



Spencer Felt

United States Army Air Corps

2nd Lieutenant

European Theater

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Interviewer:
Rick Randle

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Rick: We appreciate you being with us today. Will you tell us your name and your rank and basically what your position was in the service?

Spencer: Well I was a Second Lieutenant and a pilot and a co-pilot on a B24 Liberator. My name is Spencer P. Felt – actually I'm a Junior but I dropped that since my father died.

Rick: Okay, could you tell us a little about where you were when Pearl Harbor happened and what it was like growing up in Utah and how you happened to join the Air Force?

Spencer: Well I was at college at the University here and we knew for sometime that we were going to get in the war because it had been going for sometime. When Pearl Harbor happened I was only 17 years old and of course even then the draft wasn't even down to 18 at that time. But I had made model airplanes when I was a kid and I had read a lot about airplanes and about Jimmy Doolittle and his racings and so forth so I was all hot to get into flying and this was my opportunity. I could hardly wait, but my dad wouldn't let me join at that age and besides I don't think I would have been accepted anyway. Then they finally lowered the draft age to 18 which made me eligible to volunteer so I went down and volunteered for Aviation Cadets. Of course we had to pass a series of tests and I was thrilled when I passed the tests so they said, "*fine, we'll call you*". So a couple of months went by and the Aviation Cadets called me and I had months of basic training and so forth before I got into the Cadets.

Rick: Where did you take your basic training?

Spencer: Wichita Field Texas. All my training was in Texas and then I went to San Antonio for Grounds School then I went to Bonham Texas for Primary and Greenville Texas for Secondary and Waco Texas for Advanced where I graduated and got my wings. That was a happy happy day I'll tell you! I was so excited, and I was only 20 years old at the time. So then I was sent to Casper Wyoming as a co-pilot on a B24. I

hadn't had any training on it, I got all my training on the 24 in Casper and that's where the crew was made up. We used to joke amongst us because one of the members of the crew – my Navigator's name was Dajinski and he spoke Polish fluently but at that time all the B24's were going to the Pacific and we used to joke saying "*it's too bad we're in 24's and going to the Pacific because if we were in 17's and got shot down over Poland you could get us out Tad*". And of course it was the farthest thing from the truth except it turned out to be just that way. After training at Casper for about two or three months we were sent overseas to Italy.

Rick: Did you fly there?

Spencer: No we went on a Liberty Ship. It took 25 days and we passed the days by just watching the ocean go by and as the seas got rough we'd go on the bow of the ship and try to run back before the bow dipped and we got wet – we called it '*Chicken*'.

Rick: What were the accommodations like?

Spencer: Oh heavens, you were in the holds that were four bunks high and it didn't matter whether you were an officer or an enlisted man, you were just in a hold of the ship at that point. But it was fun.

Rick: You spent 24 days sleeping in hammocks I guess?

Spencer: Yes and we were in a convoy. We left Newport (they didn't let you know where you were at that point) but I think it was Newport News and then we went from there to Oran Africa for just a night. We slept in some barracks that just had a string of ropes for a mattress and they gave us a blanket. Then we got on another ship and went to Italy, then went to our base and we spent about three weeks practice flying missions. We didn't get over Germany but we flew around Italy for three weeks. Meanwhile the first pilot (I was the co-pilot) went on missions as a co-pilot with an experienced crew so he

got the experience of combat. So he had about five missions but I didn't. Finally our first mission was on the 17th of December 1944.

Rick: When you were training did you fly these low-level flights like 100 feet above the ground?

Spencer: We did that in Casper but we didn't do that in Italy. In Casper we used to fly and they had targets on the side of the hills outside of Casper and we'd go down and the gunners would shoot at the targets as we flew by. We were about 100 feet above the ground.

Rick: And they flew low like that to get under enemy radar?

Spencer: On this Ploiesti raid, which went on early when I wasn't even there, they flew low to keep under radar. That Ploiesti raid was in Romania and that was a very famous raid, which I had nothing to do with.

Rick: So tell us about your first and second mission.

Spencer: Well the first mission – if anybody tells you you're not scared, they're lying. It was frightening! I punched the intercom and looked at the other pilot and said "*for crying out loud Bill do you realize they're shooting at Mrs. Felts little boy?*" He laughed. We always had to laugh, but we made our mission the first time and came back and thought '*well we'll have a days rest*'. You very rarely flew two days in a row however, we were assigned a mission the next day on the 18th of December and this was at a synthetic fuel plant – a chemical plant right by Auschwitz in Poland. We got up there and we got hit with flack and lost the number three and four engines which are the two engines on the right-hand side. Well it's a lot better if you lose one engine on each side, then the plane is balanced. But if you lose two on the same side it puts all the power on one side and you have to do left-rudder to counteract it and that creates more drag and you can't maintain your altitude. So we decided we'd head for Russia because we had

these two dead engines and finally the inboard engine on the left-hand side started to heat up and we decided that it was going to freeze in a little while, it would get too hot and we couldn't do anything about it so we decided we'd bail out. We told the crew to "*bail out*" and in the meantime Bill was setting up the autopilot to hold the plane level so when he and I got out of the airplane it would be level and not fall into a spin.

Rick: Were you over Poland?

Spencer: We were over Poland at the time and we were just about 60 miles southeast from Krakow and fortunately it was over mountains and we landed in the mountains. But unfortunately Bill's chute (the other pilot) didn't open and we never did find him. The Poles told us years later that they found him and buried him but we didn't ever know about it for many many years.

Rick: So all of the other crewmembers bailed out?

Spencer: They all bailed out and they landed close together close to this little village and they were picked up by the locals and put in farmhouses the first night. I ended up staying with the airplane to make sure that the rest of the crew got out with Bill. I was about 10 miles away from them west. I was all by myself but as I had parachuted down I had seen a couple of little huts and this was in the mountains and there was about 18 inches of snow (this was on the 18th of December of 1944 and there was about 18 inches of snow on the ground), but I was dressed warmly. So I had seen these huts so I made out for those and I got to the first hut, it took me about two or three hours. I was just working my way east because I figured the farther east I got the better off I'd be.

Rick: When you were drifting down in that parachute can you describe what was going through your mind?

Spencer: Well you're trained to not open your chute as long as you dare because the closer you open it to the ground the less chance the Germans have to be there where

you're going to land. So at that time I could estimate altitude so I figured I was about 1,000 feet above the ground when I opened my chute but I'd also looked at the altimeter just before I left and I was about 10,000 feet above sea level so I was about 6,000 feet above the ground and 1,000 feet when the chute opened so I free-fell about a mile. I fell flat on my back and I kept looking over my shoulder at the ground *'is it close enough? No, close enough? No, close enough? Yes!'* So I pulled the chute and I had a tough time because I had a bag (we called it an escape kit) it had my GI shoes (we flew in boots not shoes) so I had my shoes and a razor blade and a toothbrush and various things – I had that tucked under my arm, slung over my shoulder and tucked under my arm and I was holding it down and I didn't pull the rip-chord far enough and the chute didn't open. Well then the adrenaline hit so I reached around behind me to pull it open and the minute I got out to here it pulled the chord far enough and the chute opened. When the chute opened it was very peaceful. Floating down on the chute was a very peaceful sensation it really was. Although you're thinking so intensely.

Rick: In those days could you guide your chute so you didn't land in the trees or rocks?

Spencer: Barely, barely.

Rick: Not like they have today?

Spencer: No, no. You could pull the line and slip it and I did that because I was going to hit some trees and it spilled a lot of air out of the chute and all of a sudden I fell rather rapidly and I let go about as fast as I pulled it but it was enough to get me over the trees and into a clearing. They also tell you to *'flex your knees and roll'* but the wind was blowing me in a northeasterly direction so I got my back to the wind and flexed my knees to roll but it was uphill and I went *"Splat"*. It knocked me out. I don't know how long I was out but I wasn't hurt and I came to and I hid the chute and I started to walk east and found this hut to spend the first night in.

Rick: That was just empty?

Spencer: Yeah and I really said *“I don’t need to see anybody for a couple of days”* and I didn’t want to see anybody, I wanted to see how far east I could get. So I kept to the trees and this hut was in a clearing and there were no tracks in the snow, no smoke coming out of the chimney so I decided *“by golly that would be a great place to stay the night”*. So I went in and it had a picket fence around it and I tore pickets off the fence for firewood and built a fire and spent the night. The next morning at the crack of dawn I was up and on my way east and from about eight o’clock in the morning and about four hours later I ran across this deep canyon in front of me and I could see that there were houses in the base of the valley (it was a very narrow valley) and there were houses there with smoke coming out. There was a lot of smoke real close together and I said, *“I don’t want to go down through there”*. So I worked my way about 20 minutes south where the smoke was a little farther apart and I figured I could sneak down through the trees and run across the narrow valley and up the other side and maybe nobody would see me. Which I did, I got about 100 yards up the other side of the hill and I was exhausted so I climbed in a bush to rest and all of a sudden I hear voices coming up this road I just ran across and it’s just a narrow cart road and around the bend came a guy in civilian clothes, leading a horse, pulling a sled, he had over his shoulder a German machine gun. But on the sled was my Radio Operator. It was the second day that I ran across the rest of the crew.

Rick: Did you think that those were Germans maybe coming through?

Spencer: Well the second guy that came around the bend had a German uniform on and a German machine gun. Yes, my first impression was *‘they’ve been captured’*. But then the rest of the crew came up and there was nobody behind them and they were going up the canyon and I knew that there was civilization down the canyon and I said *“why are they going up instead of down”* and *“why isn’t somebody walking behind them”* and *“what’s a civilian doing with a gun?”* Also the six members of my crew didn’t seem very upset, they were talking and so forth and I said *“by golly we’ve just hit the underground”* and it was. It turns out that the 20 minutes I spent avoiding this bunch of

cabins with smoke in them was the headquarters of the Polish Underground. Talk about lucky! I didn't even know the Polish Underground was there!

Rick: Did your crew land almost all in the same place?

Spencer: Well they landed all together but I was 10 miles away. They came about three miles northwesterly and I came about seven miles easterly and we just accidentally ran across each other about noon the second day and it was at the headquarters of the Underground. Then they took care of us for the next five weeks. We spent five weeks in those mountains with the Polish Underground, behind German lines without ever being captured. They'd send patrols up every once in awhile but we'd just go hide up on the side of the mountain.

Rick: Was there plenty of food to eat?

Spencer: No, no, no. We were always hungry. We'd go two or three days sometimes without any food. But they did too. The Pol's gave us everything that they could. They were just wonderful people and you know they did this at the peril of their own lives. They'd move us around from one place to another to make sure that the German's didn't get a line on us but basically we spent five weeks there with the Pol's.

Rick: In those days the entire country of Poland was occupied wasn't it?

Spencer: The German – Russian front was 150 miles east of us and stationary. It was not moving. The Russians were waiting for the rivers to freeze in the middle of January. They said that the Russians would move at about the middle of January.

Rick: Can you tell us what the purpose of the Polish Underground was?

Spencer: Oh the Pol's were sabotaging the Germans all the time and blowing up bridges if necessary and just harassing the Germans. Also surviving really themselves. They

actually had radio contact with the British and were being supplied ammunition and guns by the British. They would parachute them in. It was just more of a harassment; they didn't ever do anything real drastic because there would be so many villages burned if they did. But they did a little harassing.

Rick: Did they have to move you to various places in order to keep away from the Germans?

Spencer: Yeah, we moved. We didn't move very far believe it or not and the Germans were very reluctant to come up in those hills. They knew the Pol's were there. I mean the Pol's were not harassing them enough to worry about wiping them out until the Russian front started to move. I think the real purpose was that once the Russian front started to move the Pol's would then take a more active role and harass the Germans as they retreated – blow up bridges and things like that. So when the Russians started to move the Germans did come up and try to wipe them out and we got up at four o'clock in the morning and spent all that day and all that night walking north.

Rick: Towards the Russian front?

Spencer: Well the Russians were still east so we were just going to a different area where they weren't and we actually moved out of the mountains. Then they told us that they were anti-Russian (they all used aliases, we didn't know who they were) and they said the reason we do that is we don't want the Russians to know who we are because we're as anti-Russian as we are anti-German. If the Russians find out who we are they'll kill us all. The Polish leaders name was Lampart, L-A-M-P-A-R-T and in Polish that means *'Leopard'*.

Rick: During those five weeks did you have any real close calls of getting discovered or found?

Spencer: In the five weeks, no. The Germans knew we were there; they just didn't care too much about it. They didn't send patrols and yes we'd have to go hide in a bunch of trees and this and that but I wouldn't call it a close thing and we didn't ever get that upset about it. We all were together all the time, but our chief problem was food. We were just absolutely hungry every minute. We lived on potatoes and cabbage soup.

Rick: How about the weather? Was it cold? Did you have enough winter gear?

Spencer: Yes, it was wintertime; it was cold however when you're flying in a B24 it's 40 degrees below zero up there so we had all the warm clothes we needed. That was not a problem and of course in a farmhouse you could warm that with stoves. So the cold wasn't a problem.

Rick: Did you learn to speak Polish?

Spencer: No because I had a built in interpreter. I actually learned more Russian than Polish but I've forgotten all that now.

Rick: Could they speak English at all?

Spencer: One Pol spoke a little English – only one. That's the fellow that was in the German uniform and he was Lampart's clerk and Lampart sent him across the valley to pick up the crew that landed in the village to bring up to headquarters. So that's why he was leading them up that road and he spoke a little English.

Rick: Did the villagers know that the underground in that area and harboring you guys?

Spencer: Oh yeah. They all knew and they all kept their mouth shut. There was one real tragedy and that is (and we didn't find this out until about 1992) the German's did come up to the little village of Ochotnica which was about 15 miles from where we were. They went up to collect pigs and Christmas dinner on about the 22nd of December and they got

in a fight (actually there were Russians in that area too – just a band of about a dozen) and they got in a fight with the Germans and killed three Germans and the next day the Germans came and shot 56 of the villagers.

Rick: Just at random?

Spencer: The 23rd of December 1944. Including two six-month old babies. There's a monument to that now. So anyway the Pol's told us that they would not help us with the Russians, we were on our own. So our biggest concern this whole time was how are we going to convince the Russians that we weren't Germans? Fortunately the first Russian we ran across that was pointing a machine gun at us was Ukraine and it was close enough to Polish and our Navigator Tad could convince him we were Americanski. Actually for a couple of days there we just sat and watched the Russian front go by. The tanks rolled by, the trucks rolled by and it was interesting the old Russian trucks were first on the frontlines and the US made trucks were a day behind them. The good trucks were not on the frontlines.

Rick: So continue on and tell us how you got back to friendly ground.

Spencer: Well that soldier Tad had convinced them we were Americans and not Germans, they left and we thought, "*well we don't want to experience that again*". And I knew that when our military conquered a town they always put in one of our Officer's as a Mayor or military administrator for the town. And I thought that the Russians would probably do the same thing and there was this side little town about 10 miles to the southeast so I sent Tad in to this village or town to see if he could come in contact with some Russians. I wanted to contact some Russians that were staying put; I didn't want to get with the troops moving west. I wanted to go east. So I sent him into town and he was picked up by a Russian captain and almost shot by him and then finally a Russian colonel came by and he convinced the Russian colonel we were Americans so the colonel came back with him and picked us up and sent us a guide and sent us to higher headquarters. We walked about 70 miles all together over a couple of days to get to Russian

Headquarters and then they Mickey Mouse'd around us for six weeks. They didn't know what to do, this was not in their manual, they didn't expect to find Americans on the German – Russian front.

Rick: So were you in Russia after that for that next six weeks?

Spencer: No, they kept us in Poland for most of it. We were in Russia for ten days I guess. Finally I guess they got word from Moscow or whatever to go east and we went to a town called Lvov where they put us up in a hotel and we actually had beds. It was the first time we'd had beds in about three or four months. Then we got on a train and went to Kiev and from Kiev we went down to Odessa which is on the Black Sea and at that point the Russians had liberated a lot of American POW's and this was where they were accumulating them to put on a ship and send home. But we spent about a week there while they accumulated all these American POW's. So there were about 1500 American's there.

Rick: Were there a lot of reunions? I bet it was good to see fellow Americans.

Spencer: Oh yeah! Besides we started getting food. The Russians weren't off any better than the Pol's but the Russians did everything they could, they really did. It wasn't bad treatment at all. It wasn't good treatment, but it was as good as they had.

Rick: Then an American ship picked you up?

Spencer: Actually it was a British ship that came to Odessa and we went down through the Black Sea and anchored in the harbor at Istanbul for a couple of days and then we went on to Egypt where we were interviewed by the FBI. That's when my parents got a telegram that I was safe. Before that of course they got the telegram "*sorry you're son's missing in action*", then in addition to that about two weeks after they got the '*missing in action*' they got a letter saying "*further intelligence reports your son's plane exploded in mid air and there were no parachutes*". So they thought I was gone and when they got

the telegram that I was safe there was a great celebration in Salt Lake City – that’s what I hear. So anyway we were in Egypt...

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Rick: Were you ever mistreated at all?

Spencer: No. Just hungry.

Rick: So lack of food was the main privation that you had. Now you’re at Odessa and what happened after that?

Spencer: We got on the ship and went down to the Black Sea and anchored in the Istanbul Harbor for a couple of days but you couldn’t pry me off the ship if they’d let me because that was my security blanket. We went to Egypt where we were screened by the FBI so that they didn’t let any spy’s through. Then they went back to our base in Italy and they gave us a choice of flying more combat or going home and I thought, “*I want to go home*”. And so then we got on a ship and went home and I had a leave and came home and got married and then went back until the end of the Japan war. So it was a wonderful experience and I look at it as a real growing experience and I look at it as a benefit – the whole thing. I did a lot of growing up and I think it really helped me in my life, I really do. I kept in contact with the crew and especially Tad and in 1992 we decided that we’d go back to this little village Ochotnica, go back to Poland and try to retrace our steps. All we knew is this village was Ochotnica and where it was and the leader’s code name was “*Lampart*”. So we went to Krakow and we got a car and a driver and it’s about 50 miles southeast of Krakow so we drove down and Tad was an artist and he lived in Manhattan and he wanted to do a lot of Polish churches – the old Polish wooden churches built in the 1700’s and he wanted to take a picture. He said, “*If we see a church would you mind if I stop and take a picture of it?*” and I said “*of course not*”. So we stopped at this church in the middle of nowhere, it was a gorgeous old wooden church and we were taking pictures of it and our driver goes up and on the side

on the porch was a story of how the Polish Underground operated in that area lead by Lampart who's real name was Julian Zapala. We stumbled across the guy's real name – that was exciting! So then we go on to this little village of Ochotnica and keep asking people if they remembered an airplane crash in 1944 and if they had gray hair they said “yes” but they didn't know much about it. Finally we got to the priest and he said, “*there's a man up this canyon that knows more about it*”. So we go up there and his name was Frank Crisco and Tad and Frank were talking (in Polish, I didn't understand any of this) but he said “*tak tak*” which is yes and points up the canyon and Tad turns to me and says “*he knows where the airplane crashed. Do you want to go up?*” And I say “*Yeah*” and he says “*well its five kilometers*” and I said “*Tad that's only three miles*”, but it was uphill. So anyway we go up there and there was no trace of an airplane crash at all but this area now is a National Park and they built hikers huts all around and about 100 feet from where the plane crashed was this hikers hut and on the side of this hikers hut was a story of how the Polish Underground rescued this B24 crew and all of our names were up there. We didn't know it.

Rick: 47 years after?

Spencer: 48 years, yeah. And all of our names were up there and then they reach in the loft of this thing and bring out some bent aluminum pieces from the airplane. I brought home pieces of the airplane that I flew 48 years earlier. Well that was really exciting. But then our time was running out so we couldn't do much, but we did find this guy that wrote the story on the hut, his name was Debrowski. It turned out that he was the guy in the German uniform that came around the bend and he spoke a little English. And I can remember we saw him in his little (he was vacationing in the mountains) and we saw him in his little house there and he comes out and he says “*Oh Spencer*” he says “*I remember you were so tired and so frightened*” and I says “*you got that one right*”. So then that was exciting and I went back but I didn't have a video camera and I wanted to video this so the next year I went back with a video camera. Then the Pol's built a monument, they reconstructed this nose section of a B24 out of steel and slapped some of the old aluminum pieces that they kept from the airplane over this monument and made a

monument out of it to the Polish Underground and the other pilot that was killed. And they made a big ceremony and they had us come over for the dedication of that and my video camera that I had shows that it started at 1:05 PM on the 18th of December 1994 and their records show that the plane crashed at 1:05 PM December 18th, 1944. This thing started 50 years to the minute from when the plane crashed.

Rick: Well that's an interesting story. What was your rank when you left the service?

Spencer: I was still a Second Lieutenant.

Rick: Well thanks very much for coming in that's a great story and we appreciate you sharing that with us.

Spencer: Well I just feel so fortunate, thanks!