



Lee Tucker

United States Army Air Corps

Captain

European Theater

Date Interviewed: 5/9/05

Location of Interview:
Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:
Rick Randle

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Rick: Lee we're glad to have you with us today. Would you just say your full name and spell your last name for us?

Lee: My name is Lee Tucker. T-U-C-K-E-R.

Rick: Ok, great. And tell us about where you were born and raised and going up to where you joined in the service and where you were when Pearl Harbor occurred.

Lee: Well, I was born in East Millcreek, grew up there. Went to Granite High School, graduated in '42. And when Pearl Harbor came that day, I was working in a service station down town, on Pearl Harbor Day. And of course we were all excited and a bunch of us talked about enlisting and this and that. And were graduated from high school. I graduated when I was 17 and I went to the university and enrolled in university and I was in the class of '46. But on my 18th birthday I enlisted in the Army Air Corps as an aviation cadet. So I didn't finish except one quarter at that time.

Rick: When Pearl Harbor happened you were just out of high school?

Lee: I was in high school.

Rick: And all your buddies felt your big patriotic serge I guess.

Lee: Yes we all did. And all the older guys were already leaving so most of us when our turn came, when we turned 18 we left too.

Rick: So, you then joined up with the Air Force right then?

Lee: Yes at that time it was U.S. Army Air Force and we went through regular basic training then we went to a college training detachment and then we went to proof flight school then we

went primary flight school, basic flying school and advanced. And I went to advanced fighter school, single engine school. Graduated from Luke Field in April 1944 and went to P47 school and then went into combat.

Rick: So it was clear until 1944 before you got all your training?

Lee: Yeah it took like 14 months because you have to say they really gave us thorough training. We knew how to do air combat, close to port, escort, everything because I guess they didn't know where you were going to end up. So by time we got trained we were highly trained pilots. We thought we were anyway until we got shot at.

Rick: Yeah, at the ripe old age of 23 or 24?

Lee: It was 19.

Rick: 19. What am I thinking? So tell us how did you get eventually to get overseas then?

Lee: Well, when you graduated from P47 School that was the last thing then you got assigned either Pacific or Europe or wherever they wanted to put you. Well, I got assigned to Europe and we went over to Europe in a convoy. Across the Atlantic and then we got to Europe they gave us some more advanced fighter tactics in England. And some of the veterans talked to us and then we were assigned from there to our organization. And I ended up in a 404-fighter group.

Rick: Are there any experiences in basic training or the troop ship going over? When you say convoy I assume it was a convoy on the ocean.

Lee: Yes it was a convoy of merchant ships and Navy escorts and we crossed the North Atlantic. And one thing I remember about it besides the crowded ship where you didn't have room to move, in fact us pilots, we were all second lieutenants, we slept on the deck with a canvas cover over us. And one night we had the ship next to us was carrying a bunch airplanes

over on the deck and I guess in the hold. Well, one morning we got up after this terrible storm we'd been through in a couple days and all the airplanes on the deck were gone.

Rick: Been washed overboard?

Lee: Yeah, been washed overboard during the night. We had a submarine alert once and a Navy ships dropped depth charges and roared around. But we never saw a submarine. But everybody you had to wear your life jackets and get ready to evacuate. It was kind of exciting.

Rick: Were you zigzagging across?

Lee: Yeah they zigzag all the time. It was exciting.

Rick: All right. And when you arrived, where did you ship into? England?

Lee: Yeah, we docked in England. I think it was South Hampton as I remember. And then they sent us to a little town called Shrewsbury for this advanced right up to the minute fighter tactic training which I think was in the middle of England. And then from there after a couple weeks, we had a couple people killed there too incidentally. But after a couple weeks we were assigned and we all went to our organizations.

Rick: And you were assigned to what?

Lee: The 404 fighter group. It was already in France by that time so I crossed the channel in an LST and joined them on the beach at a little airfield they had on the beach in Normandy. And then from there we went through France and Belgium.

Rick: And your duties mainly were to support the front line infantry?

Lee: That's right. We did a little escort work once in a while with the bombers but basically we flew close to port. We were trained to do everything so it didn't really matter. In fact it was easier to escort than it was to fly close to port because you got shot at all the time.

Rick: Tell us about that close to port. Your elevation?

Lee: Well what you do, you have targets or you have armored reconnaissance missions to where you go on a fighter sweep and you'll like have eight airplanes loaded with bombs and you'll have four airplanes flying top cover for you in case you get attacked. And you see a German convoy or a German train or anything that looks like that or a ship on the river then you go down and bomb the stray foot. Or you get called by the infantry and say we've got a problem here. We've got some tanks that are holding us up and this is the coordinates and you go and see if you can find them and you knock those down. All the time you're close to port the Germans had a tremendous amount of flack. So you're getting shot at every minute. In fact, I got shot down twice. But I got back both times.

Rick: You actually got shot down to where your plane crash-landed?

Lee: Well, one time I was on fire and I got back to the field because we were always close to the front lines. So I got back to the field and jumped out in a snow bank. And the other time I got hit and I landed with wheels up in a field but I was on this side of the front lines so I got back again.

Rick: So they just issue you and new plane and off you go again?

Lee: Oh yeah. Yeah, it was pretty routine, those happenings. Nobody hardly even talked about it because it was happening everyday to somebody.

Rick: So were you going on a mission just about everyday?

Lee: Well, depending on the weather. Normally yeah you would fly sometimes you would two missions because some of our missions were real short. If we were just going right to the front lines in like 30 minutes we'd be back on the ground again.

Rick: It's amazing. Tell us about some of your most heroic experiences and any of your humorous experiences and what happened to you while you were doing this.

Lee: Well, I don't know. Well, we did have some pretty good times. But one of the scariest little things that happened to me was after the war we had an airplane that we captured, got from the Germans, and it was a I forget, but one of their single engine observation airplanes. And three or four of us went to another air field and the guy that was flying it, I was in the back, he made a mistake on take-off and we crashed into the control tower but none of us got hurt. He was the laughing stock of the squadron. This was in the occupation after the war.

Rick: Well, so you were supporting the troops through the breakout of Normandy and mainly in the Battle of the Bulge?

Lee: Yeah the Battle of the Bulge and crossing the Rhine River.

Rick: Tell us about the Battle of the Bulge. It was in winter...

Lee: Yeah it was really bad. And I felt really sorry for the boys in the infantry. In fact, it was so foggy we couldn't fly for like 10 days or so. And we were ready to retreat because the Germans got too close to our field because we were close to the front lines. But we had the plan all ready to go and everything but we didn't have to. They got stalled and the weather cleared and we were able to support the Army and help win the Battle of the Bulge. But during the Battle of the Bulge, the boys in the infantry, in fact it got so desperate they took all our people from our wing, from our fighter group, that were clerks and cooks and people like that and all we had left was us pilots and us mechanics and the flight surgeon and the chaplain and everybody else was put in infantry to help stop it. And we never heard from those people again. I don't know if they survived or what but it was really pitiful.

Rick: So they took them out of being cooks and clerks and next thing they know they're carrying a rifle on the front lines?

Lee: Yeah it was touch and go, touch and go. Patton really saved the day with the third army.

Rick: That's what I understand. And actually that's quite a significant event when that weather broke and you guys were able to take off.

Lee: Well that was tremendous and the air was full of fighter planes. You know our group and the other groups, everybody descended on the Battle of the Bulge there in Belgium. We were close to it because we were in St. Tron, Belgium at the time. But the Germans couldn't make a move. Everything that moved got shot.

Rick: And that air power really was significant. It was winning the Battle of the Bulge. Did you realize at the time how significant your effort was?

Lee: No, I was a poor second lieutenant. I didn't know doodly. Just you know, you look at the flying schedule and that was about all.

Rick: Tell about going on these missions early morning. Would you have to meet in a ready room?

Lee: Yeah, you have breakfast; C-rations or K-rations and then you'd meet. The intelligence officer and the ops officer would brief you on what you were going to do and assign an airplane to you and tell you what flight you were in and what position in the flight. When you start out in combat you're always Tail-end Charlie, never Fore guy. Gradually you move up to be the element leader and the flight leader. But most the time when you first started you'd just follow the guy in front of you.

Rick: And your plane was a P47?

Lee: Uh huh. We had different models of them as the war progressed. But by time the war ended we had airplanes with rocket pods on them and more fuel and faster.

Rick: They were single engine?

Lee: Uh huh. Single engine fighter plane. The bombers called us their little fat friend. We were bigger airplanes than the 51's. The 51's did most of the escorting. We did once in a while.

Rick: Any other experiences while you were doing those missions around the Bulge that you'd like to share?

Lee: Well, that's when I got shot down was.

Rick: Well, tell us about that.

Lee: Well, that's when I got caught on fire.

Rick: Oh that's the one you mentioned.

Lee: Yeah. But I made it back. The airplane was a total loss but I wasn't.

Rick: And you were able to jump out and get away from the flames?

Lee: Yeah I jumped out on the runway and it landed in a snow bank luckily.

Rick: After the Bulge what did you do? Did you follow the troops through Germany?

Lee: Well, yes. We had a big push on the Rhine River to cross the Rhine River after the Bulge. In fact we escorted a lot of the paratroop airplanes there that first day when they crossed the Rhine. And then we moved up into Germany from Belgium. And then I went temporary duty to a radar squadron after that. After you got so many missions they could send you to someplace to talk to your pilots that were flying to like an armor division to be the air controller or to a radar squadron to talk to your airplanes to help them navigate and find their targets and things. And I got sent up there TDY and that's when I end up going to Pookewald to the death camp.

Rick: So when you went to there how long were you after it was liberated did you get to see that?

Lee: Well, I was there before it was liberated.

Rick: Oh, you were?

Lee: Uh huh. The Germans had actually retreated a couple days before but me and this other lieutenant were just riding around the countryside looking at the scenery and we happened to come on this camp at the end of this one little road. And the Germans were gone but the infantry, the Army hadn't gotten there yet. We had just inadvertently got in front of the front lines someway.

Rick: And you were the first Americans?

Lee: Me and this other lieutenant were the very first Americans to see it.

Rick: Go into detail as much as you can about that experience.

Lee: Well, we had the day off. This was when I was in the radar squadron temporary duty. We had a stand down day so we got a jeep and we decided we'd take a little ride and see some of the country around there. We were up near Wymar, Germany at that time. And we came to this one road and here was this big barbwire fence and gate at the end of this road. And the smell, you could tell something was bad because of the terrible smell in the air as you got close to it. And so we didn't know what it was really. But you could see some smoke from some looked like furnaces. And pretty soon this little young boy came out and said, "*Are you Americans?*" and we said yes. He says, "*Well, this is Camp Buchenwald*" and we asked him what it was. He said, "*Well, it's a camp for Jewish prisoners and Russian prisoners of war.*" He says, "*The Germans are all gone and we're waiting for the Americans.*" He spoke English, pretty good English as a matter of fact for a smart little guy. So we got talking to him and he worked in an underground

meshersmidt factory to build airplanes and that's why I guess he was still in pretty good health. But anyway, we went in the camp and he showed us around. He showed us the furnaces that were still hot. The Germans had left maybe a day or two before. And showed us where they shot the Russian prisoners when they put them in the shower and where they gassed the people, the gas chambers. And showed us the lampshades they'd made out of human skin that was tattooed. And the camp commander's wife had them in their quarters. They called her the "*Bitch of Buchenwald*". It was really a terrible thing. I had nightmares about that for a while.

Rick: I bet you did. Well, did the inmates crowd around you?

Lee: No I'll tell you they were so lethargic that they just looked and some of them were just laying in their beds. And everybody's skin and bones. It really made you feel terrible. In fact, both of us I think we got sick before it was over. But they didn't make any attempt to leave the camp or anything. In fact, we told this boy stay here, the Army will be here any second. I think it was a couple days before they got there as I remember right, worrying about when it was liberated. But a lot of the people probably didn't survive that were still there because they were so far gone. They were just skeletons.

Rick: Did you see any bodies piled up or anything like that?

Lee: The Germans threw them all in the furnaces.

Rick: Before they left?

Lee: Uh huh. But it was a terrible thing. In fact the Army they were so incensed when they got there that they marched all the townspeople up there and made them go through the camp and look at it and everything to see what Germans were really doing to these people. We had a couple rations with us and a canteen of water and things like that and candy bars and cigarettes. You always carried cigarettes and candy because that's what you bartered with. We gave them everything we had but we didn't have that much with us. But it was amazing.

Rick: So even though you were giving out candy and a few things they didn't crowd around you?

Lee: No you would think that they would all be desperate to leave that place but I think they so lethargic.

Rick: Malnourished?

Lee: Yeah, and they just didn't have any energy left. They showed that they had a whipping pole out in front where he said that's where they hung up the guys that didn't conform with all the rules. Whip them, set the dogs on them. It was terrible.

Rick: That's interesting. Did you see women and children there?

Lee: No, we didn't see any children. He told us that some women had been there but we only saw men in the barracks there. It was a terrible thing, it really was. You couldn't believe human beings would do anything like that. You wouldn't even do that to animals let alone another human being.

Rick: And as far as you knew that was maybe the only one or were you aware that there were others all over?

Lee: Yeah that was one of the minor ones as it turned out. But we had heard a couple of rumors that the Germans were mistreating some of the Jewish people but you never really heard anything concrete until the war ended and then it all came out naturally. That was the first part of April in '45.

Rick: And the war was over in?

Lee: In May. Yeah. May 8th. VE Day. We had a big party.

Rick: So after you were there so did you just go back and get in your jeep?

Lee: Yeah, we just went back to the squadron. We decided we better not say a lot about this because we weren't even supposed to be there.

Rick: And you're actually ahead of the front line?

Lee: Yeah, we were, through our mistakes. But the Germans had already retreated maybe a couple days before that. And of course the Army it takes them a while to get going.

Rick: Quite an experience. Well what happened after that till the end of the war?

Lee: Well, the war ended and we were in the occupation and I went back to the fighter group and we flew a lot of missions over Germany just to show the flag in big masses of airplanes for a while. Of course everybody's ready to come home. And I finally got home in August. But we were supposed regroup and go to Japan for the invasion of Japan after we had 30 days leave. But while I was on the ship coming back the bomb was dropped on Japan.

Rick: Let's go back. Tell us what happened at VE Day? Was there big celebrations?

Lee: Well yes. We got the word to stand down; the Germans were just about to surrender. And then later on that day they said the war is over. So that night the doctors broke out all the medicinal whiskey.

Rick: And everybody had a party?

Lee: And everybody had a party. We all celebrated. Everybody was ready to go home. Of course we didn't really go home right then.

Rick: And then you had a 30-day leave. Were you headed to the U.S.?

Lee: No, well we were headed back. I came back on a liberty ship, 3-4 where you shipped you back anyway they could. And when we got to New York, while we were a couple days out of New York in the Atlantic, the bomb had been dropped on Japan and they told us over the ship's radio that the Japanese had surrendered. So we didn't get a 30-day leave because we didn't have to go to Japan.

Rick: So you were headed back thinking that you would have to go to Japan after a 30-day leave and you were two days out of New York when you heard about VE Day?

Lee: Which was great news I'll tell you.

Rick: And what did they do on the ship?

Lee: Well, we didn't, really wasn't much to do, because it was a cargo ship that was returning to the U.S. It was like three or four little staterooms, cubbyhole staterooms, that the rest the people were crew. There was only three or four of us passengers, so it was just kind of business as usual really except everybody was thrilled to death.

Rick: And I guess you knew that you wouldn't have to be going back?

Lee: Yeah that was a good break because we were sick of getting shot at.

Rick: Well, did you, what was it like then when you pulled into New York and saw the Statue of Liberty?

Lee: Oh it was great. It was a real homecoming. They got us off the ship and they put us in some big room and gave us all a steak dinner. Of course there was some other ships that were coming in the same time and there was probably thousands of us there and then we, they gave us a train ticket and we got on the train and headed home. It's another two or three days.

Rick: And then when you got off the train were your parents there to greet you?

Lee: Yeah my father was there, my mother had passed away.

Rick: So your father was there?

Lee: Yeah. And my girlfriend who's sitting out in the lobby.

Rick: Right now. Your girlfriend and future wife, I guess.

Lee: Yeah.

Rick: Should've brought here down here. In New York Harbor did they have the tugboats spraying the yards of water and things like that?

Lee: I think they did yes, come to think of it. I'd forgotten about that. I think they had a ceremony for every ship that came into New York Harbor.

Rick: Can you describe what that was like when you came in?

Lee: Well it was...we were on a liberty ship, you know a cargo and they were just returning from dumping off their cargo in Europe. And we weren't a big troop ship like we were going over. But they had their harbor tugs come out and greet us with their water canons and just like we were conquered heroes. It was kind of funny really.

Rick: Did you have to fly a different plane just about every mission? Did they just assign them to you?

Lee: Yeah you just assign a plane. You know you're flying so and so. They're all the same.

Rick: So there's not much difference in function or whatever?

Lee: No it didn't make any difference. I think when the units were first formed, the original people, see we were replacement pilots. I think everybody kind of have their own airplane, because some of the airplanes still had the paint on them, you know like names and this and that. But as the war went on you lost all those and pretty soon you just have regular airplanes. But it didn't make any difference which airplane you flew. They're all the same.

Rick: Well, it's an interesting experience. We appreciate it you know.

*** Tape Interrupt ***

Rick: Tell us about, I guess was it the first time you got shot down when your plane caught on fire?

Lee: That was the second time. The first time the engine quit because it had been hit so I was over the bomb line at that time which means you're safe on this side of the bomb line, the other side of the bomb line is anything goes that moves that you could bomb or strafe. But anyway Europe is fairly flat – Belgium and that part of Germany so I just landed wheels-up in a field and the jug was really good at that because it had this big heavy engine in front and if you had your shoulder straps on tight you were in pretty good shape. So the next time, I think it was on my fifth mission, we were strafing the frontlines I think it was for the second armored division and all at once I smelled gas real bad so I pulled up and I said "*I gotta be hit*" you know "*in the gas line or someplace or in the gas tank*". So I called mayday and said "*I'm returning to base*" and so I flew to base and all the gas fumes were getting real strong and I went on 100 percent oxygen and then as soon as I lined up (I saw the field and lined up with the runway) as soon as I cut the engine the gas line exploded or the fuel exploded and caught on fire. I guess it had been running through the engine until that time so as soon as I landed flames were coming out of the front of the airplane. I slammed on the brakes, cut the switches, adjusted the canopy and jumped and I must have jumped like 20 or 30 feet with my parachute on and my helmet and jacket and all that (a gun) and everything and landed in a snow bank. Now normally I wouldn't be able to do that but I think my adrenaline was probably at a high level right at that minute because getting burned

in an airplane was always one of the fears that everybody had. But I didn't get hurt except my ego was hurt. I was a little bruised and banged up but I didn't even qualify for a Purple Heart.

Rick: If you jumped out of that plane 30 feet you're lucky a snow bank was there.

Lee: Oh yeah but I was going to get out regardless. But I was lucky, yes. I landed right in a snow bank.

Medics came out to pick me up "*you hurt?*"

"No I don't think so"

"Okay"

They took me back to the squadron.

Rick: And you flew a mission just about everyday except for the weather in case the weather was bad.

Lee: Yeah.

Elizabeth: Can you expand on when Patton's Army saved the day?

Lee: Well the 101st Airborne Division was the one that was holding the Bulge and they were surrounded by the Germans and Patton – they had alerted the armies to, you know, come to the rescue at the Battle of the Bulge and Patton said he could get there in a day or two and they *said* "*no, you're way down in southern Germany*". He was way down south and they made a forced march, it was amazing and they got there in like a day or day and a half from way down to where they were and at that time the weather broke so between Patton's Army and the air support – now if you ask the Army boys it was all Patton's Army that saved the day, but if you ask us guys we helped.

Rick: But if you as the 101st...

Lee: They did it. They didn't need any help. No they still swear to that today. Which you've got to give them credit for that.

Rick: That's an interesting experience and we appreciate you coming in and sharing those thoughts with us.

Lee: Thank you. It's kind of interesting to think back on it.

Rick: You were talking about how watching the shows over the last couple of days and it kind of brought back some difficult times for you, can you just tell us that and kind of explain what it feels like after 60 years.

Lee: Well you know it's funny that I never thought this would be this way after the war that you would still remember everything so long after but some of the things just never leave you and if you have a dream it's just like you're still there. It's amazing how clear some of that is and some of the things that weren't too important have faded into the past you don't think about. But I've done a lot of things since the war so...

Sally: You were saying you had a dream last night?

Lee: Oh yes, well I think I watched too much of the History Channel last night about the war in Europe and I ended up flying combat and getting hit. I was the Red Leader.

Rick: I think they want you to go in detail about your dream.

Lee: Well it's usually the same dream and we're flying along and I'm Red Number Four down here and all at once I get hit with flack and I yell out, you know, "*This is Red Four. I'm hit, I'm hit!*" And somebody says, "*Can you make it? Can you make it? Do you have to get out?*" "*No, I'm still okay. But I'm going to return to base*" and that's when I end up landing wheels-up in a field. But I don't know why that always...that's when I first started flying combat and I think that's why it really impresses you that, you know, you're not an old experienced head yet.

Rick: Well you know it's amazing to me that these young kids at that age go out and risk their lives everyday, you know, and don't think about it but when you get home some of that comes back you know.

Lee: Yeah, yeah. We were all about the same age. Our Commander, our Colonel was 24 years old I remember – the Old Man. We were all...those four boys in that picture; we were all the same age.

Rick: Well those are interesting experiences and thanks again for sharing and coming up here today we appreciate it very much.

Lee: Yeah, well I haven't talked about this for a long time with anybody. Well now I'm 80 years old you know.

Rick: You know we've interviewed an awful lot of pilots and this is the first time we've ever had...I'm sure they've all had these reoccurring dreams like that but we appreciate you sharing that. I think it's the first time we've had someone tell us about that.

Lee: It's kind of amazing how that happens. I've had that same dream for years. And I'm sure, you know, there's some boys that are in the hospital today from World War II that never did get recovered. In fact we had a pilot that was one of the older guys that when I got to the squadron he had a reputation all ready. People would talk about him, he'd go out and shoot his 45 at the moon and yell and scream and then go back to bed. He was a Taco Squadron. But you didn't think, you know, a lot of people thought that was funny in those days and then you think back and you think the poor guy was, you know, having a break down.

Rick: Well thanks again.