



**Jim Powell**

United States Army

Sergeant

European Theater

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Rick Randle

**THIS INTERVIEW IS NOT EDITED FOR CONTENT, LANGUAGE OR HISTORICAL ACCURACY**

**Rick:** Today we have with us Jim Powell who has a very interesting story, Jim we're glad to have you with us. Briefly tell us about your early years growing up – where it was and...

**Jim:** Okay. I was lucky to be in Idaho where they started Sun Valley as a ski resort and I think it was the first year that Sun Valley was open I skied there. It must have been in '36, '35 or '36 and at that time only wealthy people were got to go skiing but we were grimy little kids from Twin Falls Idaho and the management at Sun Valley wanted to have some ordinary young kids around and so we got special rates and passes and special treatment. Although we were too young to be in a bar, Idaho had, didn't have bars legally but Sun Valley for some reason or other had nightclubs and I forget the name of the manager then but he allowed us in the evenings to go into the nightclub and he told the waiters "*just give these kids a coke*". I think it was 50 cents back then in the nightclub and we would nurse it all night and ...I'm not talking about skiing so much as I'm talking about...

**Rick:** How old were you at the time?

**Jim:** Let's see, I think it was 13 and we would dance at the, it was called the '*Deutchin Club*' named after Eddy Deutchin and those are fond memories. We would ski all day and then we would go ice-skating at their open-air ice rink and then we'd go dancing. Skiing, you kind of followed your skis and went where they wanted to go.

**Rick:** Tell us about your first time you heard about the war over in Europe and where you were leading up to December 7<sup>th</sup>.

**Jim:** Okay, I went from Twin Falls. My brother was going to Cal Tech in Pasadena and I went down there to visit with him and then it was so interesting in California compared with Idaho I got a job in a drug store and ultimately got a job at Lockheed Aircraft and I

was working there when Pearl Harbor happened. I heard about Pearl Harbor while I was at work and I felt I was doing my duty by working at an aircraft company and I started working long hours like seven days a week and sometimes as much as sixteen hours a day and I kind of burned out and I thought *'heck, I can't spend my life this way'* so I went to the University, applied to the University of California and I got in then and I think I was a physics major then and that seemed like a nifty thing that I could get into some kind of useful occupation and but then it looked like I was going to be drafted and one way to get out of the draft was to enlist in the reserves, so I did that. I understood that if you enlisted in the reserve you could call...when they called you up you could get into the service of your choice and I had heard about the so-called *'ski troops'* and so I was pointed towards the ski troops and I was called out to service and they wanted me to get into the signal corp. and I said *"no, no, I want to be in the ski troops"* and the recruiting officer said *"well you know it's just the infantry, you don't want to get in the infantry. You're too smart to be in the infantry"*. And I said, *"Nope, I gotta be in the ski troop"* so they said *"okay if that's what you want"*. And the next thing I knew I was on a train for Camp Hale Colorado. That was the ski troops and when I got to Camp Hale they wanted to put me in the signal corp. again. Evidently I had scored very high in a test for the signal corp. and I said, *"No I wanna be in the ski troops"*. So I got...ended up in an ordinary infantry company.

**Rick:** Did you have to go through basic training?

**Jim:** Yeah, they combined basic training with just regular duty at Camp Hale and the interesting thing about the ski troops that almost everybody there at the beginning were from college campuses and it was kind of like still going to college and for a Western kid like me who was born in Wyoming and lived almost all of his life up to that point in Idaho, meeting people from all over the United States mainly the east coast and the Ivy League was quite interesting. It was kind of like *'what campus are you from'* and so it was kind of rough at first because we weren't used to the altitude. Camp Hale is close to 10,000 feet altitude and I came from sea level then because I was going to Berkley University of California and so it took us awhile to get used to that altitude and that

climate. That was in '43 and we just trained and trained and trained and actually I think we trained too...were over trained. At that age we wanted some action.

**Rick:** When you training did you have to carry a rifle when you were skiing down the slopes?

**Jim:** Oh yes. We carried a rifle and hand grenades and bandoleers and in those days the technique for skiing was to rotate and so with all of that and with a pack and with all the weaponry if you rotated too much you would rotate right off the trail.

**Rick:** And I guess those packs weighed with all the hand grenades and the rifle ammunition and everything you were carrying quite a load huh?

**Jim:** Yeah. We tried to keep it below 50 pounds total but sometimes on extended maneuvers I think we had up to 80 or 90 pounds. We had a song called "*90 pounds of rucksack found a grub or two*" and it was almost true.

**Rick:** Well then tell us about when you went overseas and how that came about.

**Jim:** Well after almost three years of training we got orders to go overseas. We took a train across the United States to Newport News Virginia and there was a ship that we got on, it was called '*The West Point*'. It had been '*The America*', the fancy tourist ship, cruise ship for the United States and it was almost Christmas Eve when we embarked and we sailed across the Atlantic on the...I think the America was the fastest ship on the water then. It was so fast that we didn't go in an escort at that time. All the ships were going in convoys and we didn't go in a convoy because we could go faster than submarines and we went zipping across the Atlantic. Went through Gibraltar and docked at Naples.

**Rick:** You had no evidence of submarines stalking you or anything like that?

**Jim:** No. The only kind of scary thing that happened was we were in a big storm and they had converted this cruise ship or transportation ship to a troop ship and they put bunks all over and they put extra plates on the side and we got into this big storm and it knocked some of the plates off the high seas and water was...we were down below decks and water came shooting down the ladders or stairways and some people thought we were sinking but it was just high seas. Nobody was hurt or anything and we landed lets see at Naples and that was the first time I was overseas and we had...we got off the boat there and went to...we got on a landing craft 'LCI's' – Landing Craft Infantry's and went up the coast of Italy and we then landed again at Livorno or Lakehorn.

**Rick:** So you went on a landing craft all the way up the coast and got off at Livorno?

**Jim:** Yeah and then our commander, we were near Pisa then and he wanted us to see the Leaning Tower of Pisa so we marched past it and that was probably the most exciting piece of architecture that we saw and then we camped out that night in the Kings Hunting Lodge area and camped there for a few days. Then we got in trucks and went up into the Apennine Mountains and that was actually right on the front line at the time but it was a quiet front line. It was kind of nice really, we were...my particular company was quartered in an Italian Villa and it was owned by a family in Chicago and it was quite quite pleasant and our duty which was a big surprise for the ski troops was to patrol a road in half-tracks. We thought we were going to be skiing and this was in winter and if we'd been in combat we would've been on skis but at that time neither the Americans or the Germans were eager to fight, it was sort of a lull in combat in that area.

**Rick:** And Italy had already surrendered I think at that time.

**Jim:** No, there were the '*partisans*' were fighting on our side but they were just holding the line across the Apennine's, they kind of went across Italy.

**Rick:** And did your equipment like how many pairs of skis were you issued? Did they come over on the ship with you?

**Jim:** They may have. They thought they were going to fool the Germans and they took away all of our winter equipment and we were told we were going to go to Egypt to train for the invasion of Japan and that was the word when we went across the Atlantic. Well the story goes that our General said “*my troops are already for combat, let them have a chance in Europe*” and so that’s how we got to Italy instead of going to Egypt. But we had desert equipment issued to us for going to Egypt so we went to Italy in the winter with desert equipment.

**Rick:** So you didn’t have the white outfits?

**Jim:** We finally did but when we first got there our nice warm sleeping bags had been taken away from us, we never had good sleeping bags. When we realized what the situation was we would scarf up some army blankets and take them to a local seamstress and get her to sew us a sleeping bag out of blankets. Well you know it’s kind of like what’s happened in Iraq where they more seriously didn’t have the proper equipment and they had to make do. I guess that can always happen.

**Rick:** So you were in the Apennine Mountains patrolling roads with desert equipment.

**Jim:** Um hum and we had half-tracks and hardly anybody had ever driven anything close to a half-track or a truck in fact they had trouble finding enough people that could even drive cars. I had a half-track and learned how to do the compound shifting in a half an hour or so and we drove up and down this mountain road and I had a gunner and we had anti-aircraft turrets on the half-tracks and our company commander told us not to fire the turrets because there were people living in the land and he said “*you might kill somebody*” and that seemed reasonable.

**Rick:** Were you ever fired upon while you were patrolling?

**Jim:** No, we were later but during this patrolling thing the Germans were very happy to be quiet. An interesting thing happened on this patrol. We'd go up to one little village and turn around and come back. It was sort of like a ten mile patrol and we were at one end and a General came up in a jeep and the General asked my gunner if he'd fired the turret and my gunner had a harelip and stuttered and he stuttered out *'no he hadn't fired it'* and the General said *"well take it out there and fire it into the mountains"*, it was a very steep canyon we were in and I hadn't gotten fully acquainted with how you worked with Generals and I said *"well sir, our Captain told us not to fire this until he had arranged for a firing range"* and the General said *"I don't care what your Captain told you, go out there and fire it"* and I said *"no I can't do that because my Captain is my commander"*. So the General turned red, got in his jeep and went zooming off and I guess he cooled down by the time he got back to our headquarters and he praised the Captain for having such well disciplined troops.

**Rick:** So what happened after you were on that road patrol?

**Jim:** Finally came the big day when we were going to make an attack and we left our little village, got in trucks. We weren't too sure what was going to happen but we knew we were going into real combat and we were excited.

**Rick:** And did you have winter clothing at that time?

**Jim:** We had white parkas, I remember that very clearly and but we didn't have very good winter equipment but I don't suppose any of the army did then, nothing like it has now. But we had our rifles and we were all set for combat and we were really excited. The trucks were taking us up to the area where we were going to attack and we were singing songs and all juiced up and later back in the hospital (I got injured) and there was a truck driver back in the hospital and when he heard that we were part of the 10<sup>th</sup> division he said *"you know you're the first guys that were excited to go into combat"*, and he said *"I always felt like when I was driving guys up into the front line that I was*

*taking them to their doom” and he said “you guys made it easy it for me cause you were so happy”. That was only the first time because we weren’t so happy the second time.*

**Rick:** So tell us about the actual combat and what went on and how you got wounded.

**Jim:** Our Commander decided to make a night attack up the face of a mountain, it was called Belvedere. Actually I think the side mountain we were on was called ‘*Gurgelesco*’ and we were going to sneak up on the Germans with no ammunition in our rifles and throw hand grenades on them in their foxholes, that was the plan. It didn’t work out that way. We were sneaking up this mountain...

**Rick:** So you were going up this mountain not skiing down it and you had no ammunition in your rifles.

**Jim:** That’s right and we didn’t have skis. There wasn’t enough snow to ski on really. I could say at this time its fortunate for us that we didn’t have snow because the Germans were accomplished skiers and we were not anywhere near the capable ski troops that the Germans were and it would have been very dangerous for us to have fought the Germans on skis on snow, whereas we had a fighting chance fighting them on the ground. So we crawled up the mountain and I was the first scout and I was so dumb I came to a barbed wire fence and the guy behind me who was smarter than I was said “*get down for God’s sake Jim*” so I got down and just as I got down a whole rain of tracer bullets went right over my head. That was the final protective line that I was standing up and looking over and if the guy hadn’t told me to get down I would have been cut in two. So we spent all the rest of the night reorganizing and getting shot up. It was a horrible night and we were sitting ducks for the Germans but at dawn we had a standard attack with flanking and a frontal assault and we took the mountain but it was very costly. I saw whole lines of my buddies’ dead and I was just lucky.

**Rick:** These are the ones you’d been training with and skiing with in Colorado?

\*\*\*Tape Interrupt\*\*\*

**Rick:** Lets resume...

**Jim:** Okay so this was the beginning of the successful push through the rest of Italy and we sort of mopped up the situation there and then moved on along the line of the mountains and the fighting was bloody and exciting from then on.

**Rick:** Well they finally gave you ammunition for your rifle?

**Jim:** They had ammunition but we were told not to put it in our chambers of our rifles. As soon as morning came and we had a standard attack we worked like we had been trained and we accomplished...and I think that we achieved great surprise on another mountain next to where we were. We had been well trained in rock climbing and a group of rock climbers climbed up a sheer face that the Germans didn't think anybody would ever attack and they took the whole mountain by surprise because they climbed up this face and the Germans were probably playing poker or something and suddenly they were surrounded.

**Rick:** And that was the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division that did that? Well did you use your hand grenades during that battle?

**Jim:** Yeah. I didn't and I don't think anybody...I think we just used rifles then. Later we used hand grenades and we were...it was kind of interesting, although we were an American Army we were in Field Marshall Alexander's overall command and I think under Field Marshall Alexander was General Clark. It was kind of interesting, we had (being in the English army organization) we had Brazilians and Gerka's on our flanks and we got very good with the Gerka's because the Gerka's had the habit of sneaking around at night in the German lines and slitting their throats which kind of terrified the Germans and we didn't mind at all having terrified Germans.

**Rick:** After that first battle where did you experience your next combat?

**Jim:** We were along the Apennine's a ways to a mountain called...oh a little town called '*Costa DeAnno*' and the mountain there was called, we called it '*Della Spay*' but the Italians called it '*Della Esperanzo*'. That was even bloodier and worse than where we had our first initiation and actually at Della Spay is where we put the Germans into route and opened up going into the Poe Valley. My company was the first company to the Poe River I believe but I wasn't with them anymore because I got a bullet through my head on Della Spay and had a pretty exciting time. Everybody thought I was going to die as you would, the bullet went through here like that and went through my throat and a guy from New Jersey decided he was going to get me out. In the meantime the Germans had surround our mountain so he rounded up a couple of cooks that weren't too eager to hang around and they started carrying me off the mountain.

**Rick:** Did you have a medic that came and helped stopped the bleeding and things like that?

**Jim:** Yeah, he mainly gave me morphine, which kept me from being able to walk, and the guys had to carry me in a stretcher made out of a shelter half and they were having so much trouble and I was coming to. Oddly I wasn't in any real pain, I suppose it was because of all the morphine I was doped up with and so I convinced them that I could walk if I could just put my arms around them and we walked off the mountain through enemy lines to an aid station. At the aid station they put a tag on me which I saw later in the hospital and it said '*check this man every 30 minutes to see if he's still alive*'. As it turned out it was not serious, it just broke my jaw and they wired my teeth together and for six weeks I was in the hospital on a liquid diet.

**Rick:** Was the hospital there in Italy?

**Jim:** Yeah and I went back to combat as a matter of fact. Guys who didn't have what seemed like such serious wounds got sent back to the United States but I was ambulatory and as soon as they unwired my jaws and I was able to eat normal food I was sent back to

combat which was in the Alps then. But the war was practically over; Kesslering surrendered to my company in the Alps and then the war was over.

**Rick:** Did you see any other severe combat after you went from the hospital? And did you ever get to ski down the mountains like you had maybe envisioned while you were training?

**Jim:** No, no combat. Not in combat, we did have a couple of action where we moved on skis, we went from one place to another on skis but fortunately we didn't run into any Germans on skis and the snow was pretty well melting, it was spring snow then. Some guys did have action on skis but I didn't.

**Rick:** Tell us what happened when the war ended and what you did?

**Jim:** We were kind of pleased to say the least when the war was over and we were kind of reckless and after a few days we had more casualties after the combat than during combat and our General called us together and he said, "*This has got to stop*". We had jeep accidents, guys swimming in reservoirs going over the dam and killing themselves. I liked to rock climb and we had gone up into the mountains and were climbing the peaks and a guy almost fell on top of me just from sheer carelessness; so we had to calm down a bit.

**Rick:** In those days you probably weren't using ropes and things to climb huh?

**Jim:** We weren't'. I don't think we did have a rope and it was kind of rotten rock but so...but we settled down and the nice thing that happened to me is I was...because of a friend was sent to Glacier Climbing School. It looked like we were going to stay in Europe for awhile so a friend of mine was put in charge of the Glacier – the Division Glacier Climbing School in Austria, on the highest mountain in Austria and the biggest ice field in Austria. I had never been on ice, this was Duncan Reed, he was the ski champion from Harvard and he knew that I wanted to do ice climbing so he tried to get

me as a student at the school but it was filled up so Duncan said *“well, I need another instructor and Powell is an excellent ice climbing instructor and I could use him”* so they sent me there. I had never been on ice and I got to this glacier climbing school and I said, *“Duncan, what have you done? I don’t know anything about ice shed”*. He said *“don’t worry we’ll go out every night when everybody else is drinking beer and having a party and I’ll show you what to teach your students the next day”*, which is what we did for two weeks.

**Rick:** Was there any talk of you guys having to go over to Japan after that?

**Jim:** Not then but actually I think what happened, our General wanted us to stay in Europe but there were so many other troops that had suffered so much more than we had you know who had been fighting for years that we were sent back to Japan after only two weeks in this glacier climbing school which we thought was going to last for months. We were sent back to Italy and then we boarded ships and the story was that we were going to go and train across the United States and get on boats and go to Japan and we would be in the invasion of Tokyo Bay.

**Rick:** So you were going to go back to the United States from Europe first and then over to Japan?

**Jim:** Um hum. So we were very unhappy to be going home as it were. We were a dismal bunch of troops because it was not a pleasant thought to get back into combat but something very interesting happened while we were at sea. I think we were two days out of New York and an announcement came over the ships radio (we were no longer on a big ship, we were on a Liberty Ship) and the announcement came over the radio that an amazingly big powerful bomb had been dropped over Hiroshima in Japan. Now we didn’t even know where Hiroshima was and everybody on the boat, not everybody but most everybody on the boat thought that the guy on the PA system was playing a trick on us and since I was a physics major in college a deputation came to me and said *“do you really think there could be such a bomb?”* and I said *“well I just don’t know, let me think*

*about it*". I went to my bunk and laid down and thought about things that had happened to me at Berkley and I remembered that one physics instructor had written  $E=MC^2$  on the blackboard and he said "*that's a very very important equation – think about it. Really think about it and think what that means*" and we were just freshmen, you know  $E=MC^2$ , Energy equals Mass times the velocity of light squared. "*That's a very big number*", he said. I thought of that and then in my fraternity house one of the members, one of my brothers' father was head of the physics department and Bob Berge every weekend would go to New Mexico and he worked up at the Cylce???? On the hill and every time I would ask him what he was doing in New Mexico he'd change the subject and I never found out. Then I kind of put two and two together. He was working at a preferred job with Lawrence and his father was in the Physics department – now what would they be doing in New Mexico? What does New Mexico have that would cause people from the physics department to go to New Mexico and then it was light a light bulb – space, no people, room where they could experiment with a very powerful bomb –  $E=MC^2$ .

**Rick:** And you were thinking this while you were on the boat heading to Japan?

**Jim:** So I came back and assembled all the soldiers around me and said "*I'm going to make an announcement – indeed it was a powerful bomb that was dropped*" and by that time they had dropped the second bomb on Nagasaki and we were the first troops into New York harbor after the bombs were dropped and boy were we welcomed! We had fireboats shooting...

**Rick:** So you turned, after VJ day I guess you were still heading...did you turn?

**Jim:** No there were a few days. VJ day didn't happen. It took the Japanese a few days to decide to give up. If you remember it was '*unconditional surrender*'.

**Rick:** I understand. Did your boat turn for New York before VJ day?

**Jim:** Yep, we...it was obvious because by that time everybody knew that there really was an atom bomb and I think we had dropped the two atom bombs that we had and there weren't anymore but the Japanese didn't know that and all they could look forward to was more atom bombs. So we were going across the United States on trains when VJ day happened.

**Rick:** So your ship turned around and...

**Jim:** It didn't turn around.

Elizabeth: They were two days out of New York when they heard about the first...tell him about being the first troops in New York.

**Jim:** The plan was that we would come back to the United States and train across the United States, get on boats on the west coast and go to Japan.

**Rick:** I see, so you were on the train heading to New York when you heard about the bomb?

**Jim:** No, we were on a boat...and I think the reason that people were skeptical about the bomb is because we were on this little boat isolated and you know somebody could play jokes with the PA system. But by the time we sailed under the *'Marizano Bridge'*, by the time we sailed into New York harbor it was obvious that we had the atom bomb and had used it. I can personally say that I'm glad we had Harry Truman for our president then who decided to use it because I think that decision not only saved thousands of our soldiers lives including mine, it probably saved hundreds of thousands of Japanese because they would have kept fighting if it hadn't been for the bomb. When you think about it, as close as we were to having the bomb, if we hadn't used it some other nation would.

**Rick:** So your ship was one of the first ships entering New York harbor after VJ day?

**Jim:** It was the first ship.

**Rick:** Tell us about that welcome and what it was like.

**Jim:** Okay well it was kind of foggy and cold as we sailed in and we came along Manhattan on the Hudson River. Of course, seeing the Statue of Liberty loom out of the fog was about the most wonderful thing you could imagine. Although I was from the west I had been to New York and I thought it was kind of fun to point out all of the buildings that I recognized to New Yorkers who didn't – who hadn't ever gotten far enough away from them to see them. Then as we went up the Hudson we were welcomed by some fireboats with hoses shooting. It was kind of exciting and then some Red Cross girls came in boats up along side of us and it was really nice to see American girls. Nice clean healthy American girls because the people in Europe were in pretty bad shape and being home was very nice particularly when we realized the war was soon going to be over. I guess the funny thing was that when we docked the Red Cross girls met us with bottles of...or cartons of milk. That's one thing we didn't have in Europe was fresh milk and the word got around that these soldiers wanted milk so not only did we have pretty girls but they were giving us milk in cartons.

**Rick:** I guess walking the streets of New York you could probably go in anyplace anywhere and get anything you wanted?

**Jim:** We weren't loose in New York.

**Rick:** They didn't give you liberty there?

**Jim:** They took us in boats up to Irving on the Hudson which was I think on purpose because they never would have seen us. So they took...that was an army camp up on the Hudson River and the nice thing that happened though – we did go ashore there. I think

Irving on Hudson's probably maybe 10 – 15 miles up from Manhattan and Joe Lewis was there to welcome us and that seemed pretty wonderful to us.

**Rick:** Well that's an interesting story Jim. Are you aware how close a wound like you had could have been a fatal wound? I mean probably within a half an inch or less and it could have severed...

**Jim:** Actually it came out right where my carotid is and evidentially the force of the bullet blew the carotid aside and the bullet slipped by.

**Rick:** And it didn't damage the carotid artery?

**Jim:** That's right.

**Rick:** Well thank you so much.

Elizabeth: I have one question – was Frank Meotsived in your unit?

**Jim:** I don't think he was in our unit but he must have been attached to it somehow. When the Germans surrendered to my unit I was not there, that was up in the Alps and I was down below, lower in the Alps at the time.

**Rick:** How many men were in the 10<sup>th</sup> mountain division?

**Jim:** I think it was around 10,000.

Elizabeth: Can you sing the song about the 90 pounds?

**Jim:** *Ninety pounds of rock sack, a pound of rubber too...I met a...* I can't think.

