, the 101st, went into Eindhoven, which isn't nearly as far as—I think the 82nd was farther along the route, and then the British were even farther.

Speranza: Yes. And the Poles were further and further up. We had the best position for pulling back out, if that's what you were looking for. But the story was this, we found out later: There was only one road for the British armor to come up. You know, parachute troops are lightly armed; their biggest weapon is a sixty-millimeter mortar. In those days, they couldn't drop artillery by parachute the way they do today. The paratroopers were supposed to hold the bridges, and then when the British armor came up, then go on the attack and be able to hit Germany from the northwest and down into the Ruhr, where they would destroy Germany's economy.

DePue: The industrial base was there.

Speranza: The industrialized area. The paratroopers took their objectives and waited, and the British armor didn't come up. The Germans would counterattack, and the Americans would be pulling back, and the Germans would hold the bridges; the Americans would counterattack and take the bridges back. They did that **twice** waiting for the British armor to come up. Well, the British armor never came up because the Germans very quickly saw that situation, they cut off that one road, and that was the end of the backup for all those guys stranded in there. The British Red Devils were almost wiped out at Arnhem. I don't know what the casualty rate was, but way up there, and the Canadians suffered as much, too. We took a beating, the 101st and the 82nd, but we were able to pull out—

DePue: And the Poles did as well.

Speranza: Oh, the Poles—they were given a drop zone that was extremely dangerous. They complained about it and so on because they were the furthest away from any kind of armored support that was supposed to come up the road. But again, you know, I don't know this during the war; I read about this later, after the war. But the men were a little bit bitter; the veterans we talked to from the Holland campaign, were a little bit bitter saying, Churchill came out and he talked about a strategic retreat, but the point was, he said, that what was happening and the reason that the British were going to come up that one road was that the German V-1 and V-2 rockets were devastating London. The launching sites were along the coast there, the Dutch and Belgian coast, and therefore if they came up that road, they would be able to knock off those launch sites and relieve the pressure on London. Whatever the story was, our guys were a little bit upset about it. We lost a lot of men and gained nothing—pulled out of that whole campaign.

DePue: Let's go back to now you joining that unit that's just been pulled out of here. Even though 101st didn't have their neck stuck out as far, they still saw plenty of heavy action. Tell us the size of your platoon and what percentage of those were brand-new members like yourself.

Speranza: A platoon at that time had three squads of twelve—that's thirty-six—and then it had six noncoms—forty-two—and then attached, part of the heavy weapons platoon or… I'd say there's about fifty men in a platoon. Jimmy Strang and myself—that was the one guy that I knew—were sent in there. A guess—strictly, you know, a guess—I'd say maybe 20 percent of the platoon was gone, either killed or wounded. We replaced them, but we were still under strength. I'll bet you we didn't have more than eight or nine replacements into that platoon, because when we went into Bastogne, the whole division was under strength; they hadn't gotten all the replacements yet.

DePue: I would assume also that there were veterans of the D-Day and Market Garden, but then there were paratroopers who weren't at D-Day but did see action at Market Garden as well, so there's a lot of depletion that had gone on way before you got there.

Speranza: Yes. They had gotten a batch of replacements when they came out of Normandy, and they were almost up to full strength when they went into Holland, from what I read. But coming out of Holland, they didn't get their full replacements, well, because of the timing. Listen to this: We came out of Holland November something—late November, late November. Well, count seventy-two days from September seventeenth. The jump in Holland was September seventeenth, so seventy-two days from there is when they got back to France and started getting replacements. December sixteenth, we were on the way to Bastogne, and so they didn't have much time to…

At any rate, the outfit was supposed to be replenished—rest, rehabilitation. They had games set up, baseball games. It's November, and the weather is starting to turn, but the general was determined that this outfit was going to do some real R&R. And we're waiting for winter clothing, equipment, food, and whatever else was to replen(ish)—and especially ammunition for the artillery units and so on. By the way, I was a runner; I was going to be in the relay race. Early in the morning, about four o'clock in the morning, on December seventeenth, the lights come on in the barracks. The sergeant comes running in and says, "All right, drop your cocks and grab your socks, we're going up." The old vets are saying, "You're crazy! We can't jump now. It's December. The ground's frozen; we'll all break our legs." And the sergeant says, "We're not jumping; we're going up in trucks." "There they go again. (makes unenthused grumbling noise) Paratroopers are being used as regular infantry again," this and that and the other thing. Of course, nobody knew about the emergency, nobody knew about the Bulge; all we knew is we were told, We're going back into combat and we're going in trucks.

DePue: Can I take this opportunity, then, to provide a little bit of context here?

Speranza: Please.

DePue: Then we'll turn it back and let you talk about the experiences once you got to Bastogne. We need to go to the second map we've got here; this one provides a big picture of the front lines at that time. You can see right in the middle of that map, the Bulge. That was the German penetration. But I wanted to spend just a couple minutes providing the context for this, because I think it's important in terms of understanding where you were from the ground level, and usually from the ground level, the soldiers never know—

Speranza: We don't know anything. (laughs)

DePue: —exactly what's going on. (laughs) You know, you're the last to find out these things. At this point in time, it's December of 1944. It's looking very bad for Germany, and the Allies by that time are thinking, It's just a matter of time; we're going to win. But obviously Hitler wasn't thinking that, and Hitler was very much dominating any kind of strategic decisions that were being made in Germany at that time. He came up with the plan to hoard all of the new equipment that was coming on line and all of the new troops that were coming on line, in one last, desperate attempt to change the fortunes of the war. And he chose the Ardennes Region of Belgium, which is interesting, because that's exactly where, in 1940, they invaded France and Belgium and, of course, wrapped up the invasion in just a couple months. So he's going to do the same thing. Now, the Americans and the Allies had very thinly defended that area because they looked at the Ardennes—heavily forested area, lots of streams, not much of a road network, really a bear to get through—and they said, Well, the Germans aren't going to go on the

offensive. We can afford to rest and recuperate some frontline units here, very thinly defend the whole thing. And our intelligence broke down.

So, as you mention, December sixteenth, the Germans have a massive offensive in this region with, I think, three armies—twenty-five Divisions—and two of them are Panzer armies. These are some of their elite troops—some S.S. units in the mixture as well—

Speranza: With the new tanks.

DePue: —with Tiger tanks and some of the new Panzer tanks and things like that—

Speranza: Mark IVs.

DePue: —and very quickly get a penetration. Now, it didn't go quite as well as they thought. There was enough resistance to slow down, and it was critical that the Germans are meeting their targets, because they don't have any gas, and they need to make the penetration just as quickly as possible. I forgot to mention, the ultimate objective for them is the port city of Antwerp, which was key, because by that time of the war, that's where most of the—

Speranza: The equipment.

DePue: —the equipment, gasoline and the resupplies come in. Let's move up a couple more slides here. Okay, there you can see a better piece of the penetration, and right in the middle, at the bottom center of this, you'll see that little circle. That's Bastogne; that's where you guys were heading. If we can go to the next slide, and there—this one might be a little bit hard to see—that's the city of Bastogne itself. Over on the right side of that, circled in blue, is the location where your particular regiment is going to go. You were in the 3rd Battalion, so on the bottom half of that map, you can see—it's kind of hard to see—but that's where the third battalion was. I think the 2nd Battalion was farther in the north, but H Company was in the 3rd. So at least at part of the battle, that's where you guys were located. Now, I think this is probably a good place to return it back to you. You're on the road to Bastogne. I think it might have been on the eighteenth when you guys actually deployed up there, just a couple days after the offensive kicked off.

Speranza: No, actually, we left on the night of the seventeenth and got there the eighteenth, were in position by the eighteenth when the first German attack came. But actually, I'd just like to emphasize one thing. The German plan was to take Antwerp because Antwerp was the now port of supplies for the Allied armies and so on. Also, the British armies were to the north of Antwerp and the American armies were to the south of Antwerp, and so if they could take Antwerp, they would not only have captured all the supplies and equipment and so on they needed, but they would have split the British and the American armies. They wouldn't have won the war, but it would have lasted a lot longer, I think.

Bastogne was in the middle. The German armies had to take Bastogne because it had five roads leading out from it in all directions, and it had two railroads in there. The key to taking Antwerp was Bastogne, which is why Eisenhower made the decision to send emergency troops up there—we found out later. We don't know anything about this.

DePue: Well, and Hitler also thought—he didn't have a lot of respect for the Allies, for the Americans and the Brits. He was hoping that that would force them out of the war and he could turn the entire German army, then, towards the east and the Soviet Union.

Speranza: Maybe so. I defer to that. All we knew was that we were being sent up someplace to fight. We had no idea where; we were in these open trucks. By the way, we went to get whatever supplies we could. We were allowed two clips of ammunition each for an M-1. Machine gunners were allowed two belts **if** they had a gun. A lot of them didn't; they were in for repair. And they said to us, "Oh, don't worry, we're going to stop along the way and get the supplies and things you need. Make a list." So we all put down overcoats, I put down gloves—

DePue: You hadn't gotten the winter gear yet?

Speranza: No. No, no. I went into Bastogne with a field jacket, and a lot of the others were the same way. Only a handful had overcoats that they happened to have from someplace else, you know, that maybe replacements that came in were issued those. But we had gotten no winter clothing. We also said we wanted galoshes, because it was wintertime. It hadn't snowed yet, but it was coming; we knew it. To make a long story short, nothing happened. We didn't stop; we didn't get anything.

Here we are, packed into these trucks so tight that if you were standing up, you had to remain standing up. If you were smart enough in the early part of the trip to lie down, you had a spot to lie down in. Nobody else could move. At first, those of us that were standing up—I was one of those—thought that was the best deal. You could lean on the truck and look at the scenery and so on and so on—and by the way, they didn't even stop for rest breaks. You had to use your helmet and pour it out the side of the truck. The emergency was not impressed upon us until we found out they wouldn't even stop for a rest break. So we drove all day, all night, and the next morning, we pull up alongside of a disabled tank. That's when my company commander, Captain Stanley, said, "Go see if there's a machine gun." The American tanks had a machine gun on each side that was on the outside that you could pull off. And of course there wasn't.

But at any rate, we're standing there now. We disembarked from the trucks, couldn't wait to get off and stretch and so on and go do your business there and so on. And here are all these dazed-looking troops coming out of

Bastogne. We kept saying, "What's the story?" By the way, green troops were also sent up there to get a little combat experience, and of course they took a beating. A figure that I read after the war was that in the battle of the Ardennes forest there, we lost twenty-four thousand troops. Twenty-four thousand casualties in that whole Ardennes forest battles, but that's neither here nor there with me. We're wondering now what's happening, what's going on. The lieutenant says, "All right, we're going to walk into town here." All these guys coming out, we start tapping them: "Hey, you don't need that ammo, right, do you?" We were just literally taking it off some of the guys, because some of our men had no helmets. We'd just go up to guys and say, "Hey, you're going back. You don't need this stuff." Some of the men didn't even have a rifle. And ten percent of our guys, even when they went into Bastogne, didn't have arms yet, in spite of all we were taking from the troops that were leaving. When we started walking to town, the lieutenant said, "All right, five yards apart, and watch out for snipers." Now, my weapon going into Bastogne was a trench knife. That's all I had. So when the lieutenant said that—I guess I was a little wise-ass, you know—I pulled it, and I said, "Lieutenant, what am I supposed to do with this?" He said, "Stop complaining, Speranza." He pulls out his .45 and he shows me the back of it. He's got no clip in it. He's got an empty .45. That's his weapon going into Bastogne.

The walk into town was peaceful. There was no fighting or anything yet, and all of these guys coming out. When we get into the town—and I read this later, I don't know about this—I'm just following orders and walking to where they tell me to go. But what I found out was that General Taylor was not with us; he was in Washington at the time, and General McAuliffe, who was the artillery commander for the 101st, was in charge. Ewell was our regimental commander, and General McAuliffe said to Ewell, "Ewell—"

DePue: That's Colonel Ewell?

Speranza: Colonel Ewell. He was a major when I first heard his name, but he was a colonel in this battle. He said, "Go out and develop the situation." And they said that that actually saved the position for us because Ewell took the 3rd Battalion out to where they set up a defensive line on the high ground. And the town of Neffe, I think, and Mont, and a couple other of these little towns out around there, he fortified those things. While he's waiting for the rest of the people to get out of Bastogne, McAuliffe starts placing the other troops—again, we don't know this—around a perimeter there, outside of town, to the east, where the Germans are coming from.

Again, the military writers said that that first day's action is what saved the position, because there were, you said, three armies; all I knew was seven divisions. And seven divisions, three of them Panzer divisions with the new tanks, with those mobile 88s that were dual purpose—they could be anti-aircraft, and they could fight. And the German troops had been reinvigorated

because now they were on the offensive again, and… Of course, again, we don't know this; all we know is, they tell us to get on this ridge and dig in. Now, the ground's frozen. Fortunately, some of us had those new shovels, that you could bend it over, turn a knob, and fasten the blade so that you could use it like a hoe to dig with.

DePue: Entrenching tools.

Speranza: Yeah. The other ones were useless. There was a little shovel like this, straight blade. We called them sand pail toys, you know; you whack the ground, it bounces right back in your face, and you whack it again, and you whack it—and, by the way, talk about a tiring experience. After you get through the frosted part, you know, then it gets easier, but it takes you two, three hours to dig a foxhole big enough to get down in. "All right, everybody. Pack your gear; we're moving out." Now, this is nighttime, the first night we were there. We move to another position. "Okay, dig in." And you start all over again. **Whack**. You dig another foxhole. You're just about getting ready now to collapse in it. "We're moving out again." Three times that first night, you were moved. In other words, as the general began to see where the positions were, they had to move the troops to certain areas and so on.

The next morning, it starts to snow. And it snowed, and it's cold, and we're wet, and we're freezing, and we don't—I had a field jacket and one of those Army GI sweaters. We had long johns. Some of the guys had that other version of the field jacket, the dress version. You know, it was just a little poplin thing there with a liner in it. So we're stuffing grass and stuff in there for insulation, trying to stay warm. But it was cold. They told us later that that was the coldest winter on record for the last twenty years in Europe, that particular year when we were there in '44.

Nothing started until the morning of the nineteenth, and then the Germans come on a frontal attack. Now, McAuliffe has got a field artillery unit—I think it's the 705 or something—a tank destroyer battalion that agreed to stay—although they could have gone; they were part of the troops that were leaving—and 81-millimeter mortars. Whatever it was, the Germans attacked, and we pushed them back, and they attacked again, and we pushed them back. We held, rather. You know.

DePue: Were these daylight attacks initially?

Speranza: Early in the morning was the first one, later that afternoon was the second one, the next day was the third one. They tried three frontal attacks and were repulsed each time, including now—they had their tanks all around up there, but our guys were in such a position that the German infantry was never able to follow up. They piled… It's an experience I don't like to talk about, but (pause) there was a big field—and by the way, I visited this later when I went back to Belgium. There was a big field, and the Germans were in the woods at

the end of this field. Now, the field was maybe about eight hundred yards, because I remember halfway across the field, we estimated four hundred yards, and we set the machine gun for a four hundred–yard range. Then the field went uphill to the woods, and right there where both the fields came down into a little narrow spot—we didn't know it, the snow had covered it—there was a barbed wire fence. A barbed wire fence that we didn't know. The thing was covered. We zeroed our gun in because we said, If they come down the hill there, they'll have momentum, but then when they start coming uphill is when we shoot. That's why we zeroed in at four hundred yards.

The last attack, the third frontal attack, they seemed to have abandoned all caution. The first line came up and came running across the field, and bump into this barbed wire fence. Now, this is my first combat action, and I'm… The lieutenant says, "Not yet. Not yet." So they're trying to get over this fence. Now, the Germans, by the way, have all full-winter equipment; you never see a German without his canteen and his gas mask. We used to throw ours away because they were too cumbersome. The second wave comes out of the woods, and they come running up to try to help their guys get off this barbed-wire fence. The lieutenant said, "Not yet." The third wave comes up, and now you've got knots of men all struggling to—some of them are over, some of them laid down, some of them are trying to cut the wire—and we opened up. And (pause), you know, God forgive me, we piled up… (pause, chokes up) The snow turned red. (pause) Held them back.

They did not make any more frontal attacks. (pause) They laid back and brought up the heavy guns. Day three started the bombardments. They threw **everything** at us. The tanks were firing their 88s point blank. The artillery that they had… When we went into Bastogne, everything was intact. When we left, every building in that place had been **flattened** except for the church and the seminary across the street from the church.

By the third day, when they decided they couldn't beat us in the frontal attack, they went down around the sides and they surrounded us. They captured our field hospital. Again, I don't know this at the time; I hear it later—and rumors are always flying around. They captured our field hospital and all the medical equipment, and most of the doctors. They had completely surrounded us. Then the story goes around… In my view, a battle isn't won by who has the most equipment, who has the most men, who has the air superiority. A battle is won by the man who says, You're not going to take it.

I didn't hear this myself, I was told it: One guy hears, "Hey, we're surrounded." The other guy said, "So what? We're paratroops. We're always supposed to be surrounded." Another guy says—I was told—"Hey, you know what? We're surrounded." He says, "Yeah, the poor bastards." He felt sorry for them. He said, "Now we can shoot in any direction and we kill them." And the reason the Germans never took Bastogne is that the individual soldiers said, Nope, you're not going to get it!

DePue: Still, if they've got armor and you guys obviously do not have armor, that's not a very fair exchange. How did paratroopers stop tanks?

Speranza: The 705 tank destroyer [705th Tank Destroyer Battalion] outfit that agreed to stay with us was very effective in that campaign. McAuliffe kept them as a mobile reserve, and if there was a tank attack or anything like that—and they were good. Also, we had bazookas—not a lot of them, but… Again, I read about this later—what they learned was that the Tiger Royal has got six inches of armor plate like this around the turret, it's got armor plate over the bogie wheels, and so on, but underneath, it's only quarter-inch steel. So they would place a bazooka man with a hole right on a little hill of the road or the depression in the ground where we think the tanks are going to come from. The bazooka man waits until the tank comes up to the hill, and then before it flops over, that quarter-inch steel is **exposed**, and a bazooka shell in there wipes out the tank. Now, they wiped out some like that, but it was the tank destroyer battalion that did the most damage to the German tanks. Of course some guys, you know, would run up to the tank, raise the hood like you see in the movies, *boop,* throw a grenade in there, and run. Of course, a lot of them made it back, and some didn't. But the individual fighting spirit is what makes the difference, and the guys, you know…

About this time, Sergeant McMullen says to me, "Hey, Speranza, you're small, light, and fast. I want you to go run back to the headquarters there, we need batteries. The radios are going bad, and we don't have enough batteries." So I said, (makes noise)—you know, what are you going to say? I picked up my rifle—

DePue: You'd prefer to stay in the lines rather than…?

Speranza: **You're in a foxhole there!** You got to run back to there, you got to dodge bullets, shells, and bombs. By the way, we had a Bedcheck Charlie. Nine o'clock every night. Sometimes they'd wait until night to send me out there, but there was a guy bombing us at night. That's a good story, too. About nine o'clock every night, Bedcheck Charlie used to come out and bomb. No target, just harassing. He'd come over, drop a bomb, we'd say, "Yeah, must be nine o'clock." One or two in areas of town. Sometimes he'd hit something good; sometimes he wouldn't. Well, the last night before Christmas—I think it was the twenty-fourth—and again, we find out about this later—Bedcheck Charlie comes over, it's nine o'clock, and all of a sudden we see a flash in the sky, and Bedcheck Charlie never came back. What we found out later was that the Air Force had a new night fighter called the Blackhawk night fighter—Grumman Blackhawk night fighter or something—that they had sent up and knocked off Bedcheck Charlie at night. You know, because they never thought anybody could hit them at night.

But when we were surrounded and cut off there, and the communications were boiling down to runners, and so with the excuse, they

said, that you're small and fast, I got the job. I didn't like it at all, but I had to go back to headquarters and so on. But at headquarters, while you're waiting for the messages or whatever they're going to send you back with, maps and so on, we'd sit down in the basement of the seminary…

DePue: So this is in Bastogne itself.

Speranza: In Bastogne. Yeah, I had to run from the lines to Bastogne and back with whatever they had to carry. I'll bet you it was three, four miles. You could look on the map, from there to the center of town, to where the church was. But we had time in between, and we'd sit alongside of… The walls of the seminary are that thick in the basement, and there's a window up here with glass, and we'd sit right under that and play cards while we're waiting. There was one guy—we used to call him Scary Joe. The Germans are shelling continuously, day and night, and every time a shell or a bomb would land nearby, he'd run and jump across the room there into a potato bin. There was a potato bin. And he'd come out sheepishly when it was over and say, "You know, you guys just sitting there, you're going to…" And we'd laugh at him. "Yeah, go ahead, Joe. Go play with your potatoes." So a shell landed, and Joe would run and get in the potato bin. Well, one time, the shell landed in the courtyard right outside. He's in the potato bin. The glass from the window—because we're right here, it missed us—the whole thing went right into the potato bin, and poor Joe had fifteen million cuts all over him from the flying glass where he thought he was safe in the potato bin.

The battle became one of who was going to be able to hold out long enough. We were waiting for supplies, but every damn day of that battle until Christmas, no flying weather. The Germans flew, but in England, they couldn't fly. And then little things would come up. We'd read about I Company went into a town to hold that town, and it happened to be a town where the Germans had a concentration of tanks and so on—again, we only heard the details later—all we heard was I Company got wiped out. And it did. The Germans had tanks and equipment there, and after the I Company went into this town, they opened up. I Company had no artillery or anything with it. They started to pull back, and the German tanks started moving forward. From what we read, the I Company commander and three or four volunteers stayed in a house. He just said to the men, "Hey, everybody get back any way you can," and he and his volunteers stayed in this house with machine guns, held off the Germans as long as they could, and then they got wiped out themselves.

But there were little incidents like that all over the battlefield. You don't know what's going on, but everywhere, for an under-strength parachute division to hold off seven German divisions, three of them are armored divisions, took a bit of doing, let's say. And food's getting low, ammunition's getting low. I meant to bring that book and read you a passage from it about what everything—state the supply and so on—was at that time. The artillery

was down to two shells a day per gun; they were allowed to fire two rounds a day. And men were told, Hey, one or two bullets, and then quit for the rest of the day, because it's not going to last till tomorrow, and if there's another frontal attack or they come in, and so on.

Food. K-rations. For the uninitiated, K-rations come in three flavors: there's a breakfast unit, a lunch unit, and a supper unit. The breakfast unit has in it a little round can about the size of a tuna fish can with ham and eggs—chopped ham and eggs, it's called. In the rest of the unit, there's three cigarettes; two sour ball candies; a package of little biscuits that we called dog biscuits, they were so hard; a little tiny bit of brown paper that was supposed to be toilet paper. When you opened it up, it hardly covered your hand. (laughter) We used to laugh at it, but **hey**, there's nothing else, so you use it as best you can. I could do something very graphic here, but I won't. The unit wasn't bad if you have to survive on something. Powdered coffee had just come out, and we had Nescafé in powdered coffee. So you could heat up some water and make some coffee and eat the thing—if you could heat it up. But if you ate the chopped ham and eggs cold—which most of the time, we had to do—what are you going to do? Can't build a fire. The grease in there does something to your system. (DePue laughs) Now, of course, when you eat lunch, you eat cheese, and it binds you up. Okay. But the supper unit has pork loaf—again, g-r-e-a-s-y. If you could heat it, not bad, but we had to eat it cold, and oh, man.

Now, a lot of people think the worst part of battles is when they're shooting at you and so on and so on. Yeah, maybe, but there are other things that bring more discomfort than them even shooting at you. A lot of times you didn't get all the proper units. You got all breakfast units or all supper units, and if you wanted to eat, that's what you had to eat, and you ate it cold. And oh, my, talk about discomfort. In the snow, in the cold, you got to take off your clothes and you got to sit in the snow, in a foxhole if they're shelling you and so on, you got to go in your helmet. The most **miserable** thing in the world was for you to have diarrhea or partly diarrhea and not be able to do anything about it. All you do—the men who had extra cheese units had gold. "Hey, I'll give you five packs of cigarettes for your cheese unit, whatever you got. I got money. Here, take some of this!" But that was part of the side effects of being surrounded and cut off and no equipment.

We also got—an awful lot of guys, I didn't—trench foot. Your feet were wet all the time. We didn't get the galoshes we were supposed to have, which help to insulate and keep your feet dry and so on. So a lot of people were walking around with swollen feet, and a lot of them wouldn't go back, and then when they did go back, there was no place to go. All the wounded were being kept on the floor of the seminary; I've got some stories to tell you about that.

DePue: Did you have an extra pair of socks.

Speranza: I had an extra pair of socks.

DePue: I mean, the NCO's job is to make sure these soldiers are changing their socks.

Speranza: And you keep them in your shirt. In other words, every night, when nothing was going on, I was able to take my combat boots off and change my socks. You take the wet ones, and you stick them in your shirt, and by the next morning, they're pretty dry. But some were not able to do that, and some, even though they had an extra pair of socks, wouldn't take the time and trouble to do that. They paid. They paid the price. It's very painful to have swollen feet and be walking around in the snow.

DePue: I know from reading the stories of that battle, that was the most common injury, if you will, by far.

Speranza: Yeah. And the thing was, we couldn't send them to a hospital or anything. There was no place to go. The church—I think they said it was a sixteenth-century church—had big, thick walls. All the glass had been blown out of it, but they put the wounded on the floor of the church on one side, the headquarters officers trying to keep some semblance of order, and we wrapped them in whatever we could find, since they had captured our field hospital and the blankets and so on and so on. We had two blankets each—that's your standard issue when you got into combat—and some of the guys had donated one of the blankets. Some of the guys had gotten a hold of a tanker's—sleeping bags were new then—GI sleeping bags. We pulled all the curtains and things out of the houses. Now, I wasn't on that detail, but that's what they did, pulled all the curtains out of the houses, and they wrapped them in whatever they could find—old rugs, shower curtains, whatever they could find—to try to keep the wounded warm. There was one doctor, the regimental surgeon, and you had a slide there of a Belgian civilian doctor who volunteered to help out. There's a picture of he and his wife on the couch.

DePue: Yeah, there he is.

Speranza: Yeah. I met him, and we got to talking and so on, and that's when he volunteered. He said, "I'm a doctor, but I have no equipment, I have no…" Well, I ran to the captain. I said, "Listen there's a doctor out there. He's got no equipment, but he's willing to help out." "Well, bring him in." So I did.

We had some lighter moments, but most of the time, there was a confidence which said, Hey, you know what? There's nobody else around here but 101st Airborne. That seemed to make everybody feel better. Of course, in the early days when you're fooling around, "Five-oh-six? I wouldn't be caught dead in the 506." "Five-oh-one?" Da-da-da-da. You know, you call each other names. "You don't have a Screaming Eagle, you got a Puking Hawk." (DePue laughs) But there was a confidence—at least that's what I felt—a confidence that said, Listen, everybody around us, we know

who they are. They're 101st men, they're all volunteers, a lot of them are battle-trained already and so on. Those of us who were new, we were getting our training. The thing wore on to where, all right, we can survive another day; all right, we can survive another day.

The twenty-sixth of December, the sun came out. The sun came out, and we couldn't believe it. We saw, like, shadows, and all of a sudden—and this is at daybreak—out of the sky, six P-47 Thunderbolts—I can see them right now—they had different color nacelles on them: red, yellow, and blue. I'm standing here. I jumped outside of the foxhole to get a better look, and I looked, and here they come, and they dove down. Our front, all around us, they dove down and started machine gunning and dropping bombs—all around us. And **everybody jumps out—Yay! Give it to them! Let them have it! Let them have it!** You could see some napalm on the tanks. And the cheering—you could hear our guys **cheering**.

Right after these guys got finished, when they ran out of bombs and ammunition, they all came in a straight line over us, waggled their wings, and then the C-47s came in. Straight line down, parachutes. I don't know if it was thousands—hundreds of parachutes. But all we saw was big bundles of food, water, ammunition, clothes coming down. From what I read, they did a good job. Ninety-five percent of the stuff that they dropped got to us. Well, the first thing we wanted, you know, was overcoats. (laughs) That was not one of the things that they included. They had more jackets and sweaters, so I had an extra sweater. Oh, OD shirts—wool shirts. Some guys got galoshes; I didn't. But the equipment—the artillery now had artillery shells.

And by the way, in between there, the Germans came and asked us to surrender. You heard that story? Where the Germans come in and said to McAuliffe, "The tides of war have changed. Now the Americans are surrounded and cut off and in danger of annihilation. We'll give you an honorable surrender." McAuliffe's answer was, **"Nuts"**—at least that's what the record says. Some of us have doubts that McAuliffe said "Nuts"; he probably said something else.

DePue: Maybe a little bit saltier, perhaps?

Speranza: I would say stronger than "salty," because we had heard him. He was a pretty tough guy, and he spoke in a tough fashion. But it's a nice story. By the way, the Belgian government gave us all—after the war—a plaque—I have this plaque at home—and shows you the Germans offering surrender to McAuliffe and McAuliffe saying, "Nuts." and it shows you parachutes in the background, the parachute drop, you know, that we were getting supplies and equipment.

At the end there when we were resupplied on the twenty-sixth, Patton comes up. Patton broke through. Now, we thought that meant, Okay, the siege is over, now we're going to go back and get rest and rehabilitation and…

DePue: Yeah, I think the 4th Armored Division was the specific unit that relieved Bastogne.

Speranza: Yeah. What did I say, 3rd Army?

DePue: Well, Patton's 3rd Army, but of that—

Speranza: Oh, oh, oh.

DePue: —3rd Army, the 4th Armored Division.

Speranza: Right, okay. All I know is I saw Patton himself. He was sitting in a tank like this with that sour look on his face, you know. He was in the third tank as they came in, put on a show, and then he pulled out again. But we blessed him; thank goodness. And we were hoping… We wanted to get a shower or something. We wanted to get some clean clothes and so on. No, no, you're in the spearhead there. We're going to move into the Ruhr now and into the Saar. And we just grunted, groaned.

We found a cellar with some good stuff in it. There were some people caught in the town of Bastogne, too, and they all went in the basements. So we didn't bother them any. But after Patton had broken through and the siege is broken and we were getting ready to start moving, we found that some of those cellars had some interesting bottles in them. So I know that a couple of days after Christmas we celebrated Christmas all over again and had a wild party. Well, the story was, we relaxed and we had some good stuff to drink.

And we got some extra outer clothes, but no clean underwear and so on. And some of us—I was one of them—just took off your underwear and just slushed it around in the snow, just wet it, do something to it. It was in pretty bad shape. Squeeze it out and put it on again wet. But, by the way, when you're nineteen years old, you can do anything, and you can take anything, and there's no hardship. You smile at it and laugh. Later on in years you say, "How in the hell did it…?"

We move out of Bastogne. Where we going? I don't know, but we got to catch—who was it?—von Rundstedt, I think, and his armies as they're pulling back into Germany before they get to their defenses, and try to knock them off. I'm sure there were other Army units with us, but we and the 82nd just kept on fighting. We stayed in the Bastogne area about to January nineteenth, I think the date was, that then we started moving out into southern—let's see. First we went to Alsace-Lorraine.

DePue: I don't want you to get too far into that story yet, because we want to spend a little bit more time on the experiences at Bastogne, if you don't mind.

Speranza: Okay, all right.

DePue: I want to go back—you said the first experience that you had was that day that you had three determined assaults, and that's first time in combat. Every soldier, that first time, there's all kinds of emotions going through their head. What was going through your head? What was your feeling at that time?

Speranza: I'm ashamed of it now, but, Good for the dirty bastards. That's what I felt—the more I could slaughter, the better. And later on when I got older, I start reflecting and think, you know, they were just guys doing what their government told them to do and so on. I said, Yeah, but they're trying to kill me.

DePue: Did you ever have any doubt that you were up to the task?

Speranza: When you first jump out of an airplane, if you are comfortable with that, you have no doubts about yourself anymore. I never felt a doubt. And, by the way, the training we got was superb, psychologically as well as physically. Paratroop training—back in those days, anyway—was the best training in the world. We had such confidence in our officers because they were all with us; they were doing the same thing we were doing. In the training areas, the sergeants, when they gave you a fifty–pushup punishment, they got alongside you and did them too. When we were six men to a log, throwing the logs to each other, one of them would do it by himself, pick up a log—gee, well. But these guys were all… There's a cohesion in an all-volunteer unit that you don't get anyplace else, in my opinion. When you look at the guy next to you, he may be big, or he may be a little guy, but he's got a pair of wings on him, which meant, hey, he made five jumps out of an airplane, and he volunteered. So in answer to your question, no. Maybe that's being cocky, but I… (pause) The old adage is, "Only a fool has no fear in combat," which is true, but he who succumbs to that fear is in trouble. We all have a fear of getting shot.

You know, one time… The combat boots have buckles, and they didn't give us regular paratroop boots going into this campaign. I was standing outside the foxhole there, and the buckle had twisted somehow; I bent down to fix the buckle, and when I bent down, a bullet went right through my helmet. Now, had I been standing up, it would have been right here. You get very fatalistic. You say, "It wasn't my turn." (laughs)

DePue: Were you saying a few prayers in those foxholes and trench lines?

Speranza: Yeah. I agree with Eisenhower: There are no atheists in foxholes. And you promise God that if he gets you through this, you'll do this and this in the church. I'm sorry to say I didn't keep all those promises, but I did go to church and support the church and brought my kids up in the church and did

everything I could to foster the belief that there's a god. Especially in this day and age when there are so many skeptics about religion.

Some of the emotion is physical. Your heart beats; in bad moments, you can feel it thumping. But your eyes remain focused. You can feel it, but you don't look around to see what the story is—as best I can remember. Don't forget, most of this stuff happened sixty-five years ago; I'm hard-pressed to really remember all of my emotions. I know that first combat, it's elation: you got him, and he didn't get you. You say, Hey, I'm going to make it. I'm an old soldier now, and I know what to do. But it's foolish. A bomb or a shell can land here anytime and so on.

I had a few close calls. One time, we're crawling to get back in the foxhole because were caught outside the hole. They had just started shelling, and we're crawling, trying to get back in the hole without standing up. I felt, Oh, geez, they got the old soldier at last. I feel liquid down here, blood. (laughs) I kept looking at my hand for the blood. It was water; the bullet had gone through my canteen. (laughs) But it tears at you, you know; you feel like you're hit. And I looked at my hand, and when I finally saw the hole in the canteen, you just almost laugh out loud. No, they didn't get the old soldier!

We had lots of close calls, and a lot of times, part of it is that you don't get careless, you get fatalistic. Say, Hey, look, if I'm going to get it, I'm going to get it, and nothing I can do about it is going to make a difference, so go ahead and go about your business and don't worry about being scared or are you going to get hit or is the gun going to open up or whatever. Another thing is this: you start to think about other people. "I wonder what Joe Willis is doing?" Now, he was my good friend and so on. And "How about Old Smiley? I got to figure out if Smiley's still humping a pack back there." As best I can remember, you go through a whole gamut of thinking, most of the time at night when you're alone in your foxhole or if you're staying someplace, and it's quiet—there's no attack, there's nothing happening—and so you start thinking. People say, "Oh, you think about home and mother and that?" I didn't. I don't know what anybody else thought. All I thought about was, "Joe got this and this and this, and I was wondering about this guy and so on, and I got to tell him, and then I got to see if I can get another pair of boots." You think about practical things, and that takes your mind off the fear of battle, if you want to call it that. I felt that mentally I came through all, you know… I have a hard time believing this business about the syndrome.

DePue: Post-traumatic stress disorder?

Speranza: Yeah. I can't think of a person who goes through combat zone but also can't deal with it later. Again, it's just me talking. I don't know how anybody else feels about it. I heard that there were cases during the war of cowards, but I never saw one. There were cases of guys who refused to fight. I never saw one in my outfit. The guys that I talked to after the battle is over—we're still in the

Army, but—and they all are saying, I can't wait till I get home. I'm going to go do this, I'm going to get a job, I'm going to go to school. It just seemed like, the people I ran into, anyway, made the adjustment.

Before I got into the battle? I was a good Catholic boy and never harmed a flea. I did my homework; I went to school. I never even thought about owning a gun or anything. I changed when I got into the Army. You change. When I got out, well, I wasn't a brute anymore. I loved my wife and I took care of my kids and my son and daughter. I remember laughing once—not laughing, but smiling… During the war, you know, I saw guys' faces blown off and things, guts hanging out and so on and so on, and after the first one or two, hey, that's life; you step over them. When the war's over, if your kid gets a little cut on his finger, you get pains. That means your sensitivity changed completely. I guess that's what's so wonderful about the human being the adaptability. From a peaceful guy, you can be made into a you-know-what, but you can change back when the situation no longer calls for that kind of behavior.

DePue: I want to ask you, when you were talking about going into Bastogne, you didn't even have a rifle.

Speranza: No.

DePue: I suspect somewhere in this process you got yourself a weapon. Can you tell us about that?

Speranza: You remember the Civil War, where—not the Civil War—yeah, I guess it was the Civil War—where, you know, the first two lines had weapons, the third line didn't, but they knew damn well they were going to get a weapon pretty quick. We picked up weapons from the dead, from the people. Most of us did okay with the people leaving Bastogne who had gotten caught by the German army. At one time, I had a German Schmeisser machine pistol. I loved that thing. While we were moving forward into Alsace, I used that as my basic weapon because the barrel on my M-1 had split. I picked up a German Schmeisser and two clips of ammunition, and I fell in love with the thing. The German machine pistol is—I think it's eight millimeter—and it fires much faster than our Thompson submachine gun. We'll call it the burp gun—*barrup*—and for a while there, we'd come across enough dead Germans for me to be able to get ammunition for it. It had like a curved clip. I fell in love with it; I wanted to send it home. They said, "No automatic weapons. You're not allowed to send automatic weapons home." And we said to them, "Well, how do they find out?" They said, "Well, you know, they X-ray the stuff as it goes through."

Now, at that time, Lucky Strike cigarettes used to come in a pack with lead foil around it, and I was told, Hey, if you can put lead around the package, the X-ray will not tell them what's in there. So I drove everybody

nuts. "Everybody's Lucky Strike—hey, give me the empty pack. Give me the empty pack. Give me the empty pack." I took the Schmeisser all apart and I made it into as small, compact bundle as I could, wrapped it up in a blanket, and then had a little—it wasn't a box, but it was cardboard from a box—I put all this lead foil from the packs of cigarettes around it, and I mailed it home. I wrote to my kid brother—he was the one who used to get all this stuff—"If you see a package that's from so on and so, son, now, don't touch it, it's a gun, and when I get home I'll take care of it. Of course it never got home. They sent me a thing there: Next time this thing happens, you're going to be court-martialed, da-du, da-du. You're not allowed to send home automatic weapons.

DePue: In a couple of the stories you've told me before you mentioned a night patrol. Did you go on a couple night patrols?

Speranza: One bad one. (pause) In a way, we always considered a night patrol a waste, because we knew where the Germans are: they're all around us. Of course, that's the guy's thinking who has to go out on a patrol. (laughs) The officers, I guess the intelligence division, feels that they got to know where these people are. Now, at night, a patrol is usually reasonably camouflaged and so on, except when it's winter and there's snow on the ground. If the moon comes out it gets like daylight out there. There's snow all over the trees, and they reflect. The moon comes out, and it's like daylight. When you are out there and all of a sudden the moon comes out, you feel like you're standing out there naked. But at any rate, here's what we used to do. By the way, I was not in charge of the patrol. (thinking aloud) Who was in charge of the one I went on?

DePue: You mentioned Louis Martin when you were talking about this; I don't know if—

Speranza: No, he was one of my friends. He was one of the guys with me on the patrol, and Joe Willis and Rominick and Carleton. The moon was not out when we started. We went alongside the tree line, and what they were trying to tell us was to count tanks; they wanted to know how many tanks were deployed where. And we used to joke, saying, "Wait till they shoot, and then you count (laughter) the muzzle blasts." But, you know, you go along, but only half-hearted. You really think that this thing is unnecessary, and what a risk you're taking.

At any rate, we went out, and before we got to the edge of the woods… By the way, the Germans had these nice white camouflage sheets that they used to put over their uniform, and we didn't. We're in these ODs.[5] Before we got to the edge of the woods, the moon comes out. Now, the moon comes out like a flare. You're trained: If a flare comes up, stand still, freeze,

[5] OD: olive drab, the color of the standard combat uniform.

because in that kind of light, movement would be noticed much more than your silhouette, your body, whatever it is. So when the moon came out, the sergeant said, "Freeze." Now, here we are standing out in the open, an open field—you know, snow, trees are just over there, and a bright moon. We stand there, and you feel at any minute, you're going to hear (makes a noise) where a machine gun opened up or something. But nothing happened. We stood there, waited, went down to the edge of the woods—and I think the sergeant himself wasn't too keen about this thing—walked a little ways. Way in the distance, you might… The tankers were never careful about hiding their lights. They always stayed behind their armor, and they'd have little stoves and things. I don't know even what the report was. All I know was, we waited out there until the clouds semi-covered them again and came back. That was the only night patrol I ever went on. And that was enough for me, too. (laughs) I was glad I wasn't going to have to go on any more.

DePue: I know another one of the stories involves one of your buddies who was back at the aid station—Steve Pentek—I think that's the name.

Speranza: Now, you mean about the helmet and the…?

DePue: Yeah.

Speranza: (makes dismissive noise)

DePue: We have to cover that story.

Speranza: Okay. My friend—it was not Steve, it was Joe Willis in this case—my friend Joe Willis had gotten hit. At the time, we were surrounded, cut off. There was no place to take the wounded out; all the wounded were brought to the seminary or the church and were laid on the floor, as I mentioned before, and covered with whatever we could cover. I had been sent to headquarters for maps or something, whatever the story was. While I was waiting, I went to the church to find Joe. As I walked along the church floor, I got such a lump in my throat. Here's all these guys, bloodied and wounded, shot, and nobody's moving. Nobody's making any groaning or hollering like you see in the movies, you know, all that. Not these guys. They're all sitting there, and they're huddled up in whatever we could wrap them with. So I walked over, I find Joe, and I said, "Joe, how you doing?" He said, "I'm okay. I just got a few pieces of shrapnel in my legs. I'll be out of here in a few days." I said, "Well, Joe, I'm sorry you got hit" and so on. I said, "What can I do for you?" He said, "Find me something to drink." I said, "Joe, where the hell am I going to find you something to drink. We're surrounded. There's no supplies or equipment coming in here, huh?" He said, "Go look, maybe the taverns that have gotten bombed out or something." I said, "Okay." So I walked down the street, Bastogne, and I go to a tavern, and I looked around, and everything's shattered glass and broken, and there's nothing in it. Walked out, went further

down the street. The next tavern I came to, when I pulled the beer handle, there was beer still on tap in there. I take off my helmet, the steel part—

DePue: And what you use for everything, right?

Speranza: That's the same helmet you use for emergencies in your foxhole. And stuck it under there and filled it up. I go back to the church, and, (whispers) "Joe, I got some beer." And he lifts his head up from the ground, and I pour him a little beer from the helmet. "Hey, give me some of that," so I go over here and give him some. "Hey, give me some of that," and I go over to this guy. I felt like a mother cow, you know, you're feeding the… I ran out. I said, "I got no more." They said, "Go get some more." "Okay." I go down again and fill my helmet up, start back. Standing in the doorway is a Major, the Regimental Surgeon. "What the hell you doing, soldier?" I said, "Sir, giving (laughs) aid and comfort to the wounded." He said, "Don't you know I've got stomach cases and chest cases? You damn fool, you give them something to drink, you'll kill them. **Get out of here before I have you shot**." Boy, I thought that day I had really had it, but he didn't do anything; he let me run away. I went back, and of course there's a sequel to this, which we'll get to in the next—

DePue: We can see a beer bottle and what looks like a helmet on the table here, and like you said, that'll be for the next session we get to. But go ahead. In this hospital, were there Germans being treated as well?

Speranza: (pause) I don't think we took many prisoners. (pause)

DePue: Okay.

Speranza: I don't know what the situation was every place, only my own section, and I know that we didn't take any. Plus, not too many of them offered to surrender, not until after the battle was over and we were moving out and they had gotten beaten; some of them held back and wanted to surrender and get the treatment of the American army. But in Bastogne, we didn't feel desperate, I don't think, but we sure as heck were fighting like we were. We said, Hey, seven-to-one odds and no equipment and running out of food, ammunition, so on—there's no time to think about taking prisoners. (laughs) I'm sorry to say that.

DePue: Well, you're on the defensive as well, and it's the offense that's taking the prisoners, typically. Do you remember what your reaction was when you heard about that situation at Malmedy where eighty-four Americans were killed?

Speranza: Absolutely, absolutely. It confirmed… Let me go back to a story before that, related to it. Now, it was Normandy. I wasn't there; this is a story I heard. One of our units—and this is from the 501—one of our units ran across six American paratroopers hung upside down from trees with their throats slit, and this was the second day of the battle. This is the way the story was told to me. And they looked at that. The Germans used to call American paratroopers

"the devils in baggy pants," and there was a sign, something about this is what happens to the devils in baggy pants, hung on one of the dead guys. And again, I was told, the 501 didn't take any prisoners the rest of that battle. They were just so upset at seeing the brutal treatment—they found out later—they told me they had respect for the German soldier. When they saw that, they said, Respect—look at what they're doing? They took no prisoners. (laughs) To hear some of them talk, let me tell you, they went out of their way to make sure there were no prisoners. But they found out later it was the S.S., an S.S.[6] unit, and so some of them were a little bit changed on it. But that kind of experience… When you're fighting a battle where you respect each other, there are certain humane aspects to that respect for one another, and you don't go out of your way to kill them if you can cause them to surrender and so on. But if you've had that kind of experience, I can understand why… Again, these are stories told to me, and I am repeating them for what they're worth, but they're firsthand, and so I believe them. We had some pretty lean months of prisoner-taking.

DePue: We're about to the close of the battle at Bastogne now. Are there any other stories that we really haven't mentioned that you wanted to talk about a little bit?

Speranza: In Bastogne?

DePue: Yeah.

Speranza: No, I think not. Well, the doctor there that you saw, now, I'm going to…

DePue: The civilian doctor.

Speranza: Yeah. He and his wife, and living with them was his brother-in-law and sister and their daughter, Anne-Marie. This is just a human interest thing, and I'm blowing my horn, okay.

Christmastime. As I went through the shattered parts of town, there was like a novelty store that had little things like coloring books and so on and some pieces of little jewelry. To make a long story short, I decided to try to give them a Christmas thing. So I wrapped two packs of cigarettes in the piece of parachute silk for the doctor, two packs for the brother-in-law. The wife, I made a little piece of jewelry, wrapped that up, and the coloring book for the kid, and I found a scarf of some kind to give to the lady. Whatever it is, I went over there and said, "Merry Christmas." His house had been bombed, but he was working in the church, helping our people out. I just went over there and said, "Merry Christmas" and dumped the things, and they burst into tears, you know. But it's an incident I remember, that even in the midst of battle

[6] SS: Schutzstaffel, headed by Heinrich Himmler one of the most powerful and most feared of the German High Command

sometimes, you think about, you know, Christmas is when you're supposed to…

DePue: Well, apparently you all knew it was Christmas Day although you obviously couldn't celebrate. K-ration for food that day?

Speranza: Around Christmastime, before the supplies came in, we were down to two K-rations a day. I don't know where they got their food from, but everybody who stayed in the town survived.

DePue: Well, you'd mentioned before, were there nuns there, orphans there as well?

Speranza: Yes, yes. Across the street from the church was a seminary. The top floors had been bombed, but the bottom floors are still there. At the very beginning of the battle, there were a couple of nuns and a whole bunch of orphan children who they took down into the basement of the seminary, and for the whole battle, they stayed down there. I don't know what they did for toilet facilities or what. But the Army would send over what they could when they could, and they survived. They survived the battle. When Patton's relief came through, and the cheers went up saying, "We're saved, we're saved, saved," two of them came out with all the little kids, and they all knelt down and said a prayer.

By the way, it's coming up in the next session, but I went back to Belgium finally in 2009, and you won't believe what those people still remember from sixty-five years ago. I'll tell you about it then.

DePue: Well, we've gotten through the battle. You said basically the 101st was there in the thick of things all the way through most of January as well, even though you were relieved in—

Speranza: Up to the nineteenth, I think, was the date that I remember us moving out now into trucks and starting out. (laughs) When we got into the trucks, we thought we were going to rest and rehabilitation. No, we were going to Alsace where there was a battle going on. (laughs)

DePue: How many of the troops were still left at that time? How many of your buddies and the people in the platoon?

Speranza: I don't know, but the guys that got hit—ooh, by the way—(laughs) well, I'll tell the story the next time. But there's a good story of when Joe Willis and I got out of the hospital and went to Scotland for recuperation leave. I'll tell you about that next time.

But the troops that I saw—since none of the wounded were sent anyplace, they were all there, there must have been—out of my platoon, Joe had gotten hit, and Joe Potatoes there had gotten hit—well, no, he had gotten the glass. I'm going to say—because when we lined up to get in the trucks, the

four squads looked small—nine, ten, eleven guys maybe weren't there when we lined up—

DePue: Were not there.

Speranza: Well, as soon as the relief came, they took the wounded out and brought them to the hospitals, and those of us that were still around got into the truck. To get into the truck, we had to line up. You know, it's not a good recollection, but I remember the lines being a lot shorter than the full platoon.

DePue: Can you remember what you felt at that time, having survived, knowing that you were in one of the most important battles of the war? Maybe you didn't recognize it at that time.

Speranza: We didn't know that then. This was a battle. This is probably going on everyplace all the time. We didn't know that at home they were making a big story over this. They were counting day one, day two. You know, they find all this out later. What I was proudest of is, I'm a combat veteran now, and I was accepted by everybody in that platoon. "Speranza, you did okay." And the kind of comradeship you make there, whew.

DePue: So you're one of the band of brothers then.

Speranza: Yeah. We didn't call ourselves band of brothers, but we said, "Good old H Company is the Give Them **Hell** Company." I wrote home after the battle. I said, "Well, you know I've been in combat"—you don't tell them anything while it's going on. Besides, you couldn't anyway; we couldn't mail any letters. But you wrote home very proudly that you survived, you're okay, nothing happened, and this and this. And of course later on I did get it, but…

DePue: And you said the unit went directly from the Bastogne region in Belgium to Alsace-Lorraine.

Speranza: Yes. We were following the German retreat. What I learned later was that what we were supposed to do was try to maul the remnants of—what was his name? I just mentioned it before. Von Rundstedt. Von Rundstedt was in charge of that attack.

DePue: I don't think he was. We can check that later and get that fixed. I think von Rundstedt was involved with the plot and had possibly already died by that time. But we can fix that later.

Speranza: Maybe it was. Okay. Maybe they called it the von Rundstedt division or something. Whatever it is, I don't know. But what we were supposed to be doing was trying to catch up with them and **maul** them before they moved back orderly to another defensive position inside of Germany. We were in combat. That ended January nineteenth. February. March, we went to Austria. Austria and Bavaria and Berchtesgaden, and we were still getting shot at when

the Germans surrendered because they had sent us to southern Germany where they said that some S.S. units were holed up and were not going to accept the surrender. You know, the Germans surrendered in May—what was it, May eighth? We stayed in transient combat. You know, the Germans were going to surrender en masse and so on, and you didn't have to shoot too much to get them back. Then part of that time, I had gone to a hospital. I had gotten some shrapnel, and so did Joe Willis. And there's a story there I got to tell you. (laughs)

DePue: We have just a few minutes left today. Do we have time to tell that story, and then we can pick up the rest of that experience at the tail end of the war next time we meet.

Speranza: Okay. Joe had gotten hit pretty bad, and he was in the hospital already. They had sent him back to England. I think it's the 79th or the 179th hospital. What I got was a tree burst, a mortar shell. Now, it cut the top of my ear off. I had a little part of it hanging there. You can see the scar across here. And I got one piece in the neck, one piece is here, but one piece went under here. There's a little scar under here. And while these others weren't bad, they were afraid that this one was touching the brain or something. Whatever it is, they didn't have the equipment there in the field. They sent me back to England, flew me to England.

Now, in England, Joe is in the same hospital, I find out, and so he and I are talking. And, by the way, they found it. It was not touching the brain or so on. I was—okay.

(end of interview #2 #3 continues)

Interview with Vincent Speranza

VR2-V-L-2010-031.3

Interview # 3: July 20, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Good afternoon. Today is Tuesday, July 20, 2010. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I'm here with Vincent Speranza. Good afternoon, Vince. This is our third session.

Speranza: Yes, it is.

DePue: So let's recap what we've already discussed. The first session, we talked about growing up in Staten Island in New York City and what it was like growing up to parents of immigrants; that was certainly a fascinating insight into your life. But we finished off that first session with enlisting or joining the military and deciding to be a paratrooper, and ending up in the 101st Airborne. So our second session dealt with you getting to Europe and joining the 101st Airborne shortly after the Market Garden campaign in Holland, and it wasn't too long after that that you found yourself in the Battle of the Bulge—a green paratrooper in a very veteran outfit, We spent an awful lot of time talking about the Battle of the Bulge because it was an important battle and it was certainly an important experience for you. We left off last time, though—you were tantalizing us—because you had gotten injured, gone back to England, and were on convalescent leave with a buddy in Scotland at the time, and we

had to cut that story right in the middle. So I'm going to let you pick it up from there.

Speranza: Well, we had settled into the Red Cross rooms there for fifty cents a night instead of using the $7.50 a night that the Army was paying us.

DePue: And who's your buddy you're with again?

Speranza: Joe Willis, Joseph A. Willis. He won the Silver Star, by the way, in the Battle of the Bulge. He was from Florida—Tampa. We had run our back pay up, perhaps illegally, on the black market, but we had run our money up to twelve hundred dollars. We had a week now and twelve hundred dollars. We were going to buy a car, and then they told us they'd sell us a car, (in a Scottish brogue) but if you don't have any petrol coupons, laddie, there's no sense in buying a car. So they talked us out of that.

We talked a cab driver into tripling his weekly take and just be our transportation out there. Now, the next thing we needed was something to drink. So we talked to our cab driver, "Where can we get something to drink?" And he said, (brogue again) "Well, the Johnnie Walker factory is down on the Clyde River, but there's no sense in trying. It's all rationed, it's all taken care of, and it's for the officers only." We said, "Where is this warehouse? Just take us to it." So we filled up our musette bags[7] with cartons of cigarettes, which were gold; during World War II you could get anything for a pack of cigarettes or a carton of cigarettes. He takes us down to the factory, and here comes this night watchman. He was a former soldier; he had gotten hit badly in North Africa, he told us. We started talking to him and saying, "By the way…" He says, (brogue continues) "I know what you want, laddies, but I cannot do it. (DePue laughs) It's not for sale. It's all rationed, it's all accounted for, and it's going to be shipped." And we said, "Well, maybe you could find a broken box or something," and we laid out a carton of cigarettes. And he said, "Laddie, I wish I could help you. I wish I could help you." And we laid out another carton. And he said, "Laddie," he said, "look," he said, "you're…" We said, "We need something to drink. We're on a week furlough" He looked, and he said, "Chesterfields, my favorite cigarette." (DePue laughs) He said, "I got to go see if I can do something for you." He goes back in there. He comes back out with a carton—twelve bottles—of Johnnie Walker **Red Label**. And he said, "Laddie, a couple of more…" We put out two more cartons of cigarettes, and he gave us the whole carton.

We went back to the Red Cross, put the carton under the bed, sharped up our clothes and went and asked the cabbie to take us to the best restaurant in town; it was called the Brown Derby. And the Brown Derby had an orchestra playing up in thebalcony. It sounded pretty bad, but I guess, wartime, you know, what did you expect? But we found a couple of bugs in

[7] Musette bag: a small bag of leather or canvas, like a hiking pack.

the lettuce there, and so we just left there and decided to find a dance hall or something where we could find some company. We took a bottle of Johnnie Walker and went to this local dance hall there in Edinburgh and went in and sat down at a table. Now, most of the people there were Scots, and we thought it was kind of amusing to see two skirts whirling around on the floor—you know, the Scot with his kilt and his girl and so on. We just looked around, put the bottle of Johnnie Walker in the middle of the table, and **gasps** came from around. (DePue laughs) And we just looked around, "You, hey!"—two of the nicest girls we could find, "Would you come and have a seat and have a drink with us?" (brogue)"Oh, that we would, Sir, that we would."

So we're sitting there and having fun and talking and laughing, and one of the Scots comes over and says, "Yank, I cannot help it. Johnny Walker Red, Scotch whiskey, is something that's made right here in Edinburgh, but I haven't had a taste of it in five years." And we said, "Well, have some." He said, "Let me tell you a good story, yanks." And we said, "Okay."

He said, "There was a little town out in outer Scotland, and on one mountain there was a little village, and on the other mountain there was another little village. Sure enough," he said, "Johnny McTavish fell in love with his girlfriend Jeanie in the other valley. So he had to go up and down the valleys to find his girlfriend Jeanie And they decided to get married. So McTavish said, 'At Christmastime, would that be the best time?' and she said, 'Yes, that would.' He said, 'All right, and in honor of the occasion I'm going to have to get a new kilt.'

"So he goes down to the village store, and he says, 'McDougall,' he says, 'I need three yards of material for a new kilt.' McDougall says, 'You're in rare luck, Johnny, you're in rare luck, because I've got three and a half yards on a bolt that I'll give ye at a bargain price.' He said, 'I do not need three and a half yards; I need just three yards for the kilt; what will I do with the other half a yard?' He said, 'You can always cut off the half a yard and make a scarf for your girlfriend Jeanie' 'Ah,' he said. 'A bargain price?' 'A bargain price.' 'Okay.'

"He buys the three and a half yards and goes home, cuts off the half a yard for the scarf, and wraps it around him and looks in the mirror. He says, 'I think I'll go show my girlfriend Jeanie.' He tucks it in, throws on his overcoat, starts down the valley; unbeknownst to him, the kilt falls off. He knocks on the door. 'Jeanie girl!' She says, 'Yes?' He says, 'Jeanie girl, there's something I want to show you.' And she says, 'You know it's bad luck to see the bride 'ere the wedding.' He says, 'I know, but there's something I got to show you **before** the wedding.' She says, 'Well, all right,' and she opens the door, and he throws open his overcoat and says, 'How do you like it, lass?' (DePue laughs) She gulped and said, 'It's nice.' He said, 'That's not the half of it, lass; I've got another half a yard at home to wrap around your neck.'" (DePue laughs)

Well, we thought that was kind of funny and he deserved a drink, so we gave him a drink. The more we drank, the more I was curious. I said, "Is it really true what the Scots wear under their kilt?" And my buddy said, "Why don't you go find out." I said, "Yeah." I looked around the room. I picked the smallest guy I could find and walked over to him. He was leaning over the table. I lifted up his skirt, and I said, "There's nothing." *Boom*, he hit me, and I slid across the floor and under the table. And I said, (laughs) as I shook my head, "Well, I found out the hard way." And the Scot came running after me, picked me up. "Yank," he said, "I did not want to do that. I did not want to hurt you, but you don't do that to a Scot." And I said, "Well, you know…" I apologized, and so I said, "Come and have a drink with us."

Well, we had a very fine party, and the rest of the time we were there in Edinburgh, it was a party every night. We really enjoyed it, then prepared ourselves to go back to combat. We left Edinburgh, caught a plane ride back to London, and then from there went back to France. The experience there was just what you might call a happy interlude.

DePue: Can I ask you a question here, Vince?

Speranza: Yes.

DePue: You were raised a good Catholic boy, right?

Speranza: Yes, sir.

DePue: Some of these stories you just told now (laughs) maybe aren't necessarily the kind of things that you want to go and talk to the priest about in the confessional. So how much of this has to do with the war and having this brief interlude and knowing that you've got to go back?

Speranza: I'm positive that by this time, we had quite a cavalier attitude. The idea was, Hey, look, you've tasted and experienced combat; you know what it is, and you realize that any time, **at any moment,** you can be splattered against the wall or cut in half by a machine gun. The attitude we had then… Now, we were very young; I was nineteen years old. The attitude was, Hey, we're not going to make this war, probably, with all the things that are going on, but let's enjoy what we've got while we can. We didn't care for the consequences. You know, we were going to be reasonable, we weren't going to hurt anybody, but we just had this—they called it in those days a devil-may-care attitude. Until the war is over, you didn't do a lot of sober thinking about your behavior. Hey, do what you can do maybe and get away with (laughter) but… I don't mean that we were reckless, but we certainly did not think too much about the consequences of some of the things we were doing. Now, you know…

DePue: Well, I think that addresses the question. I want to take this opportunity, now that you're going back to the war, to correct a mistake that I made last time in

saying that I didn't think that Gerd von Rundstedt, Field Marshall von Rundstedt, was the commander of the German forces in the west. Vince, you were right (Speranza laughs) and I was wrong. So let's get you back to the war and tell us about what happens when you did get back to the front.

Speranza: Well, when we got back, the Army was moving and our outfit was moving. We left the Bastogne area around the nineteenth of January. I think I mentioned that to you—I think that's the right date. My thinking's a little fuzzy on this because we were moving to so many places. We got on trucks, and we're moving out through Alsace-Lorraine. In Alsace-Lorraine, you know, people would be lined up: Hey, *Américain, Américain*, and the kids, you know, waving the flags. We knew that Alsace had passed hands between Germans and the French so many times. So the little kids are just, "*Cigarette pour Papa*," and you give the kids a cigarette or one of the chocolate bars, and then the kid would say, "*Vive la France, vive la France*." So we'd turn suddenly and say, "*Sieg Heil*," and the kid would go, "*Sieg*—no, no, no, *vive la France, vive la France*." You know, these poor kids—one generation to the next, they didn't know who they belonged to.

DePue: Well, especially Alsace-Lorraine, because it had been traded back and forth between Germany and France.

Speranza: Every twenty years. So going through there, I think it was in Austria, when all of a sudden, a train of Army trucks—because we were out in tents—a train of Army trucks came through. They had big boilers on them, and some kind of gas heaters. Whatever it was, they set up a whole series of tents, and they set up hot showers. Now, this was the **first** (laughs) **shower** we'd had since Bastogne—since before Bastogne! And they gave us clean underwear.

DePue: This is before you'd gotten injured and gone to England?

Speranza: No. I may have the time frames a little screwed up here, but I remember getting clean underwear and clean clothes, and you were allowed three minutes. There was a noncom there with a watch. "Get in there, (makes speedy noise) **out!**" But we all had a hot shower and clean clothes and so on, and you can't believe what that did for our day that day.

Now I remember the town of Neinkirchen is one of the places we went, and then Berchtesgaden. We were sent to Berchtesgaden and we were billeted in like German houses all around there. You know that Nazi banner I showed you?—it's where I got it.

DePue: And this is no small banner. It must be twenty feet wide.

Speranza: Well, long. And maybe ten feet wide. It was one of the parade banners. I saw this one hanging over the balcony of the mayor's house in Berchtesgaden. Berchtesgaden is down at the foot of the mountain where Hitler's Eagle's Nest was. I wanted that banner. So I told the guys, "Hey, lay off a minute, I'm

going up there to get that flag." So I put my bayonet on the rifle, and I climbed up over the porch, and it's hanging over this balcony there. I kicked the door open to see if anybody was around. All of a sudden I hear a noise back there and I go charging in, and here's this little old fat guy, rotund man, come out and saying, "*Nein* shooting, *nein* shooting, *nein* shooting." I said, "I'm not going to shoot you; I just want that banner over there." So he pulls his wife and his kids out—he had two, three little kids—and he said, "*Nein* shooting." "No, no," I said, "I'm not going to shoot you, I just want the flag." "Oh," and he sends the kid to get the banner, and he starts pulling stuff out of the drawers—you know, silverware with the Nazi stamps, anything he thought I might want as a souvenir. But, you know, I didn't want anything else. I just took the banner and took off.

Now, my squad was billeted in like a small hotel. For the first time in I don't know how long, **we slept in beds**. They had kicked the Germans out. A lot of times they kick them out altogether, or sometimes they just kind of go upstairs and stay up there. But the bed had one of those big feather things—no sheets, no blankets or anything, just this big feather… But the most comfortable thing you ever saw in your life. You sleep warm and com… The thing just wraps around you when you get in the bed. But early one morning, I'm out there, and I'm cleaning my rifle yet again—it's early—and from upstairs I hear a rather melodious female voice singing, (singing "Lili Marleen" in German) "*Vor du(??) Kaserna, vor dem gross ein(??) Tor / Steht ein Laterne und steht die noch davor. / Alia(??) Leute soll'n es seh'n / wenn wir bei der Laterne steh'n / Wie einst, Lili Marleen. / Bist du(??) Lili Marleen?(??)*" And I'm looking, and I don't see anything. She's up there, I looked around. But then, as now, I had my trusty harmonica, and I responded. (plays a verse of the same song on the harmonica) And she stuck her head out.

DePue: (laughs) And why wouldn't she?

Speranza: She smiled, and she said, [(singing the same song in French) "*Devant la caserne, quand le jour s'enfuit / la lanterne soudain s'allume le nuit / C'est dans ce coin que le soir / On s'attendait remplis d'espoir / Tous doux, Lili Marleen, Tous doux, Lili Marleen.*" Now, you know, there's a nonfraternization policy. We're not supposed to talk to the Germans; we're not supposed to have anything to do with them, so forth. Now, how do I respond to that. I said, "Uh…" (singing) "Underneath the lamppost / by the village … (DePue laughs; Speranza continues singing to the tune) / what the hell are the rest of the words? / I don't know, la la la la." And she started laughing like that. She laughed. I waved, and she went—*verboten*. That was the end of that, for that moment, anyway.

Obviously I must have violated the non-fraternization policy, because how else did I learn the German and French words to "Lili Marleen"? (DePue laughs) But those are the kind of interludes every once in a while… Any combat man will tell you that war's a pretty brutal thing, and it's nasty most of

the time, but there are times in between sometimes that you can think back on and say, You know what? What a pleasant thing that was, that little… let's say the aftermath. I enjoyed reflecting on that every now and then as pinpricks in a brutish situation that were pretty nice.

DePue: Was that story made a little bit sweeter because basically that was at the end of the war in Europe?

Speranza: Near the end, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. We wanted to start feeling sorry for them a little bit, but you can't. You think back and you say, you know, How many of the guys got blasted around and blown into pieces. I don't think, except for these moments when of course you're interested in something else, I don't think I spent much time feeling sorry for the Germans.

DePue: Let's roll the clock back a few months, because there's a couple things that I know I wanted to ask you about. One of them was how you got injured in the first place, because I don't think we addressed that in the first interview.

Speranza: We're moving out of Bastogne, January something. Every so often they'd tell us, Get off the trucks and set up a perimeter here, because we're supposed to be leading the American troops that are pursuing the German army back into Germany. You know, von Rundstedt's army that failed at Bastogne, they're moving back. We got into a little firefight there; I got out of my foxhole at the wrong time one time, and a mortar attack came in. I told you about that—I got hit. I don't remember anything because they shot me full of morphine. They didn't feel they had the right equipment at the—now, I found this out later—I don't know anything except I wake up and I'm in an ambulance-type vehicle—it wasn't an ambulance—and they took me to, where was the nearest airport back from then? I don't know. But a piece of the shrapnel had gone under my eye, and they thought it had hit the brain and something, and they did not want to fool with it. They sent me to the hospital in England.

DePue: Was there any part of you that felt bad that you were leaving your buddies?

Speranza: Absolutely. Let me tell you about that. I think some of the movies have overdone it, where you cradle each other in your arms. But you really form a bond with a guy that's sharing a foxhole with you or who's sharing a mortar attack or an artillery attack. Like one time, Steve Pentek pulled me—while we were still in Bastogne—there was snow on the ground and so on, and your equipment sticks. I had been knocked down by concussion—I wasn't hit with anything, but the concussion from the shell knocked me down, and he pulled me back into the foxhole before the rest of the mortars hit. I know damn well, the stuff that was landing around there, if he hadn't pulled me back in, that would have been it. How do you talk to a man like that afterwards, or how do you feel about him? Well, you know what you feel. As I said, when I first got there as a replacement, you're nothing. Once you have shared the combat experience, hey, you're one of the boys. It's something that—well, it's not

hard to explain. How do you feel about somebody who has saved your life or shared dangers with you? You know how you feel; you feel warm, you hope you can do the same for him, and so on. That feeling, I think, was portrayed fairly well in some of those movies that came out recently—*Saving Private Ryan* and…

DePue: *Band of Brothers*?

Speranza: *Band of Brothers* and *D-Day the Sixth of June* and so on. Any combat man will tell you this: he'll say, It is such a unique experience, combat, that anybody who shares it with you has to be somebody special afterwards. For example, later in life and business dealings and so on, when you talk to people and they mention or you ask about, were they in the Army? Yes, or whatever. Any combat? Yeah. You trust him a heck of a lot more than you would anybody else because you say, Hey, the man has been in combat; he knows what's important in life and so on, and I don't think he'd cheat me, (laughs) especially when he finds out I'm a fellow combat veteran.

DePue: One of the other things that was a common experience for a lot of the soldiers going into Europe at that time was hearing about or stumbling across some of the Nazi concentration camps. Did you have an experience like that?

Speranza: I remember it. I don't know which one it was, but the 501, in their section—somehow we were near the Czech border, or something, Austria, whatever it was—and Steve Pentek will remember this too. [Vince reported later that it was a satellite camp for Dachau.] But it was one of the minor camps, I guess, with the barbed wire and so on. I can't believe that there are some people who want us to believe that they think that the Holocaust was a myth, that it never happened, when so many of us saw these things with our own eyes. How the hell can you expect anybody to believe that you're saying this is a myth and a joke and it never happened? At any rate, we came across a gate. You know the pictures you see of all the skin and bones and…? There were no German, no guards around or anything; they all ran, left, I guess. Some of these people are crawling. They can't stand up. Steve and I, you know, we're almost puking. We start giving them whatever chocolate bar, ration, K-ration, whatever we had. And the officer came by and said, "No, no." He said, "Don't do it," he said. "You'll kill them. We got to go through this gradually. You got to feed them…" something else, or I don't remember. But he told us not to give them any food. But one of them started grabbing Steve; they were kissing our boots and started grabbing Steve's leg and talking to him in Hungarian. You know, Steve Pentek is Hungarian, and Steve knew the Hungarian language. I said, "Steve, what's he trying to say?" And he says, "The pond out there, the pond has got fish in it." We said, "Oh, we know what to do about that." Took a concussion grenade, threw it in the pond, *boom*, all the fish come to the top, and here these people are grabbing them.

I never told that story to my kids. I very seldom told it to anybody. But any time you doubt that man can be inhumane to his fellow man, just think back to some of these things of what people did to each other. Maybe the fellow who said "civilization is but a thin veneer over the animal instincts of us all, and when that veneer cracks, you'll see the result." Yeah, I saw the ovens. Gee. How do they live with themselves when you take somebody and you throw them in an oven to be burned? This is probably the least emotion I've ever shown when I tell this story, but, you know, it used to crack me up. When I think of all the pleasant things and wonderful things about people and the wonderful people I know and all the wonderful things I know, but I think how some people can still—or even the wonderful people under the right circumstances—what are we really?

I don't want to contemplate that question anymore. I'm getting too old now to get emotional about these things. But Mark, you get a lot of experiences from being in a war. You try to play it by the rules, they say the Geneva Convention, the rules of war, respect your fellow soldier, and so on. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. But then you run across things like this and you say, How can you respect anybody who did anything like that?—and without feeling bad about it or anything? Gods.

In New York, you know, I had a lot of Jewish friends, and we used to talk about that a lot; some of them had people who were in the camp and so on. And they said that their parents, the ones that were in the camps, didn't even want to talk about it. They said, "We don't want you to hear us say what we really think about people and what they can do to each other and so on." Let's get off this…

DePue: Let me ask you this, and then we will get off the subject: Did this experience of seeing the concentration camp happen before or after the experience of the woman and "Lili Marleen"?

Speranza: No, the "Lili Marleen" was right near the end, there, at Berchtesgaden. It must have been before. Yeah, and I know what you're saying: here's a German woman there who intrigued me by her singing. That's what I mean by pinpricks. Every now and then something will hit you that way when…

DePue: That's how you would prefer to remember the German people?

Speranza: You know, since the war I've read and understood and realized that you can't blame the—what is it?—the sins of the father, you know. If that generation of Germans were pretty bad, that doesn't mean the next two or three generations. Who are our best friends in Europe now? The Germans. I used to smile at that when I was teaching. The two most hated peoples in the world in the '40s were the Germans and the Japanese. Our best friends in Asia now are Japan; our best friends in Europe are Germany. So, you know, one of these days, we're going to be able to figure out why we are all so willing to go do

something like that on the basis of what a bunch of politicians have cooked up.

DePue: Well, let's ask you this, then. Do you remember V-E Day, the end of the war in Europe?

Speranza: Mm-hmm.

DePue: Tell us about that.

Speranza: Okay. The Germans surrendered in May—May eighth, I think it was.

DePue: May eighth.

Speranza: There's the 101st Airborne and the 82nd Airborne, and the Army decided to break up the 101st Airborne Division. Now, don't forget, the war with Japan is still raging, and most people believe that that war is going to go another two, three years.

DePue: But on V-E Day itself, was that something that the troops celebrated?

Speranza: No, this is not V-E Day. I'm talking about right after the Germans surrendered, in May. At that time, we expected the war in Japan to continue for another two or three years. As the Japanese were pushed closer and closer to the home islands, they got tougher and tougher, as you will recall reading. They broke up the 101st Airborne. They took all the high-point men—the men who were married, had kids, and had seen combat and so on and so on—and they sent them home. They eliminated the 101st Airborne Division and put us all in the 82nd Airborne. I was in D Company 504. We were all unhappy about that, but life goes on.

They told us we were going to go from France to Panama to Saipan for the invasion of Japan. And man, when that rumor started, morale went like this. How in the hell are we going to survive another series of battles over there? Besides, didn't we do ours? Look. (laughs) At any rate, morale was down pretty bad. We just went around and drank ourselves silly some nights because we said, "Not even a thirty-day furlough at home before we go overseas to Japan?"

DePue: Were you still in Germany at that time?

Speranza: Yeah, yeah, in Bavaria. Bavaria, yeah, southern Germany. As I said, they kept moving us around. Oh, one of the reasons they sent us to Bavaria, they said there were some SS units that hadn't surrendered that were still going to shoot at us from the thing there. We were unhappy about that, too, but… As far as we were concerned, though, Hey, that's the end. If we're going to have to do combat in Japan, too, well…and so we just might as well live it up.

But V-J Day came in August, and—what was that, August the seventh or second or something? Whatever the story is, when we heard of V-J Day, now, there was cause for celebration. (laughs) We just had a ball. We just sort of loafed. There was very little training from there on in until we came home in December.

DePue: Let me ask you one quick question here. I don't want to interrupt you too much. What did you think about hearing the news about the atomic bomb, which ended up being the reason the Japanese surrendered?

Speranza: Oh. At that time, you know, (whispers) good for the bastards. We didn't care if they killed a hundred thousand, fifteen million—hey, it ended the war, we don't have to go over there and fight some more, and we thought that was a great idea. Now, later on, when you think… I don't want to get political here, but the people, the liberals or whoever they were that were saying, What a terrible thing we did, dropping the bomb on Japan. We killed a hundred thousand people, women and children and so on. We said, "But do you know how many more people would have been killed if we had to go and take the Japanese home island? Not only Americans—they expected another half a million casualties taking the Japanese home island. They also expected two or three million Japanese casualties, not to mention we were firebombing the whole island, the people's homes and everything destroyed. The atomic bomb not only shortened the war, but it saved an awful lot of lives. Those people who were trying to make us out as we were barbarians because we did this and that—hey lady, you haven't been in combat, and you don't know what they did to us. Besides, they started it. I'll try to leave politics out of it.

But what we felt was elation. And, of course, nobody understood yet what the real results of the atomic bomb—the radiation and all of that stuff—we didn't know. All we knew was a big bomb destroyed it, and the Japanese quit after the second bomb. That made us all very happy. We just fooled around September, October. November we went to the port of embarkation, and I think we got home in December.

DePue: Why did it take that long to get you shipped out in the first place?

Speranza: (sighs) Don't ask me. But they, I think, wanted to keep us there until they had the occupation troops ready to come. Of course, who knows this? That's the big picture; the big boys know that. All I know is that we didn't get home till December. Now, here we are at Camp Shanks, New York. I'm fifty minutes from home! So as soon as we get there, I put in for a pass. No passes. I said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "No, there's going to be a parade down Fifth Avenue"—I think January the fifth or something like that. One of those pictures that I gave you showed you that somebody took a picture of that parade. But we said, "Oh, we'll come back for the parade, but we're all going to be discharged from the Army soon, and…" No, no, no passes.

So a bunch of us said, To hell with you; we went home. We all got in a car, we went home. (laughs) With all the fooling around I did during the war, nothing ever happened. I got a summary court martial for going home without a pass. A whole bunch of us. I don't know if it ever went on the record, but they said, Summary court, ba-dup-ba-da-ba-ba-ba. They busted us down, those of us who had any kind of rank. I left the Army with a bitter feeling about that. I said, "You know, you guys…" They were afraid maybe that we weren't going to come back for the parade, but we said, "Hey, you know, we're only an hour from home. You got to let us go home." No, no, no, no, no, no, no. So we went, and when we came back, they wrote us all up.

DePue: I want to back you up again, though, because you didn't talk about how you came back home.

Speranza: I came back home on the *Queen Mary*. By the way, I told you we went overseas on the *Queen Mary* and it was all the… Coming home, now, we're heroes. I had KP all the way back. My company commander must have screwed up someplace, because my whole company—D Company—was on kitchen duty all the way home, scrubbing the pots and pans and so on. I didn't even get to see the Statue of Liberty when the *Queen Mary* got to New York. We were down below on kitchen duty; we were not released. (laughs) I said, "I'm glad I'm getting out of this outfit." (laughter) I said, "I want to get back to civilian life where people make sense on certain things." But it was a terrible experience on our way back, except for one thing: boy, did we eat properly. (laughter) We were in the kitchen. We ate, and we ate well.

DePue: Do you remember meeting your family for the first time coming back?

Speranza: Mm-hmm. I told them, "Don't come to the camp or the city or the ferry or no place." From the Staten Island Ferry to my home, there was a train, the Staten Island rapid transit, and the station was two hundred yards from my house. I told them, "I'll come home by myself, and I'll meet you all there at home. I would rather meet you at home than at the ferry station." So they did. I got off the train, I've got a duffle bag and I'm walking out. My kid sister Connie is on roller skates, and she sees me, and she comes skating down the sidewalk and jumps up. (laughs) She hit me in the knee with one of her skates, and I thought she broke my knee with one of the roller skates. So that was the first one I saw, and then they must have heard the excitement. I came running in the house, and there's everyone: my mother, my father, my sisters and brothers, the neighbors, and so on, and everybody's patting you on the back, and we're laughing and crying and talking and so on. Mama said, "And I got what I know you want: **sausage and peppers**." I said, "**Right.**" (DePue laughs)

We had a real emotional, tearful reunion. Members of the family and friends and neighbors and so on who, you know, if you asked them, they probably would never tell you, but they didn't expect you to come back. A lot of times we thought, Hey, if you go overseas, you're dead. But they really

gave me a warm welcome back. My parents especially, sort of remained back a little, and then after everybody went home, then just my parents sat down with me. My father asked me about this and that and the other thing. My mother—she was worried about what kind of nutrition I had, what did they give me to eat and so on, and what… I said, "Well, pretty good. My teeth were going bad because we didn't get like vegetables and so on, but…" My parents had a quiet moment with me afterward, and I was grateful for that. I had a chance to really talk to them, you know.

Mama kept asking me, "Did you get the lasagna I sent you? How about when I sent you the jars with the meatballs?" I said, "Mom, anything like that that came through, the postal people, whatever they saw, (makes whisking sound) it would never get delivered to us." She said, "All those nice things that I made you, the cake, the cookies…" One time I got delivery of a box, and all it had was crumbs in it. The cookies had been taken out, and the crumbs were left and the box re-tied and sent to me—as a joke, I guess. My mother was so disappointed. She thought all along that, boy, I was getting some good stuff, at least from her, but it didn't happen.

I spent the next day or two just sitting around the house, and then got up and went visiting, you know.

DePue: Did you get any of that good wine that your dad made?

Speranza: Oh, of course. Of course. I asked him, "Pop, how'd the wine come out this year?" He said, "Oh, *superbo*." And I would say, "Ah, let's have a glass." He'd go get the thing and pour us a glass. "*Salut*."

He was so worried that I was going to be sent to Italy and that I would have to fight the Italian Army. He asked me after the war, "Well, you know, suppose…" I said, "Pop, we're American, not Italian. The Italians were on the wrong side of the war. That's the way it goes." He said, "Yeah, but, you know, it would still hurt." I said, "Life's tough, Pop," you know? Life goes on.

But at any rate, after the war, I just took two or three days and I went visiting for a few more days, and then I said, I've got to go apply for school.

DePue: I'm going to interrupt here because I want to backtrack; we've got some pictures that I definitely wanted to show. One of them is a series of photos you took on a practice jump in Europe.

Speranza: Ah, in Auxerre, France.

DePue: Yeah. So if we can go to some of those photos, because this is a rather rare collection. You actually had—

Speranza: A camera.

DePue: —the presence of mind to take a camera and take pictures of yourself. So as we're looking at these, why don't you walk us through these? I'll let you take your glasses out, here.

Speranza: Okay. That's a C-47, and there we are lining up to go aboard. Now, you see, we have no equipment, just the parachutes, because this is a practice jump. We found out later that this jump was supposed to get us ready for the jump into Berlin. Supposedly at one point, the 82nd and 101st were going to jump into Berlin before the bigwigs decided they'd let the Russians take Berlin. But I had a little Brownie box camera, and I had somebody else take that picture of us going in. Then the one you just saw was I turned it up, and that's the guys down below me, and the next one—no, that's—(laughs) I turned it out like this and clicked myself. Look at the risers pulling me up there, but that's how I looked coming down (laughs) in a parachute. That's me spilling the air out of the chute. I didn't know where these pictures were for a long time, but I had them someplace locked up. But I don't remember when or what the occasion was for me to go looking for and find them. And I said, "You know, these are kind of unique." (laughter) A guy taking his own picture and taking pictures of the guys jumping all around him while he's coming down in a parachute. Of course, you can tell that that was a practice jump in that I had the time to do that. You know, we jumped at eight hundred feet in practiced. You got about a minute and a half before you hit. In combat, you jump at five hundred feet and chute opens and hit the ground, because you don't want to be a target. Those pictures are one of my prize possessions now.

DePue: The second set of pictures that I wanted to check out had to be just right after you came back, and you had a couple days on the town, too, it looks like.

Speranza: Oh, well—

DePue: Here we are celebrating in New York.

Speranza: That's Joe Willis and I in one of those fake horse and wagons there, Central Park.

DePue: That's your Scottish buddy, right?

Speranza: Yes. Now this is a good one. This is Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe. At that time a big fancy place known for its very sexy floorshows, the Billy Rose's Diamond Horseshoe chorus line, things like that. So we wanted to go in there. All of those other guys are country boys—no, that one on the left here, that Cammarata—he was a New York City guy. But they said they'd never seen anything like that, they wanted to go in there, and so on, but we didn't have any money. I said, "You know, It's expensive in there. But I tell you what we can do. We'll try and find out when the floorshow's about to start. We'll go in there"—and we pooled all of our money; we had enough for maybe one beer.

So we go in there and sit down, and the waiter, so we ordered a beer. I told the guys, "Hey, slow." (laughs) So we kept nursing the beer, nursing. The floorshow hadn't started yet. Nursing… The waiter keeps coming around: "Are you ready for another round?" "No, no, not yet, not yet." Nursing the beer. Finally the waiter says, "Hey, are you going to have another drink or not?" We said, "Well, uh…" About that time, Bing Crosby walks over to us. He said, "Boys, I want you all to know how much we think of you and what a wonderful thing you people did for us, and we appreciate it." He said to the waiter, "Come here. Give these boys anything they want for the rest of the evening, and put it on my tab." He said, "What are you drinking, boys?" We said, "Scotch. (laughter) Redeye, bourbon." We sat, and we got to see the floorshow, and we left. That was a good experience, and we took off our hats to Bing Crosby.

DePue: Well, that's the second time you went to a bar and had one of those memorable experiences that stayed with you all these many years.

Okay, let's get back to your narrative, then, of deciding—I think you were talking about going back to college.

Speranza: Yeah. By the way, first of all, I've always said this, and I'll say it again for as long as I live: I'm very grateful to the government of the United States who, after the war, gave us the opportunity to go to college for free. Most of us would never have been able to go. In those days there weren't all these government loans; you had to have money to go to college, and we didn't have any, and I would have never gone. But the GI Bill after World War II was one of the most generous and wonderful things for the returning veterans.

Now, there were two laws. Public Law 346 said you get one month of college for every month you serve in the service in the United States. If you get overseas and you were in combat, you get two for one. If you're a wounded veteran, if you got a Purple Heart, Public Law Sixteen: they carry you through to your objective. You want to get a BA, they pay for everything and pay you 105 dollars a month stipend while you went. That's how I was able to get married while I was still in college. I was making 120 bucks a month while I'm going to school, plus all the part-time jobs I took.

By the way, I could have gone to any school I wanted to. I could have gone to the University of Bologna, I could have gone to London. I didn't want to go anyplace; I wanted to stay home. (laughs) I wanted the closest college to my house that I could find, and that was Wagner College on Staten Island. So I applied, and they said, "We got a waiting list, and it's going to be at least a year." Because, you know, all the veterans had returned and applied for college before me. So I said, Well, I better go get a job while I'm waiting. So I get at job at Procter and Gamble. I hated the thing. I was packing Spic and Span, the cleaner. The machinery sounded like a machine gun. Half of the time, when the machinery would go on again, I'm ready to duck into a

foxhole. That thing was nerve-wracking, but hey, it was a job, and I had to wait.

So I'm coming home one weekend, and a friend of mine named Frank Senerchia says, "Vince, what are you doing?" I said, "Nothing. I'm working. I'm waiting to get into school in September." He said, "Let's go to sea." I said, "Get the hell out of here. You were in the Navy, you're okay, but I don't know anything about the sea." He said, "Nah, it doesn't matter. This is the Army Transport Command, ferrying troops from New York to overseas, and they take any veteran; even if it's an Army veteran, they'll take you on as an ordinary seaman. Within three months you have to take the lifeboat test and so on and so and you'll get an able seaman's papers. It's good money and nice, clean, healthy living" and so on. I didn't have a wife or a girlfriend or anything at this time. Yeah. Of course my mother went through the ceiling. "You just got home, da-da, da-da, da-da." (laughter) And I said, "Well, Mama, you know, this is a one-month deal. It's three weeks at sea and one week home, and three weeks at sea. Every month there was a troop ship leaving."

Now, what I wanted was to find a ship going to Italy. When Rome had been liberated while I was still overseas, I tried to get a pass to go. You know, I wanted to see what Italy was all about, from the stories my father was telling, my mother tells. The Wartime Secrecy Act was still on even though the war was over, so they wouldn't tell us where the ships were going. We had to go by rumor. Go down to the Brooklyn Navy Yard: "Hey, where's this ship going?" "Hey, that one's going to Naples." We'd sign onto the ship—Bremerhaven and back.

DePue: (laughs) Not quite Naples.

Speranza: Hey, that one. That one's going to Palermo in Sicily. So we sign up on that ship—Bremerhaven and back. To make a long story short, twelve times across the Atlantic and back, once a month for twelve months—never got there. Every one of the ships I signed up on went to Bremerhaven and back. Once we stopped at the Azores to pick up the crew from a disabled ship, and once we stopped at Liverpool to do something there with the British, but Bremerhaven and back.

Now, the story I want to tell you about, just one incident in the Merchant Marine—by the way, it was a good, healthy life, good money, and everything—

DePue: And I think we've got a picture of it, too, if we can put that up while you're telling the story here. There you are on the right.

Speranza: That's Speranza the seaman. I'm in Bremerhaven. We have three days in port. I'm young and healthy, so I go ashore to look for companionship. I walk

through the park, and here's this rather nice young lady sitting on the bench, and I said, "*Guten Tag. Wie geht's? Was is los?*"—all the German phrases I knew, I just spit it out, and she started laughing. She said, "*Kommen Sie hier*," and we sit down. So I sat down, and we started talking, and I said, "*Haben Sie Hunger…Essen?*" And she said, "Oh yeah." And I said, "Well, come on." I took her to the Seaman's Club and had a nice meal, you know, and so on and so on. She was very classy, too. She didn't gobble things or anything. She was starving to death, but she ate nicely. And when we go out, she said, "*Willst du zu meine Hause kommen?*" And I said, "Oh, yeah, I'd like very much to come to your house." So she walks me, and we walk to a part of town there.

We get in the house, and as soon as we get in the door, here comes this big, blond, blue-eyed, the typical Aryan-looking German young man, and she said, "This is *meine Bruder, Hansi.*" That was the last guy I wanted to meet, but I shook hands with Hansi, and Hansi said, "*Sitten Sie. Willst <u>du</u> eine Bier?*" I said, "Yeah, I'd like a beer." So he had beer, and we started drinking beer. He said, "*Wo bist du in the Krieg?*"—Where were you during the war? I said, "*Ich bin eine Fallschirmjäger*." He said, "Oh," he said, "me too, *Fallschirmjäger*, German 6th Parachute Division." That was a very famous German parachute division. I said, "Me 101st Airborne Division." He said, "Ah," he said, "We *kaputt*-ed you in Normandy!" I said, "You're full of crap; we *kaputt*-ed *you* in Normandy." (DePue laughs) And he said, (makes contradictory, whiny noises), and he started laughing. And he said, "*Bist du in the Hollande?*" And I said, "Not me, but the 101st Airborne was in Holland. He said, "Ah, we *kaputt*-ed you in *Hollande(??)*." I said, "Nah." Now, he knew I was lying, because we did get kicked out of Holland. (laughter) And I said, "Nah, we *kaputt*-ed *you* in Holland." And he starts laughing again, and he said, "Bastogne—*bist du in Bastogne?*" And by the way, the German 6th Parachute Regiment, three times the 101st and the German 6th, they were (claps) banging into each other during the war. He said, "We *kaputt*-ed…" I said, "Nah." I said, "*Ich bin* in *Bastogne*. You never got past the front end there!"—I didn't know how to say it in German. (laughs) So he starts laughing, and he says, "Mm," just shook his head like this. I sat back, and I think it hit us both at the same time. We looked at each other, and, you know, we're drinking. Six months ago, we'd have been slashing each other's throats, and here we are sitting down, having a beer, talking. We might have shot at each other during the war. He was in the 6th Parachute Regiment, which was at all three of the battles that the 101st Airborne was in. Hansi, you know, he just seemed like a nice guy, we were drinking beer and so on. Again, you're thinking… But of course, at that time, I was young and pretty set in my convictions about the war and so I didn't like him after that. And I never saw him again, of course. But again, it's one of those things that you reflect on later, you know, but it's something.

DePue: It might have been even more of a miracle that he survived the war, considering how tough it was for those in the 101st.

Speranza: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And he was in all three: Normandy, Holland, and Bastogne. Of course, we don't know what he was in the Army, though. He might have been a photographer or something, you know, the kind that doesn't get involved in the battle. But he seemed like…

DePue: So what happens after the Merchant Marines?

Speranza: I'm supposed to start school in September, and in August, I took my last trip, came back in August. I resigned from the Merchant Marines, and they gave me whatever mustering-out pay and stuff they had, and they also said, You've got thirty days of free hospital care.

DePue: You had reminded me before this to ask you about Hansi. Did you just tell—

Speranza: That's Hansi, yeah.

DePue: That's that story, okay.

Speranza: "*Meine Bruder, Hansi*."

DePue: Okay, very good.

Speranza: And the thirty days at the Marine hospital on Staten Island for any hospital care that you need. So I went and decided to take advantage of it. Got a checkup, I got my teeth fixed and so on, and then—my wife would never admit this—I decided I needed a circumcision, so I decided to get it done. It was going to be done for nothing, that's the healthy thing, and this and that. So I go into the hospital and tell them that's what I want. So I went in, I got the circumcision; I'm sitting in a bed, I've got my shirt off, and here comes this, I'm going to say, creature out of heaven. What a beautiful woman, I thought. She had a waist like this. The nurses wore those white starched uniforms then, and they had the hat with the band and so on. And she's got a shape like a… And she comes walking in with about an entourage of fifteen guys—I'm exaggerating—three or four guys, all who want to assist her, push the cart, you know. She's the surgical nurse in charge of the ward.

Well, she starts around there, and then I see her walking right over to me. Her first words to me—I'm sitting in the bed without my shirt on—she said, "Sir, hospital regulations require that you wear your pajama top at all times." I said, "Eh." (DePue laughs) So I put it on, of course. And I said, "My goodness, look at that…" I called my mother. I said, "Mom," I said, "Ma, listen. Make a cake, cookies, anything, bring it so I can take it to the nurses' station and see if I can't—there's a girl I'm interested in." So my mother came, and she made orange cupcakes. I remember them so well. So I went to the nurses' station and—with my top on—and I said, "Is Miss Leftwich here?" "No, she's off today." "Well, I thought maybe you ladies…" "Oh," they said, "thank you very much. But we'll tell her when she comes back."

Well, I was in the hospital maybe three days, four days at the most. I'm talking to the guy in the bed next to me, and I said, "Boy, am I going to date that woman when I get out of here if she'll have me." "Oh, no," he says, "she's all taken." I said, "What do you know about it?" And he said, "Oh, I've already taken her out." By the way, I found out later it was all a lie, but he convinced me that I should leave that alone. And when I left the hospital, years later, my wife told me, she said, "You don't know how disappointed I was. You left without even saying goodbye, without even talking to me, without a…" She said, "You know, we nurses used to leave each other notes on the charts: 'Hey, the guy in bed number seventy-two, he's going to go to college; he's not a seaman' and this and that and the other." And she said, "And I had such a good report on you, I was expecting you to…" But the guy had convinced me she was taken.

So one day I'm painting my mother's house, and my friend calls me up, Moki Geminis. He was a Hawaiian guy that I went to sea with. He and I were buddies on the ship. He said, "Let's go to the Marine hospital. I got to go get my—something fixed." I said, "Oh, get out of here." I'm up on a ladder, I'm doing the painting and so on. I'm all dirty. "Aw, come on, Vince. I'll buy you a beer. Look…" "Come on." So then I thought, Well, who knows, maybe I will run into… (DePue laughs) So I put on different clothes. I showered and shaved. I went, and I sat outside the nurse [station]—and sure enough, she came walking by. And I said, "Hey, how are you?" so on and so on. I said, "When you going to let me take you out?" She said, "When you going to ask me?" (DePue laughs) I said, "Well, they told me you were all…" She said, (chuckles) "They are liars." Well, the rest is history. We went out on a date that Friday night or Saturday night, whenever it was, and man, I was hooked. I just—whew.

DePue: And there she is, and there's the two of you together. And I would assume that—

Speranza: Which one is that, now? Let me see. Oh, yeah, that's her. Yeah, that's our twenty-fifth anniversary, silver anniversary, the one on the right. And—

DePue: She still looks very young.

Speranza: Well, we were only twenty-three when we got married. We've been married sixty-two years. Unfortunately, she's in a nursing home now with Alzheimer's and doesn't know much what's going on, but she still knows me, and that's all that counts. So I go see her every day, except Saturday.

DePue: What happens after college, then?

Speranza: After college I got a job—by the way, I went right through a Master's degree. I had a Bachelor's and a Master's. New York City was not giving the test for jobs, and there was no openings in New York City. I went up to the bulletin

board of the college, and I took the first job—they said it was in Keeseville, New York, and I said, "Where's Keeseville, New York?" "Right up near the Canadian border, near Plattsburgh, in New York State." And I said, "Well, let me go home first and talk to my family." "Listen," I said, "are you ready to move? There are no jobs here, but there is one in Keeseville, New York." And she said, "Yeah." We only had one child then, a baby. So I took that job in upstate New York.

My salary with a Bachelor's and a Master's was twenty-seven hundred dollars a year. This was in 1951. And that's only because I had the Master's. If I only had the Bachelor's, it was twenty-five hundred dollars a year. By the way, every cop, fireman, sanitation worker, so on and so on, in New York City, was making over three thousand, thirty-five hundred, but teachers, even in New York, weren't being paid anything. To make a long story short, that summer, I got a job parking cars at the Ausable Chasm, which was a place right near Plattsburgh where the river had cut a chasm, and there was a resort thing. Parking cars for two months that summer, I made two thousand dollars. Teaching the youth of America American history all year long, I made two thousand, seven hundred dollars. That was my salary. And again, it taught it me something.

At any rate, after that, they were giving the test in New York. We went back to New York, I took the test, and I went to work for the Board of Education, City of New York. My best twenty years were the twenty years I spent teaching. I loved everything about it. I thought what I was doing was important, and every kid that came through my class had a good understanding of World War II and its aftermath when it was time to study that part.

DePue: Which borough did you teach in?

Speranza: Staten Island, New York.

DePue: And you lived in Staten Island, as well?

Speranza: I lived on Staten Island as well. We had the beginnings of the teachers' union near the end of my twenty years. I went to work just part-time with a new union just starting in New York, the United Federation of Teachers, and I was one of the local chapter chairmen in the schools and so on. What I want to say is that right at the end of my classroom teaching, I got into the teacher union movement, and that's what brought me to Springfield. I was borrowed by the California teachers when they were just starting because we were the only ones who had any experience. Joe Pacheco and I went to California, and out there, the Springfield people saw us and the kind of job we were doing. They called me up and started offering me money to come to Springfield, and I said, "I don't want to come to Springfield." (laughs) They said, "Oh, but we are paying this and this and this." But I said, "For an extra five or six thousand

dollars a year, uproot my whole family?" and so on and so on. Well, they kept upping the ante until they offered me so much money I said… I called the family together, I said, "Hey, you ready for a move?" I got three kids and my wife. The kids were all for it. You know, New York was getting pretty bad then—the drugs and the gang wars and the—

DePue: What year would this have been?

Speranza: Nineteen seventy. We were just getting through the '60s. I ended up in Springfield in '71, I think. But the family was for it, the money offer was good, and so I went to Springfield. In Springfield, I worked for ten years with various groups and so on and then retired to Florida. The kids were all grown and gone. My last two had finished college, and the wife and I… I had bought a piece of property in Florida about thirty years before out of a magazine. "Rainbow Lakes Estates lots. One acre of land, six hundred bucks. Ten dollars down, ten dollars a month." I had just quit smoking then, cigarettes, and I said, "How do you go wrong with that?" "Ah, you're going to get stuck. You're going to have a swamp there that's alligators and so on." I said, "Well, for ten dollars down and ten dollars a month, so, you know, I'll raise alligators." (DePue laughs) But whatever the story is, within the first five years, (laughs) they allowed you to go down and look at it, and they'd give you your money back if you didn't like it. We went down and looked at it. It was great. It was great. Nice corner lot. And so when we retired, that's where we went. Built a house and so on. I'm doing beautifully in retirement. I'm still active. I'm student-teaching, practice teaching, yeah, keep my hand in that, and I got involved in politics. I was having a great time.

I'm in a gun shop one time looking for a sight for my shotgun, an electronic sight. The woman who was serving me—you know, well-dressed, middle-aged, nice-looking woman—and she had an accent. So I said to her, "Do I denote a French accent?" And she said, "No, *Belgique*." I said, "Oh, Belgium." She said, "Yes. You been to Belgium?" I said, "Well, yeah, but it was during the war. I didn't see anything but bombs and shells." She said, "Oh," she said, "you—Bastogne?" I said, "Yes, I was in Bastogne." She said, "The 101st Airborne?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Ooh, I am so glad to see you. I am from Bastogne." I said, "Oh." She said, "Have you been back?" I said, "No." She said, "Oh, you must go back. The people of Bastogne love the 101st Airborne Division. You go to Bastogne with a little pin or something that says 101st Airborne Division, you don't buy a drink or a meal the whole time you're there." I said, "Really?" (DePue laughs) She said, "Yeah." I said, "But I was there sixty-five years ago." She said, "It doesn't matter; the people of Bastogne remember." I went back home and talked to my wife and so on. Well, maybe someday.

Well, in the year 2000, my wife gets diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Now, I have no family in Florida, and I just figured that it's time to get back close to the family if I'm going to have a sick wife. My daughter, five

granddaughters—six granddaughters—here in Springfield, in Auburn, and my son is in and out, but he's in Alaska. So we decide to move to Auburn. And so I sold out in Florida and we moved to Auburn. My wife is still reasonably competent, and I took care of her at home. They told me to put her in a nursing home, and I said, "I don't think they can do anything for her there that I can't do for her at home. Let me take care of her as long as I can." To make a long story short, the situation… You know, Alzheimer's never gets better; it only gets worse; it's gone downhill, and it got to the point where she went into a coma. I panicked and I called the hospital. They told me, "Hey, no more home. You put her in a place where there's twenty-four-hour medical help" and so on. So I looked a bunch of places over. The best one was one ten minutes from my house in Virden, so I three years ago put her in a nursing home.

Well, in 2009, that September—last year, September—I decided that—I kept waiting. You know, my son was going to come with me. We're going to go to Bastogne. But he had problems with his own wife being sick and so on. So I said, "Well, I'm going to go by myself. I've got to see it before I leave this earth. From what that woman told me, I ought to go back to see Bastogne." My daughter said, "I'll come with you, Pop." I said, "Look, since you're going to come, I'll only spend three days in Bastogne, and then I'll take you to Paris for three days so you can see…" My daughter had never been anywhere.

So we went to Bastogne. We're in a nice hotel. We have no game plan. All I was going to do was maybe take a taxi to go out and see if I could find the old battlefields or something. This woman had told me there's a big museum right in the center of town that's dedicated to the 101st Airborne Division and that museum has maps and everything, you know. You might find that. So that's what we were going to do.

After we spent the night in Bastogne, the first morning, I'm looking for a bank with an ATM machine. I need euros. As we're walking down the street, my daughter pulls me back and said, "Dad, look at this." In this window, there's a mannequin of a man with a 101st Airborne uniform on with a 101st Airborne patch and the boots and everything. And I said, "Wow, look at that. Let's go in." So we went in. In the front there's just a little storefront, but the back is like a big warehouse, and it's full of Army equipment… You know, there's some old Jeeps and a tank and all kinds of equipment—guns, machine guns, and everything. The man said that this stuff is all from World War II. All of it is World War II memorabilia. There's a counter, and behind there's a big—later on I found out he's an officer in the Dutch army—big guy. And he says, "Can I help you?" And I said, "Well, no, I just want to look around. I was with the 101st here during the war." He said, "With the 101st Airborne here during the Battle of Bastogne?" I said, "Yeah." He comes charging around—I thought he was going to attack me—picks me up in a bear hug. He said, "Sir, you don't know how happy I am to see you. My name is

Mark Killian. I'm an officer in the Dutch army, but I'm on leave now, and this is my shop." He said, "We are going to welcome you. Is this your first time back?" I said, "Yeah, sixty-five years earlier is when I was here the last time." "Well," he said, "how can I help you?" I said, "I would just like to see the battlefields and maybe see, you know…" "Ah," he said, "I will take you. I will take you. You and your daughter meet me here at one o'clock, and I will take you."

While we're talking, another guy comes in, a smaller guy, and they start speaking in Flemish; I don't know what they're saying. But all of a sudden, this guy turns to me, and he said, "You were with the 101st Airborne Division here during the war?" I said, "Yes." He said, "My name is Johnnie Bona. I'm a tank commander in the Belgian army," so on and so on. He said, "Let me shake your hand. How wonderful of you to come back." He said, "I'm going to come with you. I have made a study of the war for the last twenty-five years. I'm going to take you to my home and show you my war room where I have maps and… Who were you with?" I said, "The 501." He said, "Which company?" I said, "H Company." He said, "Well, I can show you exactly where H Company was" and so on. "I've written four; I'll give you one." By the way, I found out later, they were in French—what am I going to do with that? (laughter) So I didn't take the book.

But that afternoon, he and Mark take my daughter and I out to… I said, "Where's the church?" And he said, "Well, we'll go by it." "Because," I said, "the only landmark I really remember in the place is the church and the seminary across the street from the church." He said, "We're going right by it, and on the way back, we'll stop." So we go by, and I got a glimpse of the church on the right-hand side, and the brick seminary had been rebuilt.

We went out to the battlefield, and he takes me. He said, "Now, here's a big sloping down"—I told you about this—"and then sloping up to the woods." The Germans were there; we were here. He said, "And H Company was dug in here on both sides of the road." And I said, "This is the field where we…?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "If that's the case, right here, there should be—there was a two-man foxhole, machine gunner and assistant gunner." He said, "There is." By the way, there's a barbed wire fence all around this area. The Belgian government just blocked it off. There was so much unexploded ordnance there and it was going to cost so much, they just decided to block it off instead of paying to get everything defused. And so he said, "There is. It's filled, but you could still see the outline."

So I said, "Could we go in?" He said, "Oh, yes." So we went in, and I looked. I said, "Jesus," and I'm looking at the field. Now, of course, there was no snow on the ground, and when I was there during the war, it was all covered with snow. I'm looking, and I see the damn outline, and, "Jesus, that could have very well been a two-man foxhole. Then there should be a rifleman over there." And we walk over there, and you could see a little

outline there. Went over here. I said, "This has got to be…!" Then I said, "No. There was a stream on the right edge, because I remember that morning breaking the ice and filling my canteen." He says, "There is. You can't see it because of the grass." And we went over there, and there was the stream.

I stood there like this, and now I'm trying to picture, and the stuff is coming back. You know, there was a little more growth on it now, of course, over the sixty years. Some of the trees had grown and so on. But the basic field was still there, where the barbed-wire fence was that I told you about where the German first waves got tangled up and so on and so on, and where we had (pause) a slaughterhouse day. And I just… …My daughter took me aside, you know. That was the first of the breakdowns that day. You know, I thought I was tougher than that, but I guess when you get to be an old man, you're not as emotionally tough as you used to be.

I turned around, and I said, " Tell me something. There was a barn, stone, stone, all made of stone, attached to the house." In Belgium and in the Low Countries, in a lot of places in Europe, they used to attach the barns to the house because the heat from the animals helped to heat the house. Also, in the wintertime, you just walk into the barn. But I said, "There was a barn." We went up the road a little bit, and there was the barn. He said, "The stone barn; this is still the original. The owner has put it up for…" like, national monument—their version of keeping it as a memento, something. And I said, "If the barn is there, then there was a barbed-wire fence here." He said, "There was a barbed-wire fence, but all the poles are rotted, so on and so on. But I just…

So I said, "Let's go back to town? May I take you to lunch?" They said, "Oh, yes." So we go to lunch, and I (laughs)—I'm laughing already. We go to lunch, and I ordered a few bottles of wine—I'm going to change the mood here, because I was feeling, you know, sorry for myself. We start drinking wine and talking and telling stories and so on, and I started saying to them, "Oh, you forgot to take me to the church," you know, something about that church. I said, "During the war, my buddy had gotten hit in both legs, and he got sent back—we were surrounded and cut off"—and both my friends are saying, yeah, they knew about that—"We were surrounded and cut off, and we couldn't get the wounded out, so the wounded are laying on the floor of the church." And I said, "I went to look for my buddy. I stepped in among the wounded there laying on the concrete floor, and I found my buddy Joe Willis, and I said, 'Joe,' I said, 'how you doing?' And he said, 'Well, I'm okay, It's just a couple pieces of shrapnel in my legs. I'll be out of here quick.' 'Well, Joe,' I said, 'can I do anything for you?' He said, 'Hey, Speranza, go find me something to drink.'" Now, my friends are starting to perk their heads up. "And 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 or anything coming in.' He said, 'Go look in the old taverns. Maybe something's left.' I went down to the tavern, and the first one was all broken glass and nothing. I went down to the

second one, and there was beer on tap. I took my helmet off." My friends now are going like this. And I said, "And I filled it up with beer and I took it back to the church, and I start…" And both of them practically stood up and said, "**You were the GI who brought beer to the wounded during the Battle of Bastogne?**" I said, "Yes." They said, "**Vincent, you don't know!**" I said, "I don't know what?" They said, "**You're famous all over Europe.**" I said, "Oh, beautiful. Famous for what!"

He said, "**Waiter,** come here. Bring me three bottles Airborne beer." This is what came. (laughs) They took the bottle and they showed me. There's a picture of a paratrooper with a helmet full of beer bringing it to his friends. They said, "There are 127 brewers in Belgium. Twenty years ago, one of them from this area who heard that rumor about a GI who gave beer to the wounded during the war. We honor this man." He said, "But we thought it was a rumor. We didn't know, and now, **what a miracle**—standing in front of us is the man who did this and…" (laughs) I said, "Well, I got to take a bottle of it home so I can show my friends this one." He said, "And do you know what? They serve it in a ceramic bowl in the shape of a helmet." I said, "Okay. (DePue laughs) Okay."

The next day we went to the church. We went inside, and when I got in the church—the floor now has benches on it, you know. It was bare with the wounded there during the war—but the scene of the guys laying on the floor came back,—I mean, just hit me right here. I looked, and I turned away, and I looked again, and I broke again. So my daughter takes me to the back of the church, and she says, "Pop, I know, but it was sixty-five years ago." I said, "Yeah." Across the back of the church comes an old woman with a cane, hobbling, and a little boy with her. She comes up to me and says, "Sir, thank you for our freedom," and she hooks an arm around my neck, pulls me down, and kisses me on both cheeks, and then she wipes my tears. I hugged her, and she stepped back, and then she says something to the kid. The kid backs up, gives me the one-pump French handshake. He says, "Sir, thank you for our freedom," and then he gives me the British salute, and… I got emotional again, and we walked out.

The rest of the time there—we only had three days—my two friends, Johnnie and Mark, kept telling me, "You must come back. You must come back on the sixteenth of December. The sixteenth of December 2009 is going to be the biggest celebration for the 101st Airborne of the century, because it's the sixty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Bastogne. We know that all of you have to be in your mid-eighties or older, and we don't know how many are ever going to come back, and so it's going to be the biggest…" He said, "There isn't a room anywhere in the entire nation of Belgium or Holland. The closest rooms are in southern Germany, Northern France, and Luxembourg. But I have a room for you. I have three reserved for any of the GIs who show up. Will you come back?" I said, "Yeah," and I looked at my daughter. I said,

"**Yes**, I'll come back." He said, "We do a reenactment; everybody is in uniforms, 101st Airborne uniforms. You've got to come back."

I went back in December, only I went by myself this time. My daughter couldn't get any more time off, and my son is in Alaska. I went back, and this time, they took me around and showed me the **monuments** to the **101st Airborne Division**. Some of this is on tape that you have of the TV coverage. Everywhere you went, "101st Airborne Division," "To the men of the 101st Airborne Division." There was one three-story monument, almost like a building, a star-shaped building, made from the rubble of the streets of Bastogne. All rubble. Everywhere I went, everybody: "**Sir**"—kids too. In other words, not just the people who were there during the war, the old people who remembered—they taught it to their kids, down to the last generation, because the little kids, they said, "We have it in school."

They took me to a place, McAuliffe's Cave, they called it, when McAuliffe had his headquarters in a basement. McAuliffe's Cave was called the Nut Cave because that's where supposedly when the Germans asked for the surrender, you know, and he said, "Nuts." When I went there, there's a whole bunch of schoolchildren there. You know me and kids. I went over to the kids; I tried to talk to them. I said, "How are you doing?" and they kept looking at me and looking at their teacher and "*Non compri, non compri*." I said, "You know," I said, "Americans and Belgians and French are people…" "*Non compri, non compri*." I said, "Well, you know this one, then. (sings) "*Frère Jacques, frère Jacques / Dor*"—the kids all singing—"*Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?/ Sonnez les matina! Sonnez les matina! / Ding, dang, dong. Ding, dang, dong.*" Well, the kids all…(DePue laughs) and I'm hugging them all. I got some good pictures of that, too, by the way. The teacher took the pictures.

But the VIP places, I told you about. Before I got to Bastogne, I flew from Springfield to New York, and I'm waiting for my plane to go to Brussels. I got a little pin, 101st Airborne Division. And I'm walking to the bathroom, in the waiting room, and a gentleman says, "Hey, are you going to Belgium?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You're 101st Airborne Division?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "You're going to the celebration?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "So am I." I said, "Oh." He said, "Who do you represent?" I said, "Just myself. I'm one of the veterans of the Battle of Bastogne." And he said, "Oh, well, I'm General Patton's grandson." I said, "Oh, nice to meet you, sir." He said, "Hey, I would like to take a picture with you." I said, "Okay." So this woman had come up. She said, "Sir, I'm Belgian, from Bastogne. May I take your…" "Okay, but first you take a picture of us, and then he'll take a picture with you." I have those pictures that I think I showed you, too.

When we got to Bastogne, he was going to set me up… He said, "Be sure to look for me, because I've got the VIP section," so on and so on. The joke of the whole thing was when he asked me where I was staying, I said,

"It's the Leo." He said, "The Leo? That's the best hotel in town. It's right across the street from the square where the museum is" and so on. He said, "They got me stuck in a hotel in a little town outside of Bastogne." (DePue laughs) I said, "Oh, well." (laughs)

And then all the ceremonies—you know, the French ambassador, the British ambassador, the German, the American ambassador, all of that, they all sit on the sides. There were four of us, four veterans who were there. We had the seats of honor. (laughs) When I finally went to visit him in this VIP place… First of all, the MP wouldn't let me in, and so I said, "General Patton's grandson invited me." "Oh, well, well, let me see." They go get him. He comes out himself. So he lets me in there, and here's this place full of, like, you know, diplomats, all kinds of officers. I think some of them still had the old pinks[8]. But officers and colonels and so on. And Patton says, "Colonel, would you get this man a drink?" (laughs) A full colonel (DePue laughs) who will get me a drink. (laughter) He should have I known I was an acting sergeant at the highest point in my life. (laughter) But I didn't want to stay there. I stayed a little while, then I said, "Well, thanks a lot. I appreciate the invitation," but I went with the boys. We had—as I said, you have the video of this stuff. But it was a wonderful experience—and I'm going back. They said, "Every year on the sixteenth of December, we want you to come back. We'll take care of everything," so on and so on. I said, "Well…"

DePue: I think we have some pictures—I know we have some pictures, and I think one of them includes a shot with General Patton's grandson, so—

Speranza: Oh yeah?

DePue: —let's check those out real quick.

Speranza: Those are my Dutch commandos who just came out of Afghanistan.

DePue: And these are some of the other veterans.

Speranza: The one on the right there is the Japanese guy from the *Band of Brothers*. The other one, there, I don't know who he is.

DePue: Well, let's go to the next one here, because I think it's the one—

Speranza: Yeah, that's Patton's grandson on the right, the bottom one on the right, and those two are Dutch journalists. I forgot their names. Okay.

DePue: Well, this is probably the best opportunity here. We're again running short on time. I could sit here all day and listen to you talk about these things, but I think it's important that we kind of wrap this all up by asking you some questions of reflection on this whole business. The first one I want to ask you

[8] Pinks: a reference to the colloquial name for a certain uniform of WWII.

is, I'm curious of how much you've talked about this with your family, with your wife. And part of that is, why now you're willing to talk about this today.

Speranza: Practically none when I first came home from the war. Before I was married, when I started college, there were a group of us, all veterans, just freshly out of the Army, who would sit at a coffee table and talk. But when you're with anybody else, first of all, most of the stories you tell people are hard for non-combat people to understand or to even believe you. I've still got some stories I haven't told you, that I haven't told anybody, because they're just unbelievable. Only another combat man can really understand how these things happen, because combat is crazy. You never know what's going to happen. You never know what miracles take place or what devastation… You're concerned about people thinking you're just lying when you tell them a story that's outrageous. One night I'm almost sure I was standing guard with a German soldier. But the family—you don't want to talk to them about it at all, and I didn't. My kids to this day are saying to me, "Pop, you never told us this about it" or "You never told…" In my own mind, as far as I was concerned, hey, there was a certain job that had to be done, we did it, it's over. I don't want to fool around with that stuff anymore. I didn't go to any reunions; I didn't join any clubs or groups—nothing. I had this notion that if I didn't talk about it, pretty soon I'd forget the unpleasant parts, and I think I did. I didn't dwell on that stuff at all. I would have a brief comeback—you know, I was teaching American history. When we got to World War II, I would bring in this trunk full of stuff I had with the German helmets and gas masks and bullets and…

DePue: So your students knew that you were in the 101st.

Speranza: Oh, yeah. They knew. Yeah. In other words, I took the whole period for my experiences in World War II. In other words, the day before, you study the war—political, social, economic—and then I took one day to do this. I would try to, without being melodramatic, give the kids a little feeling for, Hey, you know what, and your time may come when you'll be asked to defend the country, and you got to be ready and willing to understand that here's what happens in a war. That's why, when the country's in danger, you got to be ready to be called. But then that was like a teaching tool. I didn't dwell on it.

Now, it wasn't until that woman that I told you about in Florida who told me about Bastogne and so on that I started thinking about it again. Then at the time, in my little town of Auburn and I'm the commander of the American Legion, I'm a life member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. In a little town like that, a lot of us are in both organizations, and we were doing things for veterans. I started the Auburn Veterans—I'm putting in a plug—Auburn Veterans Research Center. I had a committee of people who I gathered who were interested, one of them being the daughter-in-law of the local newspaper in Auburn, Connie Misleich, and Jim West, and Edna Dolbert and Tony Belin. I said, "Look, we can do"—in other words, the schools used

to call on me to come in and—I did it once a long time ago, and then the word got around. So a lot of the teachers were interested in having a veteran come in when they do World War II, and I would go through the thing, show them the trunk full of stuff, and so on. They were all so interested in what I had—the Nazi banners, the helmets, the Luger, and the stuff. I said, You know, maybe I ought to put it on display someplace where more people can get to see it. I asked the banks and so on, and they said, Eh, security would be…this and this and that and that. Then I got the idea that, Well, maybe we could get our own little thing there. So first we had to go to the city council and get permission to do this, and we had to go through certain hoops to ask the library if we may have a little section of the library that we can devote to the Auburn Veterans Research Center, which is one little section of the library. We have a computer, and we have all kinds of filing stuff and so on. What we're doing is gathering—like you're doing here—except on our scale. I interviewed every veteran—I have a form I fill out, you know—where were you born, this and this, and when did you go into the service, what did you do, which outfit were you with, what were your awards, and this and this and this, and any anecdotal story they wanted to tell me, and we're putting it in a file.

DePue: Okay. I'm afraid we are at that point in time where we do need to wrap up here, Vince, and I apologize for that. I do want you to have an opportunity to express your concern, because you waited a long time to sit down with anybody and tell your story.

Speranza: Yeah. I would wish that none of this story, none of the things that I'm doing, can be used other than for personal viewing, that any other reproduction of the material or use of the material, is forbidden, except with the written permission of the library and me. I say that for a lot of reasons. Most important of all, I used to be a pretty private guy, and now here my life story is all over the place. But more important than that, I don't want any of the war stories, war materials, to be used in a way that would reflect badly on the real heroes of this whole thing, the guys that are buried in Bastogne right now. I would feel that I had done my friends a disservice if in any way the story of their sacrifices and so on was used to make money on it, whatever you want to call it. I want to keep the use of the material controlled by you and me and the entire story be available only for personal viewing.

DePue: Okay. Well, I am very happy that you decided to do this. I know that it wasn't necessarily something that you were eager to do—you just explained why you weren't eager to do that. I am thrilled that you decided to do it, because I think it's invaluable history that people can learn from in the future, and there's a few fun stories sprinkled in there as well. So Vince, thank you very much for giving us the opportunity. And thank you for sharing this experience with us.

Speranza: Thank you.

(end of interview #3 interview #4 continues)

Interview with Vincent Speranza

VR2-V-L-2010-031

Interview # 4: October 19, 2010

Interviewer: Mark DePue

(Special note: Interviews #1-4 were recorded on video at the Illinois Information Service Studio.)

DePue: Good morning. My name is Mark DePue; I'm the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today is Tuesday, October 19, 2010, and I'm here for my fourth session with Vince Speranza. Good morning, Vince.

Speranza: Good morning, Mark. How you doing?

DePue: Good. You've already had a busy morning, because you were telling me before we started you got up early, as you always do, you read the newspaper, and then you went for a swim first thing in the morning.

Speranza: Absolutely. Swimming's the best exercise there is for an old man.

DePue: So you stay up and keep that vigor that you had during the war itself, then.

Speranza: Yeah. (laughs) I'm not going to be able to approach that, but it certainly keeps you in better shape than if you sat around in a sedentary life.

DePue: Well, last time when we finished, I was thinking at that time that was our last session, but in the back of my mind I was regretting the fact that you didn't

have an opportunity to talk about the Honor Flight that you went on last year. Then I found out there were some other stories that got left out of the narrative as well, stories I thought were very deserving to be told. So what I'd like to start with here is to ask you to go back to those days when you're in Bastogne in combat, and tell us about the incident where you eventually received the Bronze Star.

Speranza: Sergeant McMullen, who was my platoon sergeant, said to me early on in that battle, "Vince, you're small, light, and fast. I want you to go back to the headquarters and pick up these things there and get back as soon as you can." I had to walk from where our forward position was back to the church where the 501 had its headquarters to pick up some things. Pretty soon that got to be a habit. The guys are all sitting nice in their foxholes, but I've got to run, chasing, dodging artillery and so on, back to the headquarters. We needed batteries because the batteries for the radios were going dead. Stuff like that. But whatever the story is, I made several trips.

Well, one time, I guess it was four, five days into the battle, when we were already surrounded and cut off, he sent me back at night. It was late evening, but it was already dark. The moon was out, and it must have been a full moon, because it was bright as day. The snow and the moon and so on—very bright. I had picked up a bunch of maps that Captain Stanley wanted me to bring back. My rifle is slung over my shoulder as I'm carrying the maps. I'm walking the road, and out of the corner of my eye I see like four or five white shapes just sink down into the snow. Of course my heart jumped. We had been warned that the Germans were infiltrating our lines, and sometimes they would come—they had these white snow-colored sheets, whatever they used. My heart jumped, as I said. There was an abandoned Jeep turned over in a ditch right alongside the road there. So I just kept walking as though nothing happened, and I walked behind that Jeep and unslung my rifle. Now, you know, it's hard to see at night, but this was almost as bright as daylight. It's hard to see that peep sight. But I was one of the guys who had come across a man who had one of those jeweler's files, and a lot of us made the hole in the peep sight of our rifle bigger so that even in poor light conditions you could see a lot better. Of course, it's not as accurate, but in my opinion, it saved my life that night. Because when I got behind that Jeep and unslung the rifle they hadn't moved. I guess they figured that they hadn't been seen. But then I just started popping them off. I got four, and one of them got away, ran up in the woods. I just picked up my maps, then dropped them again, grabbed my rifle, and took off down the road.

Now, I reported the incident to the captain. He said, "Five Germans behind the lines?" I said, (laughs) "I was just about maybe a half a mile from the church on my way back when I saw them." And he said, "Well, I'll send somebody to check that out. If it's true, I'm going to write you up for something."

I forgot about it and then never thought about it anymore afterward. About a year after the war was over and I was home and in a completely different life, I get a letter from the War Department and a nice fancy box with the Bronze Star medal for heroism in action with my name on the back of it. I thought about it later and said, well. You know, I should have sent the damn thing back. How heroic an act was that, to kill four guys who were laying down in the snow? But whatever the story is, that's what happened. So I accepted the medal and I put it in my box, framed with all the other World War II citations that I received, including the Good Conduct Medal. (laughs)

DePue: You say that as if maybe you shouldn't have received that because there wasn't always exemplary conduct on your part?

Speranza: Well, I don't know. You know, "heroism in action"—how heroic was that that I knocked off a five-man German patrol behind our lines who didn't shoot back?

DePue: Did you ever have any reason, maybe weeks or maybe years later, to wonder about those four?

Speranza: Sure. You always do. You think back. When it's four or five years later, you've got a whole new perspective to look at these things. Now you're a married man, you've got a wife, you've got kids, and, these guys also had wives and kids and so on. You look back and you think back and you say, you know, maybe at the time you thought that was the right thing to do, and maybe later on you should have tried to capture them or… I don't know.

It doesn't take you long in combat to acquire a kill disposition. That may not be nice to say, but the story is, you're quite willing and quite ready to do what you have to do. At that time, what you think you have to do, the right thing to do, is you just get him before he gets you. That philosophy, if it's a philosophy, stays with you.

DePue: The story you just told really emphasizes how incredibly important your senses are—all of your senses—to be working correctly. Before we started, we were talking about the sense of hearing as well, and how important the sense of hearing was. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that.

Speranza: Well, the topic was opened because I said to you, "Mark, I don't have my hearing aid with me today; make sure you speak nice and loud when you talk to me on this thing." You asked me if perhaps my hearing had been damaged during the war with a lot of loud sounds. I'm saying that yes, it probably was. I had an awful lot of artillery, and in the Ardennes, when the Germans were firing point-blank with the 88s on their tanks through the woods there, the sound is a cacophony. No, it really kills you…

Well, whatever the story is, early on they gave us ear protectors, you know, these little plugs and so on that you were supposed to stick in your ears.

But you can imagine how long we latched onto that idea. None of us probably had them by the time we got to combat because we'd throw those things away. In addition, you don't want your ears plugged up, even though it would protect you against the loud sounds. You want to be able to hear the clank of a tank's bogie wheels as it's coming through the woods. Also, after a while, your ears are attuned to where you can tell when an artillery shell was fired and a sound of it coming over, as to whether it's going to land near you or it's going overhead and way back. So you want to keep your hearing pretty well acute if you can, and so it gets damaged. Heck, if that's all that happens to you during the war, that's a little enough price to pay.

DePue: What would you say was the worst sound that you heard?

Speranza: Mmm. That sound of the Tiger Royals or Mark 4s, whatever they were, the tanks. It's usually just before dawn, and you hear the clank of these things in the woods. The Ardennes is pretty thick, you know, right around Bastogne. The woods that we were fighting in were thick, thick woods. Of course, a lot of them had been destroyed with all of the artillery and so on. But in the early morning, there's usually a fog, a dense mist, and the sound, like, is a muffled—but to us, the most terrible sound in the world is to hear that because you know the next thing you were going to hear is the swivel of that 88, and then it's going to go off. And they were firing point-blank at us in the woods. If there's one thing that I remember is, for a few years after the war that any early morning—I used to go camping a lot with the family—but early morning mist, and that sound would come back to me of the wheels on the tank clanking, and knowing that the next sound was going to be that 88 swiveling around. I'm not going to say it bothered me, but I did think about it after a while after the war.

DePue: You mentioned another story to me—this is some time ago—one of those stories that many soldiers have but they kind of push the envelope of believability to a certain point, and yet they happen all the time in a war. This is one, I guess, dealing with you on guard duty?

Speranza: Well, a lot of times you hesitate to tell things except to another combat man who you know has had the experience and he would understand, and yet you feel that other people would not. For example, the one that I didn't tell you either, but I think it was the second night we were out there. We were still, as McAuliffe said later, developing the situation, and it necessitated moving us around all the time. I think this was the second or third night. Snow on the ground. Cold. We were put on a little ridge: "**Dig in**." Okay. Now, by the way, the ground is starting to freeze, and so that shovel bounces back in your face. Thank God, by the way, for the new shovels that you could bend over and tighten up and make into a sort of hoe. The other shovels we had before we got into battle, those little things, they were worthless, worthless.

But we dig in, I make a hole, and after about two hours of digging this long, you got a foxhole. And the word comes out, "We're moving out." Good God. (heavy whisper)"Grab your stuff, move to another position. **Dig in**." Now you got to dig in again. And you'd dig a hole. By this time it's three, four o'clock in the morning, no sleep. You dig a hole. (heavy whisper)"We're moving out again." Well, you curse and holler and so on, but hey, you move out. Move out to another spot. This time, you just scrape the snow off the surface and put down your blanket and lay down and go to sleep; to hell with that. It's still dark. I no sooner laid down than McMullen comes up, "Hey, Speranza, you're on guard duty." Holy Jesus. "Down there," he said, "right around." I said, "Well, where…?" "Down there. You see where the woods are over there? There's a shadow of the woods anyway, that haystack."

So I put my rifle on. I didn't have any gloves. And it was cold, and it was snowing, you know, like light snow. Maybe it was just the wind blowing the snow. But whatever it was, it was the most miserable feeling. We had no coats, you know. We had no equipment, the winter equipment. And that field jacket—I turned the collar up, and had grass in my jacket to try to insulate. But I went down, and I'm looking for the other guy, because, you know, when you go on guard duty, two guys. I'm looking for him, and I don't see anybody. I walked a little further, and I don't see him, and I walked a little further. And then I see a guy. He's got a blanket over his head, over his helmet and so on, and has got his rifle slung, not ready. He got the blanket wrapped around him to where you could just about see his eyes maybe. I just walked up to him and I said, "Listen, I don't know what you're going to do, but I'm going over there where that haystack is, and I'm going to get out of the wind and…" He didn't answer me. I just shrugged my shoulders and I walked away. I could hardly see any of him except his eyes, and I saw his eyes just sort of blink a little bit. Of course, the wind was like howling. So I don't know if he really heard me or what we were saying or something. But I walked away and I went to the haystack; I got behind it, out of the wind, and I burrowed into it a little bit, and I put my two hours in.

When they came out, they hollered at me to come back, and I went back. McMullen said, "Did you see anything? You hear anything?" I said, "No. But who was that unfriendly guy you put me on with? He wouldn't even talk to me." He said, "We didn't put anybody else with you down there." I said, "There was a guy right down there. I talked to him." "Well," he said, "it was probably a German soldier, because the Germans are in the woods right over there." And I said, "You mean I was standing guard with a German soldier? You didn't send another American soldier out with me?" He said, "No." I can't prove it, you know. I will never know. But I could imagine that he was as cold and miserable and… And besides, his rifle was slung. You just got to the point where you don't want to do anything. Just if you can walk away from it, you walk away. And that's probably what he did.

It sounds crazy, but it happened. I don't like to tell this story because I think people would look at it with disbelief. But it's true. It happened. A combat man would know that. He would believe me, because he has seen all the crazy things that happen in combat where it puts Hollywood to shame when you read up on some of these things that happened in combat.

DePue: So another example: truth oftentimes is stranger than fiction.

Speranza: Oh, boy. Yeah, yeah, yeah. You know, I'm standing there. We had those combat boots with the buckles—we didn't have paratroop boots when we went in there—and the boot buckle is twisted. I bend over to fix the buckle; a bullet goes right through my helmet. Right through the top of the helmet. Now, had I been standing up, it would have gone right through here. An amazing, what, coincidence? God? Whatever the story is, had I not bent over, I wouldn't be talking to you today.

DePue: Well, when that happened and when this incident happened, where you end up spending guard duty with a German soldier out there probably, does it make you wonder that maybe there's something up there, that somebody has a bigger idea for you?

Speranza: That idea has crossed my mind many times. You know, there were so many close calls—but I came out, I'm free—that you said to yourself, You know—and by the way, you become very fatalistic about that. You say, Hey, look, if I'm going to get it, I'm going to get it, so worrying about it, never mind, da da da. Go do your job. Go do it and do it aggressively, as quickly as you can; get the war over with so you can go home. But I never worried anymore about, Am I going to survive the war? Is it going to—this and that. I told you all about that Scotland thing there when I had recuperation after we got wounded. The attitude then was, Hey, we're going back into the war as soon as this leave is over. Why do I have to worry about what I'm going to do. We just lived it up. We blew all our money. We partied. (laughs) We just had a grand old time. After the war, you said, Boy, what a crazy thing. You blew twelve hundred dollars, and look what you could have done with it now. At the time…

DePue: When you're out there in Bastogne or in other combat situations, do you find yourself praying more often?

Speranza: No, not physically. What you do is—what I did—is when you're by yourself and it's quiet, you just sort of—you talk to him. I know that these circumstances are this and that and the other thing, but I believe, and I believe that you're saving me for something—so far—but, if it happens, just so long as I have not disgraced my family and so on, thy will be done. You know, Eisenhower said it out loud: There are no atheists in foxholes. When you're faced with these things, you pretty much believe that there's something going on up there. What it did was strengthen your belief, but in a way that was very

practical. You know what I mean? You didn't go around saying a bunch of prayers because you thought that was going to protect you. What you did was pray that whatever the plan was, you hoped the plan was to preserve you, but if it didn't, if that was not the plan, that I've done my duty, I've done right by my family, and so be it.

DePue: Okay. You've got a big flag here in front of you. And I asked you to bring some artifacts, some souvenirs, I guess, from the war. And this is universal: all soldiers in all wars have always brought things back for whatever reason. So let's start with the banner here.

Speranza: This is a Nazi parade banner. It's big. It's, what? fifteen feet long, eight by fifteen? I don't know. But when we got to the village of Berchtesgaden, there was a house, a nice-looking house—you know, there was no bomb damage yet—a house that had a balcony, and this banner was hanging down on the balcony. It was on the second floor. So the war was almost over. We were concerned. I said, you know, "I'm going to go get that thing." I told the boys, I said, "Hey, hold your fire. I'm going up there to get that banner." And so I didn't go through the door; I climbed up to the balcony up there, and then put the bayonet on my rifle, and I smashed through the door and, you know, looked around. There's nobody there. I move out to another room, and there's a—and I say this only because this is exactly what it looked like—a little round old fat man with a skinny-looking wife and a bunch of—about three, I think—little kids, and he's going like this: "**No** schutzen**, nein schutzen, nein schutzen**!" I said, "I'm not going to shoot you, I just want that banner. I just came up for the flag." And he said, "Nein sprechen Amerikaner." I said, "Hey, you just shh. I am not going to shoot you. I'm going to take that banner off of there." "Oh. Oh, ja, ja." He and his wife run into the other room, and they start bringing in stuff—knives with the Nazi insignia on them and things, and a shawl, and whatever stuff they—you know. I took a couple of the pieces of cutlery that have the stamp. I've got those in the trunk. But I went to the balcony and just took the banner and wrapped it up. I threw it down, went back down out there because I didn't trust going down through the door.

And later on, before I went home, I had a lot of my friends sign that banner. I told you the story of Steve Pentek, when I went to see him. He showed me his banner that I had signed. I was one of them that signed his banner. He had a smaller one. So I went back to my banner to look for the signatures—I remember now that a bunch of the guys signed it—and I couldn't find a one What I recalled was, years later, my wife didn't like the way that smelled whenever I took it out, so she washed it. (laughter) All the signatures must have disappeared, because they didn't have indelible ink then. I regret that, but, you know, I've got it here.

DePue: Absolutely. I'll grab the next one here. This one has got to be pretty recognizable.

Speranza: I was asked whenever I show this, "Were their helmets better than ours?" We've always had this theory. Because of this flare—you know, our helmets are round, straight all the way around—because of this flare here, shrapnel hitting your helmet would slide off and not get your neck, probably in the shoulder. Whereas with ours, if the shrapnel is going to hit and glance off down, it comes straight down, it's going to get you right here in the neck and kill you. But then the flatness means that bullets and shrapnel that are straight will penetrate, whereas with our rounded helmets, they may glance off. Now, we've been able to—you know, you can put a rifle bullet through both sides of this helmet, and not too many will glance off, whereas with ours, they would glance off. But this guy must have been in the Afrika Corps before he served in Belgium because his helmet is painted that sand color that they had in battle.

This is a German gas mask. Now, the Germans—you know, the German soldier was very well disciplined—I have to say more disciplined than we were—but he never would throw any of his equipment away. He kept everything, and whenever he went into combat, he had all this stuff hanging all over him and so on. We always admired the gas mask. This is a gas mask, and this was a very modern gas mask for its day. What we were issued had a big canister bag that'd sit under your arm and then a big hose to a face piece. Not only was it bulky and so on, but half of the time if you didn't have it right, it would have leaked anyway. That was the first thing we threw away. We never carried those things around. But a German carried his, but you see, his was a lot easier to carry around. Look, this is the charcoal canister. You put the facemask on, and that's all there is to it. There's nothing—hoses and canisters—under your arm.

I picked up one of these, not to use, but just to show. My kid brother used to write me letters: Oh, Vince, send me this, send me that, send me the other thing. I would send home all kinds of stuff. Uniforms. One time he would have been the best-dressed Nazi on the block. (DePue laughs)

But this is the mess kit. Now, this, we grabbed a hold of whenever we could because it was far superior to ours. Ours was that flat one with a cover. You remember. And while it was okay to eat stuff out of and so on, if you were trying to cook anything or heat anything, it was bad. This one—

DePue: And it usually took about five seconds for the hot food to get cold in that thing.

Speranza: Yeah. (laughter) But this, now, you could hang it from a stick, you know, and make a pot of soup or heat up a stew, whatever, and yet you still got a little frying pan. I was a Scoutmaster for many years, and when I went camping with the Scouts, they all had those other things, but I brought the German's. (laughter)

DePue: Makes for a great conversation piece with a bunch of Boy Scouts. You have a lot more; we just selected a few things. I wouldn't let you bring the Luger in for security reasons. Did you have something else you wanted to say here?

Speranza: Unh-uh.

DePue: What I wanted to do next is jump ahead something like sixty-five years and get to 2009, I believe. You had an opportunity in 2009 to take an Honor Flight. Now, I want to just kind of set the stage real quick. I think the World War II memorial came many, many years after the Vietnam War Memorial had been built and even after the Korean War Memorial. Was there a point in time when you thought to yourself, We're never going to have this thing; it's never going to get built?

Speranza: I was amazed at my reaction when I first read in the newspaper that they were going to build a World War II Memorial. I said, What for? (laughs) When the war was over, when we came home, they treated us like kings. We were, you know… I always felt that my country couldn't have been nicer to me for whatever I did. You know, the GI Bill, go to school, and opportunities. They would give you extra credits on civil service exams and so on if you went. I thought that was good enough.

DePue: What'd you think about the Vietnam War Memorial?

Speranza: Well, the thing is, by that time, the wars—again, maybe this is just in my view, it was a change—it wasn't a war that the whole country wanted and all the people were behind and so on. The people who served in those wars were a little special, and especially the later ones now where they even volunteered for them. But, you know, those memorials were erected to get the recognition that was not coming to them that they should have. I think, for example, the Vietnam veterans are owed an apology by the entire country for the way they were treated when they got back from the war. I won't get into the politics and so on. But I had no problem that the Vietnam people had a memorial and the Korea had a memorial and the Air Force and so on and so on. As far as I was concerned, no memorial could match the feelings that I had when I came home from the war about how the American people felt about us. But once they told me that they were going to build one, I said, well, you know, maybe it's about time that—of course, now, these generations are farther away from the war. This will remind a lot of people, so on.

DePue: That was 2004. I think it was April 29th of 2004 that it was dedicated. About a year later, there was a gentleman in Ohio who was a retired Air Force captain and a physician's assistant, I think, who was working in a veterans' clinic. He kept encountering guys of your generation who were World War II veterans who hadn't gone out there. It was a fairly new memorial, but it was obvious to him that they'd probably never get an opportunity to go out there. You know, they were at the stage of their lives where the clock was ticking, so to speak.

So he got the notion, after talking to a lot of these people, of, Maybe I can fly one of these guys out there. And before you knew it, it grew into something much, much larger and much more meaningful. So the first one of these Honor Flights occurred in Ohio, I believe, in May of 2005. It kind of took off after that. It was a great idea, and people across the country started to do that.

So we've got a slide here. One of the organizations is the Lincoln Land Honor Flight, that's the group that eventually approached you. Or maybe I should ask you. How did you find out about this? How did you end up going on a flight?

Speranza: I was at the VA clinic A pretty little nurse was taking my blood pressure, and she said, "It's very good. Your blood pressure's very good." I said, "Well, it should be high with you…" (laughter) But she said, "I see from your records that you were in World War II." And I said, "Yes." And she said, "Who did you serve with?" and so on. She started a conversation about it. She said, "Have you been to that glorious memorial they have for you in Washington?" I said, "No." She said, "Oh." She said, "Wouldn't you like to visit it?" I said, "Yeah, but, you know, I don't know if I…" I said, "Don't forget," I said, "anybody who was in World War II is at least 85 years old today, 85 and up, and it's not easy for people to travel." And she said, "Well, this organization…" and she started telling me all about Honor Flights, a private organization. They get nothing from the government. They have just dedicated themselves to getting as many of the World War II veterans to see the memorial in Washington as possible, and all with private donations, private funds. They won't let the veterans spend a penny. She said, "I can get you an application." I said, "Yeah, okay." I found out later that she is one of the volunteers that goes on these Honor Flights.

Let me describe what happens. You fill out an application, and on it you indicate what kind of shape you're in. Are you shortness of breath, do you have this, do you have that, and so on. I wish to emphasize that I have never seen—and after I experienced it, it only solidified my thinking—I have never seen an organization so tuned to what they want to do, what they want to accomplish, that they anticipate every need, every problem, anything that can come up with eighty-five-year-olds and up going on a flight to Washington. They don't care what condition you're in, so long as you volunteer and say, yes, you're willing to go. They have wheelchairs for all the people in wheelchairs; they have oxygen supplies for those people that are on oxygen. They have nurses. Each veteran is paired with what they call a guardian. The guardian is a volunteer from the community. A lot of them are nurses, but some of them are not. The guardian stays with you during the entire trip. As soon as the organization gets enough money to hire a plane and pay all the expenses, they inform the veterans who are on their list, who have applications in, and they fly them to Washington.

Now, when I signed up—and by the way, the head of the operation here—and by the way, these are chapters. Like it's a nationwide thing, but all individual chapters, local organizations. A guy named Ray Wiedle—I've never seen a man more focused, more competent, so well organized. For a while I asked him if I could help them any by joining their committee, and they put me on the committee. I didn't last three months on the committee because I couldn't keep up with these people. They were just **fantastic.** This work they were doing, and the fundraising, and the planning, and the accompanying of the veterans on everything—you can't believe it. Ray Wiedle and his crew are an outstanding group of people.

But now, when they called me and told me I was going, first they send a person to your house to interview you, and they ask you your eating habits, or do you need this or will you take that. And they make lists, and they take everything with them that you might need on the trip. (laughs) And then they pick you up at your home, they take you to the airport. At the airport, an Army band is out there playing, and all of the people—this is the St. Louis airport that we went to—all of the people who were waiting for planes stood up and started applauding the World War II veterans. You know, half of them are in wheelchairs, or with canes and walking, but there's a couple like me who can walk, still walk straight. And they came up and they congratulated you and so on.

When you got to Washington, DC, the pathway to the War Memorial is lined with school kids, all with little banners waving. You know how that made us feel? You know, we're all in the last part of our lives now; everything is slowing down and everything is fading., These people made you feel like, hey, you're still somebody, you're still something, you are still—and we want you to know it. The little kids come up with little notes: Thank you for your service. Some of them come up and kiss you on the cheek. And some of them had banners. Some of them had a thing; would I sign my name, and so on. What a fantastic feeling. And this is just walking into the memorial. And then the memorial itself is a magnificent thing.

DePue: We've got some slides of the memorial. Here's a long shot of it. It's right on the mall. It's between the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial. The Reflecting Pool is right behind it. So down on the opposite side of the Reflecting Pool are the Korean War Memorial and the Vietnam War Memorial.

Speranza: Well, we went to those later. But this one, it has all of the states, where you came from, and then it has some memorable—

DePue: I think each one of these pillars stands for one of the states, doesn't it?

Speranza: —quotes from—well, I was standing in front of the New York State, because that's where I was when I served. But the people that were there—that was the

important thing. We're standing there, and those that are in wheelchairs are being pushed around to the different places where they want to stay. And all the people who were there walk up to you: "Sir, were you one of the…" Yes, I was standing in front of the 101st Airborne thing. "Yes." "Oh, sir, thank you." Mark, it's like the big moment in your life when you realize, You know what? sometimes you're so wrong for thinking bad things about people who don't care or they've forgotten. You say this, you say, and you say, and you say. Boy, you know how wrong you were. How wrong you were that people didn't appreciate this or that folks don't think about that or so on. Just look at what the story is now. Just look, from little kids on up to adults who stand up and applaud as you walk by in wheelchairs. Yeah. It was a very moving experience, Mark.

And Honor Flights, which is now all over the country, is one of the finest organizations. If our organization, Springfield one is any example, they are a group of people who I wish to praise to the skies for what they're doing. They're reviving the spirits of a lot of old men. They are making them feel as though they're not just going to die off as another thing, you know. I don't know what other people's reactions are. That's mine. That's my reaction. And I wish to encourage. I talk to everybody about this, and I volunteer to be on the speakers' bureaus that go around and speak to groups and—well—

DePue: That's how I found you.

Speranza: That's how you met me, yeah. Speak to groups about this, because I think it's such a wonderful thing. And they ask for **nothing**. When you're on the flight, you can't even buy yourself a pack of gum. They insist, No, a veteran may not spend a penny. We'll buy it for you.

One of the things that they did on the way back: We're in the plane now. The plane's taking off. And a man gets up—in my case, it was Ray Wiedle—and he turns the plane's lights on and he says, "May I have your attention for a moment, please. First, I hope you had a good day today," and we all applauded. And he said, "Now we have one more thing in store for you. Now, I know from talking to you how much you appreciated mail call." So we're all saying, "You bet your boots. Let me tell you something, boy. We stood out in cold and in lines and so on and so on—not in Bastogne. We were cut off. We didn't have any mail coming in and out. But in other places mail call was the high point of the day." "Well," he said, "we've got a mail call for you right here and right now." We're looking like this, and he calls, his assistant comes up with a whole bunch of little sacks, little draw-string sacks. They call out your name and they give you this sack of mail. Unknown to you, two or three weeks before the flight, they contacted everybody in your family and friends to write you a letter. Here we were now on the plane with mail call, and here's this letter from our kids and grandkids and family, neighborhood friends and so on. All of them were saying such nice things.

Mark, it was such an emotional, wonderful moment at the end of a long day, you know, of wonderful things. The Honor Flight people are really to be commended for what they're doing. I hope the general public supports them. You know, the only way they can operate is by donations from people. The World War II people are dying off at a rate of twelve hundred a day, and so we don't have a lot of time to get those that still want to go to see the memorial.

DePue: Do you think the design and the architecture of the memorial, did that work for you?

Speranza: Mark, I have to admit to being kind of ignorant about form and design and so on. What I appreciated about it is that in general it was wide open water, a pond, whatever you want to call it, in there. Then around the edges were statues of people, events, and history. In other words, I was trying to look through the eyes of a kid who would see it for a first time, and that kid would have to be impressed. So my judgment about the memorial is it's a wonderful thing. The thought of it, the idea of doing it, and the people it seems to be attracting is a good thing. There probably will never be another war like World War II, total war where everybody's… The slaughter and the things that went on and so on, the horror of destruction of so much property and lives and all that. But it doesn't take long for people to forget. And when we're gone there's nobody really to remind the kids. Kids get so wrapped up in electronic things and so on. It's a good thing that there's a place that they can go and be reminded. I would hope that when school kids, as a school trip go to Washington, DC, I hope that's one of the places they take the kids to.

DePue: There's a couple other ways that people have been remembering what you and your fellow veterans did in World War II. I'm sure you're familiar with Stephen Ambrose. He wrote extensively on World War II. He was totally amazed by your generation and especially by the paratroopers, so he wrote the book *Band of Brothers*. A couple years later, Steven Spielberg, the Hollywood producer, came out with *Saving Private Ryan*, which very much emphasized what the paratroopers, what soldiers were doing on D-Day during World War II. Then, of course, Steven Spielberg produced the TV series *Band of Brothers* that became very popular. It was incredibly well done. What did you think of all that?

Speranza: The first thing that I noticed that I recognized was that, for the first time, Hollywood seemed to get it right. They depicted war the way it really was, not the romantic or the heroics of the previous movies and films. More important than that is that I think that's what woke up the rest of the country, the movies and the books and so on, because, you know, the stories have been here, but who's paying attention? I personally—and I think I've said this to you before—I personally, after it was over, did not think much about it or do much about it. I told you, I felt, hey, there was a job to do, we did it, it's over, and now I want to find a nice woman, I want to get married, I want to have a

family, and get a good job, and I taught school. That was… And all of a sudden, the whole country seems to be awakened. Now, (laughs) I never went to reunions and so on in over sixty years, but when I went, for example, to Belgium to see the battlefields, I can't believe the way the people treated you there. I can't believe the way Americans are treating you here now. So to a large extent I believe that those movies and those books—well, a lot of times, that's what does start a movement. You know, if people write a book that becomes popular and some ideas in it and so on.

DePue: The name of the book, *Band of Brothers*, is that what it was?

Speranza: Here's what we have to be careful of. Ambrose selected E Company, Easy Company from the 506, for a lot of reasons. One, they were genuine soldiers during that battle. But secondly, they were one of the few organizations that stayed together after the war. In other words, the Easy Company…Club? Group? I've forgotten what they call themselves. But whatever the story was. I read this later; I didn't know about it at the time—but they met every year. They stayed together. So that when Ambrose is ready to write a book—he's one of the authors who wants to go to original sources—here's a group of people who were there and described all about it. So what you see in *Band of Brothers* is much more accurate than anything somebody could dream up because he dealt with the people who were there and who had kept in touch with each other all the time so that the stories were not like—I've forgotten half of the stuff that's gone on, or maybe some of it is distorted in my mind—but these people kept alive the real experiences.

So *Band of Brothers*—I hope it connotes what we believe it should connote, and that is, there's no bond like the bond you make in combat. When you and your buddy—and usually you end up with one good buddy and the rest are all general buddies—but when you share what goes on in combat with somebody, it changes both your lives. You're not only depending on each other for survival, but when you're alone and quiet and you talk, you'd be amazed at what you're willing to tell this guy which you wouldn't tell anybody else, or what your hopes are, what your fears are, what your… You know, there's a thing, and what Spielberg I hope brought out with the movie *Band of Brothers,* is that in the final analysis, the reason you do the things that you do in the war are not only for the great cause of democracy and this and this, but hey, it's you and your buddy against the enemy. Now, your country has said that this is the reason you're here and so on. Yeah, okay. But when you get down to the nitty-gritty, the thing is, hey, buddy, we're going to try and survive the war, but, you know, whatever the story is, we look out for each other. You don't say these things, and it's not a conscious thing, it's just that's the way it is after you are in combat with another man. What the movie I hope brought out was that most of the originals never made it. At the end of the war, in Easy Company, there were maybe twenty-five guys that were the original company of two hundred at D-Day.

So it also pointed out some other things about combat, and what it's like to try to survive. You know, it's not always bullets and bombs. It's just that, what do you do when you're freezing to death and your hands are cold and you've got to hold that rifle. For example, early on I had a pair of gloves, but one of our guys' hands were starting to swell up, so I gave him my gloves. We were just so cold and so miserable sometimes you didn't care, you didn't care what happened. And when they ordered you to do something, you did it, but you did it like in a, oh, I don't give a damn what happens or what… There's another factor. Most people think of the wars where you're exchanging bombs or bullets, but so much of it is, can you endure, can you persevere, can you hold out, can you…with lousy food, and sometimes none, and the cold? This was in the Bulge. The cold is **numbing.** You know, your whole brain goes… Especially when you didn't have the right clothing, you know. And I remember often having to go to the bathroom and saying to myself, It's not worth the bother. Maybe I should just (laughs) pee, let it go, you know. But you don't. You take your helmet out and… But once again, people's experiences in the war can only be known by what they tell you, and different people see the same thing and have a different reaction to it. Unless you were there, what do you really know about the war? You know about what other people have told you. Now, my little piece of the war might have been entirely different from… I've told you some things about this and this. Somebody else in another outfit, in another part of the woods, might have had completely different experiences. So what's war really like? Well, it's a conglomerate of all these experiences. I guess what you folks are doing is to gather as much of it as possible; then you can make generalizations about what war is all about.

DePue: Were you ever able to tell some of these stories to your wife and your kids?

Speranza: I did not tell my wife or my kids anything except the funny stories. I'd tell her like, once during the war, we did this, we did that. It was just something funny. My son and my daughter right now, they said, "You never told us any of these things. Why?" I said, "First of all, I wanted to forget them. They're not important to me anymore. I had a different mission now in life. I want to be a father and a husband and a schoolteacher. S what in the world do those experiences have to do with any of that?" And then I said, "Secondly, I figured that if you're interested in that, you'll ask me about it. You'll hear something, so-and-so, and say, 'Pop, was this…' and so on and so on. And since none of you did that…" That was my attitude.

DePue: Looking back at it, were you a changed man because of your experiences in the war?

Speranza: Mark, I was only eighteen years old when I went in, so what kind of a man was I before I went in? I was a student; I was a kid. So I have nothing to compare it with. Was I changed? Did I have certain ideas and resolves and so on because of the war? Oh, yes. (laughs) In other words, after having been in

battle, what was anybody going to scare me with now? You know, a job? In other words, I had no fear in anything I wanted to do. I had complete confidence in myself that, hey, look, if I can survive that, I can sure as heck survive this. Don't threaten me, because I've already faced the ultimate threats, and you can't scare me with anything now. By the way, that was in the back of my psyche; I never verbalized that or thought about that like that. But what I just realized as I went along in my life, if there's one good thing that comes out of a combat experience, it's that you find out who you are, what you are, and what you can do. Okay. That's the way it's going to be.

DePue: What do you think people should know or can learn about your experiences and these stories that you've been telling us?

Speranza: Oh, my. Wow. I think that what they should do is view them as the experiences that a person can have in those situations. But don't draw any hard and fast conclusions that you would behave this way or that way if you got in this one. You are tested by life. When you go out on your own, you're tested by life. Now, what life are you going to? In my case I went into the war, but you can be tested by your first job or so on. I think what people should take from listening to or reading about people's war experiences is that in general, war's a pretty bad thing, and that's certainly the conclusion they should come to, is that there ought to be a better way to solve problems than to kill each other. But those have to be tempered by reality. Reality is if there's somebody out there trying to kill you, you better be ready to shoot them back. The feeling is, we hope you learn from our experiences. Learn what? Well, learn how you may have to conduct yourself sometime. Learn that life is not the black and white you think it is, and so on. Depending on your background, what your parents are telling you, and what the schools and the teachers and so on are telling you, this should be something that you should be able to read, listen to, and say, Well, you know, that's interesting. This is how this guy behaved during the war. How would I do it? Why am I telling you these stories and so on, so on?

I don't expect anybody to learn anything from my experiences. All they're learning is this is how this eighteen-year-old kid behaved when he went into… Well, what my whole life is about—now, you got the whole thing from when I was growing up to where I am now. I was just thinking, the title of my story ought to be *The Story of My Life, As Though Anybody Should Give a Damn*. (laughter) Well, you kind of talked me into it. I say maybe it's a good idea, if nothing else that somebody will say, This is how it can happen. It doesn't mean this is how it will happen to me if I were there, or you. But here is a true story, not a Hollywood version of something, or a person who's telling a story because he expects to make something out of it or do something. What you've got is, hey, this is what happened to me.

DePue: Well, I am thrilled that I managed to talk you into doing this, because I think these are important stories; they are stories that people need to understand and

grapple with and figure out on their own accounts. So it's been a wonderful opportunity for me. Any final comments from you?

Speranza: No, Mark. I just hope that somewhere, somehow, the awakening, the real awakening to what war is all about, comes to the general public. There are a lot of people who know and understand and do things,, but it's not a general, ideal feeling. For example, everybody pretty much has a general feeling that you should help someone if they need help. Well, I would like for—and I'm not just talking about America, because it wouldn't work if it was only in America—I would like for everybody in the world to someday realize—and it's only going to come through education and teachers and so on—maybe teachers ought to watch this stuff—that experience has taught us you got to know history and you got to emphasize history, that slaughtering one another solves an immediate problem—who wins the war, to the victor go the spoils—but it doesn't solve anything long-term, because history has shown us that there's war after war after war after war. Now, there's got to be a better way. One time on TV I saw an episode of *Star Wars* or—no, not *Star Wars*. What's the one with Captain Kirk and…?

DePue: *Star Trek*.

Speranza: *Star Trek*. This was a planet that had two different cultures on it that were constantly at war. But they said to themselves a long time ago, you know, it's crazy to actually fight all these wars of destruction and so on. They each set up machines and defensive systems and so on. Whenever one country thought they could attack the other, they would attack, and the machine decides was your attack successful or so on, and if it was, about how many people did it kill, and then it was up to you to kill that many people, put them in a chamber and kill them, because you lost the war. In other words, the attitude had become so cynical that they said, Let's not go through the motions; let's just say I'm bigger and stronger than you, therefore I'm going to knock off ten of your people, so you do it instead of me. It's cheaper. Because I'll do the same thing for you. Now, that kind of thinking, that kind of thinking, you know, can permeate, well, I guess the whole world.

But the philosophers, you know, there's a long time, you've got to seek the truth, and the truth will set you free. If the truth of the matter is, killing people and destroying property—and that's what war is, you know—don't glamorize it with anything or heroics or loyalties or this, that. In the long run, war is killing people and destroying property. That's all. That's the purpose, and that's the wherewithal that you're given to do those two things with. But if the world seeks the truth about human relations and how we're going to survive and so on, they're going to have to admit that it's untrue that a war will solve anything. Once they're really convinced of that, then there's hope that we'll start thinking about how to improve each other's lives instead of how to end each other's life.

I'll just make this last comment. It's what my wife and I talked about when we first got married. We took our vows very seriously. And by the bye, we've been married sixty-two years now. We said to each other, "Look, this is forever. Separation and divorce are not options; we are not going to have separation and divorce. We promised each other that. There will never be those things. Therefore, if those two things are not options, any problem that comes up has to be resolved. That means we're going to sit down and we're going to work out the problem. One way or another. I don't care what the problem is, if those other two things are not options, then this is the only other option. So if the world comes to the conclusion, finally, that, look, war is not an option anymore, then you've got to find another way. And maybe we will. Maybe we will.

DePue: Well, I think that's probably a very good point to stop our conversation. It's been a long but a very interesting, and again, an important conversation. So Vince, thank you for giving us the opportunity.

Speranza: Thank you.

DePue: And that concludes our series of interviews with Vince Speranza.

(end of interview #4 #5 does continue later)

Interview with Vincent Speranza

VR2-V-L-2010-031

Interview # 5: April 5, 2011

Interviewer: Mark DePue

DePue: Today is Tuesday, April 5, 2011. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. I'm here today with Vincent Speranza. Good morning, Vince.

Speranza: Good morning, Mark.

DePue: We decided to do one more session, something of a postscript, because your story just keeps evolving and going on, doesn't it, Vince?

Speranza: It seems to be, as long as my health maintains itself.

DePue: I'm going turn it over to you. I want you to tell us about your latest trip overseas. There's a couple aspects of that that I know you want to talk about that are fascinating to hear.

Speranza: Okay. To begin with, I was invited to England for this trip by a very pretty young lady named Kelly Ann Sproul and her mother Kim. I will first tell you about how I met this young lady.

At the 2009 Bastogne celebration, I was sitting in there with the other three veterans—there were four of us that year, of the 101st Airborne and the Battle of Bastogne—and we were signing autographs and she was entertaining. She's famous all over Europe and England as a Sweetheart of the

British Armed Forces, and she was entertaining at this celebration. Unbeknown to me, her microphone cable was under my chair, and when I got up to move my chair, I unplugged her microphone, (DePue laughs) and there she is singing into a dead mic. Embarrassing and so on. I guess if I still turned red in the face, I turned red that day. But after her performance I went and spoke to her, and I apologized profusely. She was very gracious about it, and she said, "Those things happen." In fact, after we spoke a while, and , after I told her how much I admired her music and how much I enjoyed hearing those old World War II songs and those Army and Navy songs and so on, she gave me a CD of her music. I thanked her and took it home.

When I got home, I found playing that CD, the music, the snappy (sings) "Boogie woogie bugle boy of Company B," that it made me just bounce a little bit. I found it especially effective—you have to know that when I come home from visiting my wife every morning, who's in her tenth year of Alzheimer's now, it's sort of sad—I found that by putting this CD in my car stereo, the music just made me feel a little better, and after doing it for a while, I said, you know, really and truly, this is an improvement. This is something… I said, If I ever meet that lady again, I'm going to take her to dinner and tell her how much I enjoy her music and what it's done for me.

In 2010 when I went back, I did. I met her again, and I took her and her mother and her driver and whoever else was there out to dinner, and we hit it off, Mark. The way we were talking, and I started telling her some stories about when I was in England and so on, and we had a very wonderful dinner and evening after that. You know, sort of instant friends. When we left to go home, this time she wanted to give me four more CDs of her music. I said, "Okay, but I want to pay for them." (British accent "Oh, no, we can't take any money from American veterans. No, no, they must be a gift." I said, "No, no. I can't take charity. After all, you gave me that first one and so on, and you have to make a living too. I want to pay for them." And her mother chimes in, "Oh, absolutely not. We can't have it," and so on. And I said, "Well, all right. I'll take them under these circumstances. If you'll give me your address, when I get home, permit me to send a little appropriate gift. Would that be satisfactory?" Well, they agreed to that.

I went home, and I got my daughter to come with me, and we picked out a necklace for her and a wristwatch for her mother, and I mailed them out. Well, two weeks later, the telephone rings. "Oh, Vince, your gifts arrived, and oh, thank you, and you must come to see us. You must come to visit us. Our family would be honored to have you in our home" and so on. You know, they hardly know me. I'm impressed by this, but I still thought it was one of those, Oh, you know, come see me sometime. But it wasn't. She put her mother on, and her mother told me. She put her grandfather on, and her grandfather—(with a British accent) "Oh, Yank, I think we'd have a grand old time. You know, I'm a World War II chap myself, and…" (DePue laughs)

Then the grandmother gets on. And I just said okay. That was the invitation, I accepted, and I went, and I'm so happy that I did.

Prior to my leaving for England, I found among my writings a blue piece of paper with names and addresses from World War II, old girlfriends in Liege, Paris, this, or some of the English girlfriends. But one of the addresses, the one that interested me now that I was going back to England, was of the Radbourne family. Now, in order to give you the background for the Radbourne family, we have to go back in time.

Now, this is October 1944. I arrived in England I think in September—somewhere the end of September, beginning of October—on the *Queen Mary*, which was a troop ship then. They took us off the ship and shipped us to a little place called Hungerford, where we were stationed, waiting to be flown to France to get into the war. And I was a replacement for the 101st Airborne Division. The first weekend we were there we had a weekend pass to Brighton. Brighton was on the Channel coast, of course, and it was the nearest big town to Hungerford. Just picture three young men with a weekend pass to Brighton, first time in England, and looking for action. (DePue laughs) We were all healthy young soldiers, and none of us had wives or anything, so we felt justified in looking for companionship. At any rate, I'm making excuses for what the normal thing is when there's a bunch of soldiers out on pack. We went to a pub; here's this old English pub with the exposed beams and a little smoky. Everybody's smoking a pipe or something. But no girls. Well, we ordered a beer, and the beer was warm. (laughter) They didn't serve cold beer in England then. And it was dark brown. They called it "bitters": "a pint of bitters." There was a fireplace with a bunch of pokers sticking in it. One of the men at the bar there, said, (British accent) "What you do, Yank," he says, "is you go, you get a hot poker, and stick it in your beer." Now, of course, we were new there and we don't know… But I couldn't figure out why. The beer's warm already; you stick a hot poker in it, it's going to be even warmer. But if that's the way you do it in England… We did. We took the hot poker, stuck it in the beer, and drank it. Finally we asked one of them, "Listen, do the young ladies come in here?" He said, "Oh, no, Yankee, pub is for men. The ladies don't come in. If you want the ladies, you have to go down the street to the old dance hall."

So that's what we did. We went to the dance hall. And of course there were ladies and drinking. We had a grand old evening. But the way it ended up, there were three of us and only two girls. Well, very magnanimously, I said, "Well, go ahead, you guys take them out. I'll do okay. I'll find something. I'll go back to the pub and have a drink or something."

So that's what I did. I went back to the pub—it's late now—and I had a few more bitters. That stuff, you know, especially drinking it warm, it's kind of potent. So I'll have to admit that I was probably a little tipsy by the time I staggered out of the place. As soon as I got out of the door, I got jumped by

three or four guys, young toughs, they call them. Pulled me into the alley there, beat me up, took my watch, my wallet, my money, and they left me laying there.

When I woke up, it was almost daylight, and I'm, you know, a little bit bewildered, disoriented, let's say. A polite way of saying I was still drunk. But I just started wandering down the hill there, and I see a little pond and a park bench facing the road. I just sat down there, not knowing what I was going to do. I had no pass. Now, when the MP patrol start around, if they picked me up without a pass, I'm AWOL and I go to the stockade. So I'm a little bit concerned about what's going to happen. And here comes an Englishman walking his dog down in front of the place. And he looks at me and says something to me. I must have just mumbled in response. So he came back. He says, "Yank, are you all right?" I said, "No, considering a bunch of your toughs just beat me up and took my money, my pass, my wallet, and everything. He was horrified. He said, "Yank, that's terrible. Please, come home with me. Let us help you. My wife can help you clean up, and then…" So I wanted to get off the road. You know, the MP patrols were going to start. So I said, "Yes, okay, thank you," and I went with him.

He took me home, and Mark, his wife cleaned my uniform and pressed it, and they washed the blood off the side of my face, they cleaned me up, and then they spread out a meal like you wouldn't believe. This is at a time where the British are rationed, you know, one egg a month. They put out a whole meal, fed me, took care of me that day. And he went with me to where the trucks pick us up to take us back to camp and saw me safely on my way back. I never forgot those people. You know, I tried to make amends later on and brought them some groceries and stuff. But the important thing is, they came through. I saw the two faces of England within the first week that I was there. One face, they beat me up; the next minute, a beautiful British family helped me out of a jam and saw to it that I got back to my camp.

That's the address that I found before this trip to England, the Radbournes. So when I got to England, Kelly and her mother drove me all over the place. They took me to see the old camps; they took me to see this and that. One of the places I asked them to go, would they take me to Brighton to see if we could find this family. And we went to Brighton. I had the house number. We followed the house number, and they stopped before they got to the number that I had and then continued on with a gap in there. So we knocked on a neighbor's door, and I introduced myself and told them what I was looking for. I said, "What about this house number and the Radbourne family?" He said, "Oh, Yank, that house took a direct bomb hit, it and the houses alongside of each of them were destroyed, and we don't know what happened to the family." I was a little disappointed, but, you know. It had been sixty-six years since these events took place.

So I said, "By the way, is there an old pub nearby that might have been here during the war?" "Oh, yeah, down there to the next turning and a few blocks down," four blocks down, whatever it was. And I said thank you. We walked down the hill and Mark, (DePue laughs) there was the pub. Now, how could I be sure, you know? It had changed some. But everything was right so far. Walked into the pub, and there's an old man, very old man, sitting in the corner reading his newspaper with his pint of bitters. This is in the morning now. I went over to him and excused myself, "Sir," I said, "was this pub here during the war?" And he said, "Oh, yes, and so was I." (laughter) And I said, "Oh. You know, I think this is the pub that I came into sixty-six years ago." But I said, "I remember the bar as being just a straight…" He said, "Oh, yes. They've made a few changes over the years." The bar is now an L shape. I said, "And there was a fireplace with pokers." "Ah, yes. Right there around the bend," and he showed me, the fireplace with the pokers in it. And I said, "Now, there was a seating area right here." He said, "Yeah. Well, it's been replaced by that bench now." And there was the bench and the pokers. And by the way, I have pictures of all of this, which you can look at later. I walked over to the bar and looked at the—they had changed the handles. You know, the beer things used to be big long wooden handles.

DePue: Foot and a half or two foot long, huh?

Speranza: Yeah. But now they had changed them. They looked like little pearl-handled jobs or something. Whatever it was, they weren't like the original. But I went over and I sat back in the bench and I just pictured the three of us—there were three of us there when we first went in there with our pint of bitters from sixty-six years ago. I went outside, and Kelly took my picture with the Fairfield Inn or Fairchild Inn or something, is what the name of the place is. But you'll see it on the pictures.

I said, "By the way, before we leave, is there a little pond with a bench?" "Oh, yes. Queensdown, it's called." And by the way, I've got a picture of that too. "Queensdown, it's called, and it's right down at the bottom of the hill there." And I said, "When I was disoriented, I would have chosen the easy way out, just walking downhill." We went down the hill, and there it was. We saw Queensdown this time, which I didn't know about, and the bench. I went over and I sat down in that bench, and I had Kelly take my picture. I was sitting in a bench that sixty-six years ago, when I was nineteen years old, I was sitting in that same spot, all disheveled, disoriented, and wondering what I was going to do. The moment, you know, the moment began to hit me, Mark. Can you believe that—first of all, we didn't think we were going to survive the war. But then to be able to come back sixty-six years later and relive some very nostalgic moments. I thanked the people once again for inviting me to England to relive these moments.

Now, we also did some other things. They took me to the white cliffs of Dover, where I saw some of the original Spitfires from the Battle of Britain,

all the monuments and so on, to the battles, and the Dover docks where the German submarines would prevent any ships from docking there at Dover. We went to a dance one evening. She asked me if I would please go with them. She was doing a fundraiser—"she" meaning Kelly—was doing a fundraiser for a British Armed Forces group. I forget which one it was. I have pictures of that too. At this fundraiser, she introduced me to them, and what kind words so many of those British veterans… They came up to me afterwards. In fact, they almost got me in trouble. Some of them kept buying us Scotches when they found out (laughter) that the grandfather and I liked the Scotch now and then. We were having a little noisy interlude back there like we did the last time. But at any rate, it was a magnificent trip. And the best part of this whole thing is that Kelly and her mother are going to be houseguests of mine in June, where she is going to perform right here in Springfield for a fundraiser for the Honor Flight Society.

DePue: Outstanding. And I'm pretty sure you mentioned this to me before, but she is known as what for the British military?

Speranza: The Sweetheart of the British Armed Forces. I have some pin-up pictures, (DePue laughs) if you want to see those, that they use when they're doing the Armed Forces thing. All I'm asking the guys to remember, the veterans that we invite to this, you just think about how sixty-five years ago we felt when we heard, Oh, oh, Betty Grable is coming, Marlene Dietrich, you know. Those were the two that I actually got to see during the war who came and performed for the Armed Forces.

DePue: You can't get any bigger names than those two during World War II.

Speranza: Well, I know it. And don't forget this: Most of the time you read about and you hear about like Bob Hope and a bunch of these other—they did these big shows for… But those had to be rear echelon events, because you can't put together a group like that anywhere near the front lines. But Marlene Dietrich and Betty Grable, they were willing to come up to an old barn close enough to the front lines so that we could be pulled back one company at a time to be entertained. And I can't tell you what in the middle of, you know, some pretty rough times, for a couple of hours there when you go back and you see these beautiful women with beautiful clothes on and so on in the midst of the ugliness of where we are right now, what a difference it made. That's why I'm sure Kelly Ann is so appreciated by the British Armed Forces. Maybe they're not in the middle of big wars, but still any veteran will tell you what it means for these people to be willing to come up there and entertain the troops.

I have such a good feeling that a chance encounter resulted in my visit to England and being able to do all these other nostalgic things and that I'm getting a return visit and introduce these people to America. They've never been to the United States, so it's going to be a good trip for them too, and I hope to make it a good trip. You know, my way of saying thank-you. The

Honor Flight Society hopefully will benefit from this fundraiser. We all know that the Honor Flight Society is a great organization that is getting World War II veterans, and then they're going to work on Korean veterans and Vietnam veterans, to see the memorials that were dedicated to them. Mark, that's about the end of the saga. If you have any questions, I'd be glad to answer them.

DePue: I'd like to have you explain this picture that you brought in the other day as well and how you ended up getting that picture.

Speranza: Ah, okay.

DePue: And this goes back to your time in Bastogne and that amazing story you told us about providing beer to your buddies in the church, the make-shift hospital.

Speranza: The church floor.

DePue: And since we've heard that story, what I need to have you tell us about is how you got this picture.

Speranza: This picture just came in an email from a—not an anonymous source; he gave me his name. But he said, "This is a picture of Bastogne during the war," and he had read the beer story, and he said, "Could this be actually where you were and got the beer?" Some man who said he was fourteen years old during the battle said he actually saw me carrying a helmet full of beer through the street. Now, you know, I asked, "Well, is he around? Can we talk to him?" No, he'd passed away. But that story, you know—

DePue: That was the origin of the story, yeah.

Speranza: At any rate, when I saw the picture, I said, Wow. Now look, there's the church. Certainly I remember the tavern was on the right-hand side. Down the road here, looks like no more than a five-, ten-minute walk, which rings a bell. It was not too far. The thing that would clinch it for me is if here there was another tavern, because the first tavern I went into had nothing; it was all broken glass and shattered stuff and so—

DePue: And we're looking at the picture with rubble there.

Speranza: Yeah, yeah. I told them when I go back to Bastogne next year, if I'm still around, I'm going to walk that. I'm going to go to the church, walk down the road, and see if this place is still around or whatever it's become, to just see if I can bring back something. Circumstantial evidence says that yeah, this is the place. It's about the right distance. There's the church. I do remember it being down the road on the right-hand side. If I can verify that there's another one here, that would clinch it 100%. But right now, I would say I can't be positive, but it sure looks like that is the history. Again, this is sixty-six years ago that that picture was taken.

DePue: How important is it for you? I mean, you didn't go back to Bastogne until I think sixty-four, sixty-five years after the battle. So how—

Speranza: Sixty-five.

DePue: —meaningful is it for you now to go back and to find all these things start to fall into place and relive that portion of your life?

Speranza: Well, my attitude has changed, Mark. When I first got home from the war, I didn't want to talk about it. I had other things to do. I was asked if I want to be in the Reserves or they'd move me up a couple of ranks and so on and so on. I said, hey, there was a job to be done; we did it; we finished it; I survived; I did my thing. Now I want to find a nice woman, I want to get married, I want to have kids, I want to raise a family and so on. I want to become a teacher. and I did. And I didn't talk about the war. My kids nowadays ask me, "Pop, how come you…" I said, "Look. What makes you think that I would want to tell you about guys with their faces being blown off and no legs and my mowing down a bunch of advancing troops? Why would I, as a good father, want to tell you about those things when you're growing up? Most veterans were combat veterans, and you know, when you think about it, a relative handful of soldiers see combat compared to the number of people in the service. Everybody's important, and you can't get the job done without the people in the back. But combat veterans you find are reluctant to talk about real war. When they get together, they talk about the fun things, the things that make them laugh, and the jokes, and the funny events that happened to them and so on and so on."

You know, maybe that's a mistake, just like the mistake we made when we raised our kids saying, Oh, no, they should not have to go through what we went through, and so you do everything for them, and that didn't do them any good growing up. My whole attitude was, hey, it's over, and we're finished.

Now, I did become a history teacher, and when we got to World War II, oh, yes. I was going to make sure the kids knew not necessarily what was in the book but what it was really all about. Again, I pointed out, this is one soldier's point of view. I can't speak for everybody. I can't speak for other people's adventures during the war. What I'm telling you is about me, what happened to me, and what I did and so on during the war. I may be typical, and I may not be. But what I want you to know is the truth about war from one man's point of view.

I had sent home a whole bunch of German helmets, gas masks, equipment, the Nazi battle flag, and I used to show them the SS uniform. I had a whole bunch of stuff. I don't have it anymore. But I made it very real. Anybody who came out of my history class understood at least this aspect of World War II.

I don't know if I told you this story or not, but in 1964—let me digress a moment—I got an email about going to a reunion in New York City. My history class of 1964—this was 2004 when I got the email—fortieth reunion of the class in New York, and they invited me to come, and they'd pay my ticket. Hey, no. I've got family in New York; I could stay with them. Yes, I'd be glad to come. When I went, here's these kids now that I remember as eighteen-year-olds who are now fifty-eight years old. They're all seniors. The kids of course—the kids!—these fifty-eight-year-old things, they come up to see me. "Mr. Speranza, you remember me, so-and-so?" "Oh, yeah."

This one guy comes up to me. "Mr. Speranza, you remember me? Buzz Allschuler?" I said, "Give me a hint, Buzz; it's been forty years. This is the fortieth reunion." "Well," he said, "I was in your history class. You remember when you used to bring that trunk in with all the German stuff and you told us all about the war, and you had that big Nazi banner that came off the parade grounds at Berchtesgaden?" I said, "Oh, yeah. I remember that," because I used to do that every year. And he said, "Mr. Speranza, you inspired me. When I graduated I went to West Point. I went to West Point, I became an officer, and I joined your old outfit, the 101st Airborne Division, and I was sent to Vietnam. I did two tours. I got wounded. Come out, and did okay." I said, "Oh, well that's great, Buzz." I said, "What are you doing now?" He said, "I'm still in." I said, "Really? Fifty-eight, you're still in the service?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Where are you?" He said, "I'm at Fort Bragg, North Carolina." I said, "Oh, what do you do there?" He said, "I'm the commanding general." And I said to myself… **WOW!**

By the way, he invited me over there. I went to visit. What a fantastic visit that was at Fort Bragg. I may have told you this in the other part of the interviews. But that's when I said to myself, maybe we should have talked more about the war and end up with more patriotic people like this, instead of some of these ones that ended up with the anti-war hippie protester. Well, you know about the Vietnam era.

At any rate, Mark, about ten years ago—maybe it was the movies, *Saving Private Ryan*, the *Band of Brothers*—whatever it is, the nation just seemed to wake up about, hey, you know what? So far we've been able to prevent it, but World War II was a pretty horrible affair, wasn't it? Certain number of people took quite a beating there. Maybe we ought to start looking at—there are not too many of them left—but these guys who were out there, there wasn't even a memorial to their… There's a Korean War memorial, there's a Vietnam memorial, there's all kinds of Air Force memorials here, but the World War II guys… I don't know who started it, but somebody, they built the World War II memorial in Washington, DC.

We find ourselves now being sought after. I'm asked to speak all over the place. I'm going to Collinsville Wednesday to speak to a group. And the schools and so on. I'm beginning to understand more about myself and

beginning to realize that, you know, it was a mistake not to talk about the war early on. People should know. But how do you do it without looking like you're a braggart, without looking like you're looking for sympathy? And especially some guys used to exaggerate. You know, you got to be very careful to tell the truth about that stuff.

But if we had made more people…maybe we'd be less willing to jump into Afghanistan and other –stans. These wars, where unless you have a real need and then the willpower to use full force and then the ability to get the job done quickly and come back, when you put people at risk for their lives, you'd better have a good reason. If more people realized what it was like, maybe our politicians would be a little more careful. I don't know. But all I know is this. I am now—and for the past four or five years especially—I am now willing to speak to any group to discuss what we did in our war and to hopefully just tell the truth about what it was like. There are not a lot of us left who have had the experience, and, you know, experience is the best teacher. We don't have an agenda. We're not trying to do anything other than: You want to hear the story? We'll tell you the truth. And we caution you that what we're telling you is what our experience was. Now, you make of it what you will, but this is what happened. More and more people want to seem to know that. Every place you go, you tell them you're a World War II veteran, they ask questions. They want to talk to you. "What was it like?" High school kids now, the teachers have become aware; the kid comes in, "Is there a World War II veteran in your neighborhood or in your city?" Kids come out, they call you, "May we speak with you about…?" And I always say yes. "Come on. Bring all the kids you want."

Whatever word is getting out, Mark, it's something that people should just tuck into their background to give some perspective to what's going on when… Politicians make war, but the young men go out and fight it and die. More of our politicians need to know more about what they're doing when they send people to war. I'm doing my share, now, of sharing my experiences (laughs) at every opportunity. If somebody asks, yes, I will come and speak and tell you what the story is.

DePue: It's been our honor to hear those stories, and not just the stories that I think you enjoy telling, but some of the stories that are more painful and difficult that you talk about in terms of the action at Bastogne and other places as well. Now, that, we really appreciate.

Speranza: Let me just tell you about one incident. Kelly and I—her mother's driving, we're sitting in the back of the car and talking. We had just left the pub and the bench, that whole adventure. We were laughing about the fun thing there. I'm sitting on the bench, the same bench, and that… And suddenly… (pause) I started to tear up. What I had just remembered is the two guys that were sitting with me on the bench were both killed in Bastogne. You know, during the fun laugh part of the whole thing you forget about that. You see these two

guys that you were sitting on the bench with and talking to, and then you get another thought, and oh man does it change your mood. Geez, you know. I'm here, talking about it. Those two guys got cut off sixty years ago.

So, Mark, without getting morbid about anything, my trip to England was a magnificent thing. It brought back a lot of memories, including the one I just told you. I'm so grateful to that family that really convinced me that I ought to go, because I would not ever have had that experience otherwise. I hadn't set foot in England sine 1944, and probably never would have except for the way these things worked out, these circumstances. I'm grateful. And I hope that I can in some way repay them when they visit me.

DePue: Thank you very much, Vince. It's an important postscript that we put to your story. It keeps evolving. Who knows what's going to happen next for you? But we certainly appreciate you taking the time and telling us these stories with so much vigor and panache.

Speranza: I appreciate the fact that you folks are interested enough to want me to do this. I really am.

DePue: Okay. Thank you, Vince.

(end of interview #5)